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Uplifting Rural Livelihoods Through the Application of CSR on Eco-lodges

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Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is the commitment of businesses to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community, and society to improve their quality of life. Corporations may not fully grasp rural communities' unique cultural, social, and economic dynamics. Hence, companies often contribute resources that do not meet the community's needs. In this paper, we discuss the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in poverty alleviation and its significance in uplifting rural livelihoods. A mixed methods approach was used for data collection and analysis. Purposive sampling was used to identify and target key informants who held positions in the community, government, and eco-tourism businesses. Out of a target population of 750 in KwaZulu-Natal, around 25% participated in the study, resulting in 218 participants and 33 key informant interviews with Lodge Managers. The results show that the relationship between tourism and society is complex, and all the pro-poor needs are unlikely to be met through CSR alone. With ecotourism on the rise, communities are becoming more engaged in environmental conservation, promoting sustainable practices that protect local ecosystems and wildlife. Local guides often share their cultural heritage knowledge, like the Zulu traditions, providing jobs and income. Therefore, tourism organisations should adopt green practices to procure products and services locally. The paper concludes that addressing poverty alleviation through CSR is inconclusive since the role of eco-lodge business in social development remains a contested issue with emerging patterns of vastly different factors affecting eco-lodge business operations.

Keywords: Eco-lodges; corporate social responsibility; sustainable tourism; poverty alleviation; environmental sustainability

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Introduction

Many developing countries have effectively modernised their ecotourism sectors and promoted economic stability while minimising tourism's adverse environmental and social effects. The impacts are palpable as these initiatives have contributed to poverty reduction and peace promotion in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Tanzania, Kenya, India, and Nepal (Honey & Gilpin, 2009; Samal & Dash, 2023). The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is so widespread and discussed nowadays that anyone reading a newspaper, a business magazine or financial news could not help wondering about companies' (disclosed and hidden) goals in terms of protecting and welfare for the environment and community in which they are operating (Farcane & Bureana, 2015). Kimaro & Ndlovu (2017:132) state that environmental concerns have been the most researched area of sustainable tourism since the 1990s. However, CSR in tourism has not enjoyed as much attention in academic literature as in other business sectors (Barrow & Murphree, 2001; Page & Connell, 2009). Studies have shown that the prospects of community-based conservation experiments have been mixed at best, and the performance of many has been reported to be well below expectations (Ndlovu et al., 2014). Even though CSR is based on the businesses' commitment to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community, and society to improve their quality of life, in tourism, CSR lacks a systematic scholarly analysis to build a cohesive body of knowledge to build on the discourse (Kimaro & Ndlovu, 2017). Studies show a link between hotel environmental practices and their impact on guests' experience (Banerjee, 2014; Ismail, 2009; Sharrock et al., 2021). The concept is based on a business organisation's configuration of social responsibility principles, social responsiveness processes, policies, programs, and observable outcomes relating to the firm's societal relationships. With the increasing awareness of environmental problems and the growing need for tourism organisations to act ethically, consumers expect companies to be good corporate citizens beyond generating profit (Crook, 2005; Sampong et al., 2018). Hence, most organisations have embraced this call through CSR. Apart from being a requirement of the law, CSR involves voluntary actions by organisations meant to go beyond the company's interests by doing social good. In South Africa, private tourism companies struggle to create a business environment that maximises their positive effects on local communities and employees. With ecotourism on the rise, communities are becoming more engaged in environmental conservation, promoting sustainable practices that protect local ecosystems and wildlife (Samal & Dash, 2023). However, Companies often contribute resources that do not align with the community's needs. Despite local private tourism businesses' promise of employment creation and poverty alleviation, rural communities have livelihood concerns and are not exempt from adverse impacts from tourism businesses (Kimaro & Ndlovu, 2017). Corporations may not fully grasp rural communities' unique cultural, social, and economic dynamics. In this paper, we discuss the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in poverty alleviation and its significance in uplifting rural livelihoods.

Open Rubric

Literature review and theoretical framework

Environmentally responsible practices (ERPs) have emerged as an important concept in tourism and hospitality (Lulama et al., 2024). Tourism is seen as an extractive industry since it appropriates and transforms environmental resources for sale in consumer markets (Sucheran, 2014). Therefore, CSR is seen not just as a promotional tool for attracting customers but as a way of retaining loyal customers. Integrating CSR into loyalty programs has enhanced awareness and boosted customer engagement (Bello et al., 2017). Whilst most tourism and hospitality organisations have loyalty programs, stakeholders can support and be involved in the company's programs and policies. The attractiveness of a destination is determined by the country's attributes, which in turn influence consumer behaviour and decisions (Ferreira & Perks, 2022). Consequently, tourism growth in rural areas would be supported by the greater involvement of rural communities and a sustained effort to promote informed investment in developing rural tourism products that respond to market needs (Kimaro & Ndlovu, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Thus, destinations must be appealing to be competitive and sustainable (Ferreira & Perks, 2022). Recently, the tourism and hospitality sector has emerged as a pioneer in sustainable tourism and is now focusing on environmentally sustainable good practices aimed at energy reduction, recycling, waste management, water management and other social projects (Banerjee, 2014). Equally, CSR practices increase customer satisfaction by increasing the company's market value. To achieve community prosperity, CSR has been used for pollution reduction, environmental protection, consumer protection, fairness, and honesty with employees and customers (Farcane & Bureana, 2015). Thus, CSR is the continuing commitment by businesses to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as of the local community and society at large (Asemah et al., 2013). CSR can assist companies in doing business in a friendly and ethical way.

Drivers and influences of CSR in tourism

Community members can be involved and support the company's initiatives through purchases and participation in the company's CSR programs. Tourism has a consequential element resulting from dynamic and static elements (Sampong et al., 2018). Dynamic element involves travel to the selected destination, and static element involves staying at the destination. Hence, tourism is concerned with economic, social, and physical subsystems and the effects directly or indirectly (Werther & Chandler, 2011). Thus, CSR and disclosure performance have become an integral part of the corporate fabric whereby organisations disclose their social and environmental performance in many ways (Dagmar, 2015).

The use of CSR in South African lodges

There are signs that the hospitality industry is slowly adopting social and environmental strategies and actions (Bostwick, 2007). No matter what you call them, eco-hotel, eco-lodge or green hotel, they are all part of the 'greening' of the tourism industry, representing a conscious effort on the part of hotels to promote themselves as environmentally and, quite often, socially conscious entities (Dagmar, 2015; Sucheran, 2014). In hospitality management, green practices include energy and water management, the use of chemicals, wastewater and waste management, contribution to community development, contribution to biodiversity and nature conservation, and social issues within the workplace (Bello et al., 2017).

The magic pentagon of sustainable tourism and the relational theory

Muller introduced the magic pentagon as a conceptual framework for sustainable tourism development (Mishra & Mishra, 2024). Sustainability in tourism can be depicted as a pentagon pyramid which consists of the following five angles: economic health, well-being of locals, functioning environment/protection of resources, healthy culture, and optimum satisfaction of guests. The framework's concept is that a balance among these five aspects is essential for sustainable tourism development to strengthen their positive interconnections. (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). Mowforth & Munt (1998) then proposed a list of tools for achieving sustainable tourism, which are area protections, industry regulation, visitor management techniques, environmental impact assessment, carrying capacity calculations, consultations/participation techniques, codes of conduct and sustainability indicators. Different stakeholders share specific goals and interests regarding sustainability (Kimaro & Ndlovu, 2017; Timur & Getz, 2009). For instance, the community and the tourism industry share the goal of economic and socio-cultural sustainability. Ecotourism initiatives are centred on attracting small numbers of high-spending tourists willing to stay longer in a destination, thus maximising the economic benefits to the stakeholders while minimising the negative impacts on the environment and society (Merino & Valor, 2011). This tourism usually involves nature-based products and markets; it uses ecologically sustainable operations and management; it is environmentally educative for staff and clients alike; it is locally beneficial; and it generates tourist satisfaction. Ecotourism is associated with low-impact nature tourism, which directly or indirectly contributes to conservation by encouraging local communities to maintain and conserve species and habitats to protect their wildlife as a source of income (Banerjee, 2014). In relational theory, corporate citizenship depends strongly on the referred community, but it is seen as a way companies choose to behave responsibly. Thus, the company's connection with its stakeholders involves continued commitment and engagement. This approach falls under the integrative and political theories (Ismail, 2009; Kimaro & Ndlovu, 2017). Cheruiyot-Koech & Reddy (2022). believes that corporate citizenship seems to be a new conceptualisation of the role of business in society. Depending on how it is defined, this notion largely overlaps with other theories on the responsibility of business in society where corporations enter the arena of citizenship at the point of government failure in the protection of citizenship (Garriga & Melé, 2004).

Research methodology

In this paper, we discuss the role of CSR in poverty alleviation and its significance in uplifting rural livelihoods. A mixed methods approach was used for data collection and analysis. Purposive sampling was used to identify and target key informants who held positions in the community, government, and eco-tourism businesses. While sampling can be based on probability or non-probability, this study used a non-probability sampling technique. Thus, purposive sampling was found to be appropriate for the study due to several reasons. Several studies, such as those of Raifman et al. (2022), Omona (2013), Rahi (2017), and Scholtz (2021), have used this approach with commendable outcomes. Secondly, purposive sampling was used to identify and target key informants in the business, tourists, and employees in different tourism organisations in KwaZulu-Natal. From a total of 750 target populations spread across KwaZulu-Natal, approximately 25% participated in the study. Thus, 218 people participated in the survey, and 33 key informant interviews were conducted with Lodge Managers until a saturation level was reached. Since qualitative and quantitative methods are not mutually exclusive, their combination can deepen the understanding of respondents' motives, attitudes and perceptions to achieve the research objectives (Dawyer et al., 2012). Creswell (2007) notes that the overall combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods in this research was quite logical as it ensured that the collection process was reliable, of high quality, and capable of generalisation.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of respondents

In today's hospitality sector, social demographic traits are important drivers of visiting patterns that influence destination choice and boost marketability (Imoagene et al., 2021). This is a significant component of the study on the impact of demographic characteristics on tourist visitation patterns to specific eco-lodges in KwaZulu-Natal. This section presents the participants' response rate and demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Gender of respondents

	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	Frequency
Valid	Male	95	54.9	56.2	56.2
	Female	74	42.8	43.8	100.0
	Total	169	97.7	100.0	
Missing	System	4	2.3		
Total	173	100.0			

The above table 1 shows the gender of the respondents. From the above results, 54.9% of the respondents were males and 42.8% were females. Considering that more men travel to eco-lodges than women, it may seem that men are likely to travel longer and more remote distances than women. Women have different travel patterns than men and prefer shorter distances with short travel time. Since most women travel short distances, they have different preferences for using vehicles than men, as they can choose other modes of transport for their daily chores. Table 2 above shows the distribution of respondents by age. From the above figures, the highest frequency was for age groups 30-39, 61%, followed by the age group 40-49 with 53%. Age groups 18-29, 50-59 and 60-69 showed 41%, 13% and 3% respectively. It appears that most tourists were within the age group 30-39. Interestingly, most tourists who visited eco-lodges in KwaZulu-Natal were young; for instance, ages 40-49 were 53%, and ages 18-29 were 41%. Unlike other studies that showed that tourists who visited eco-lodges were old, in this study, eco-lodge patrons were most found between 18-49 years old. Based on the above distribution, most tourists visiting KwaZulu-Natal are interested in adventure products.

Table 2: Age distribution

	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-29	41	23.7	24.0
	30-39	61	35.3	35.7
	40-49	53	30.6	31.0
	50-59	13	7.5	7.6
	60-69	3	1.7	1.8
	Total	171	98.8	100.0
Missing	System	2	1.2	
Total	173	100.0		

Table 3 below shows that most of the Lodge patrons were Black (74%), followed by Whites (67%) and Indians (18%), and Mixed race at 11%. Since this study was conducted during the COVID-19 era, tourist distribution was influenced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) protocols, lockdowns, and the closure of borders to contain the coronavirus spread.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents based on race

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Black	74	42.8	43.3	43.3
	Mixed Race	11	6.4	6.4	49.7
	White	67	38.7	39.2	88.9
	Indian	18	10.4	10.5	99.4
	Other	1	.6	.6	100.0
	Total	171	98.8	100.0	
Missing	System	2	1.2		
Total	173	100.0			

Table 4 reported that 94.8% of the eco-lodge patrons came from Africa, followed by 5% from Europe and 1% from East Asia. This study shows that most of the Tourists were from the region and were Africans.

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Table 4: Distribution of respondents based on place of residence

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Africa	164	94.8	96.5	96.5
	Europe	5	2.9	2.9	99.4
	East Asia	1	.6	.6	100.0
	Total	170	98.3	100.0	
Missing	System	3	1.7		
Total		173	100.0		

Figure 1 shows that eco-lodge patrons were highly educated since most respondents had secondary education (35%), undergraduate degrees (76%) and Postgraduate degrees (55%), respectively. Only 3% of the respondents had no formal education. The results show that the eco-lodge market comprises educated clients who know what they are looking for and their activities. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of tourists based on the highest qualification, current occupation and income. Figure 1 below shows that 43.9% of the respondents had undergraduate degrees, 33.5% were employed in the private sector, and 36.4% had an income below US$25000 per year. This was followed by the respondents who had postgraduate qualifications (31.8%), were employed in the public sector (21.3%) and had income of between US$25000 and US$50000. Students made up 22% of the respondents of eco-lodge patrons. The above figures show that 14.5% and 5.8% of the respondents had an income between US$50000-US$75000 and US$75001-US$100000 per year. A total of 6.9% of the respondents had an income above US$100000, whilst 11.6% did not specify their income. The income of eco-lodge patrons was concentrated between less than US$25000 and US$100000.

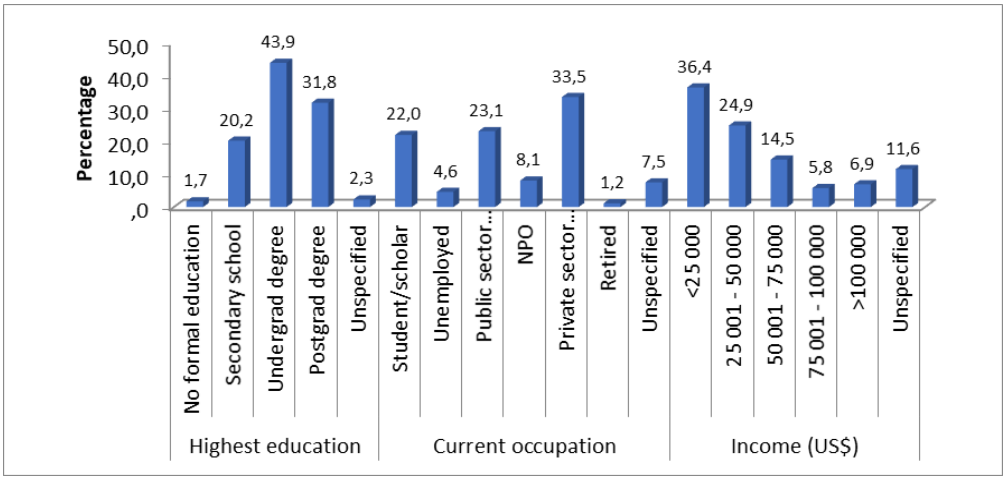

Figure 1: Highest education qualification, occupation and income

Environmental practices of eco-lodges

With ecotourism on the rise, communities become more engaged in environmental conservation, promoting sustainable practices that protect local ecosystems and wildlife. The results show that eco-lodges are well-designed and managed, considering their significant contribution to the three dimensions of sustainable development (Khonje et al., 2021). As a result, there is a close linkage between eco-lodges and other sectors, creating direct and indirect decent jobs and generating trade opportunities. Eco-lodges adjacent to protected sites are legally bound to use indigenous plants and other natural resources sustainably without damaging the ecosystem. One of the respondents indicated that, "An ecology primarily focuses on ecological principles, possibly in water conservation. It follows guiding principles on eradicating alien vegetation, and we have a programme to remove all the alien species and vegetation. We pump our water from the river without electricity, Respondent 5. Eco-lodges have a special interest in sustainable development as they are small, medium, and micro-enterprises that can produce many positive results in highly rural areas of biodiversity, where other kinds of innovation are underway or are often environmentally harmful (Olson, 2011). Although some tourists view eco-lodges as someplace that provide off-budget accommodation, most of their practices are sustainable.

Table 5: Green practices in eco-lodges

	Statement	Standard deviation	Chi-square	p-value
1	Green audits to reduce greenwashing	42.4264	6.9251	.0085*
2	Recycling	14.1421	.5351	.46445
3	Water bottle filling station	7.0711	.00585	.808903
4	Recycling bins	56.5685	50.4881	.00001*
5	Biodegradable products	21.2132	2.6016	.106759
6	Cycling	7.0711	4.2338	.39627*
7	Composting beverage cups	15.5563	.5273	.467731
8	Gel hand sanitisers	31.1126	9.5864	.00196*
9	Use of low shower heads	62.2253	66.6467	.00009*
10	Use of motion sensor taps	53.7401	42.6813	.00001*
11	Use of shower cubicles	21.2132	2.6016	.106759
12	Use of stickers advising guests to save water	66.4680	80.4924	.00001*

Table 5 shows that green audits are perceived to be important since they reduce greenwashing. The chi-square static was 6.9251 (p-value .0085*). The chi-square static for recycling bins was 50.4881 (.00001*), and Cycling was 4.2338 (p-value .39627*). The chi-square test static for gel hand sanitisers was found to be 9.5864 (.00196*), the use of low shower heads was 66.6467 (.00009*) and the use of motion sensor taps was 42.6813 (.00001*). Respondents expressed a favourable attitude towards using motion sensor taps even though they are a recent technological innovation. The study has revealed that Eco-lodges are up to date with new global water-saving developments to increase guest satisfaction. This was confirmed by Respondent 10, who indicated that, "Lodges offer their employees clean uniforms, providing comfort and safety, including one meal and medical cover. He further explained that some employee benefits are not prescribed in the Labour Act. However, they use these benefits to motivate their employees for optimum performance," Respondent 10. The study has also revealed that despite a dearth of knowledge on shower heads, respondents perceived these as an important element in green practices.

Expectations regarding eco-lodge room attributes

From the above table, saving water (60.1%) was considered highly important. A high priority was placed on saving water, considering water is an essential, scarce resource in KZN. Tourists' preference for saving water is motivated by using showers with low pressure. By installing water-saving showers, Lodges can save water compared to pressurised taps. It was observed that using low-pressure showers would not compromise guest experiences; hence, using a shower is cheaper and more hygienic than a bathtub. Furthermore, Respondent 6 said, "We use a spreadsheet for items that do not considerably impact the environment. We have people who advise us on environmentally friendly items, but we do not know about chemistry. Therefore, we go according to experts' recommendations and their standards. They give us a data sheet with a massive number of chemicals that we use for laundry and soaps that we use for washing dishes. There is a standard that we use when buying these environmentally friendly chemicals. We do not use these fly-by-night companies." For instance, bathtubs require chemicals for sanitisation, and with the increasing inflation, it would be expensive to import these chemicals due to increasing exchange rates and foreign currency shortages.

Table 6: Expectations regarding eco-lodge room attributes

	Eco-lodge room attributes	Highly important	Important	Somewhat important	Not important	I don't Know	System
		%	%	%	%	%	%
1	Saving Water efficiency design	60.1	19.1	9.8	2.3	4	4.7
2	Linen and towel reuse	42.2	17.9	16.2	13.9	2.3	7.5
3	Air conditioning system	51.4	24.3	9.8	6.9	1.7	5.9
4	Natural airflow	59.0	27.2	7.5	0.6	1.7	0.4
5	Alternative energy-saving system/equipment	59.0	21.4	11.6	2.3	2.9	2.9
6	Indoor natural plants	52.6	23.1	13.3	5.8	1.2	3.5
7	Environmentally friendly products	57.2	25.4	12.1	1.7	1.7	1.7
8	The green policy of the lodge publicized	60.1	22.5	9.2	2.9	2.9	2.3

Linen and towel reuse was (42.2%), Air conditioning system (51.4%), Natural air flow (59.0%) and alternative energy serving (59.0). The results show that the reuse of linen and towels can assist in limiting the quantity of washing needed every day, which can go a long way in saving water. This implies that hotel guests in the country's lodges were comfortable with having their linen changed upon request. Rather than automatically changing the linen, the lodges could conserve resources and enhance employee comfort by asking guests if they want their linen changed. Respondent 11 thought that, "The presence of in-room detection devices to automatically turn on and off energy-consuming appliances wholly enhanced guest experiences. However, room key cards were the preferred method of achieving this instead of motion sensors. We are taking off all the lights and replacing them with LED to save electricity. We are also looking at the architectural design of our buildings, redesigning the rooms to allow more natural light into the room and reduce electric lighting. Our lodge was built long ago but was not designed to turn into a lodge; hence, some designs will be costly to change" Respondent 11. Currently, many hotels do not consult guests regarding the change of linen. This means lodges could be wasting resources and overburdening the housekeeping section by not giving guests linen change options.

Social factors that contribute to the decision to stay in a lodge

From the above responses, 67.6% of the tourists were motivated by the desire to learn the culture of the people within the surrounding areas. Although tourists' motivations to visit a particular destination vary significantly, many travellers are influenced by various social reasons and attractions. One respondent was concerned about CSR when he observed that, "It is important to question CSR as the face of capitalism since it is manipulated subtly as a public good and given a sexy name as being responsible for corporate citizens claiming that it can contribute to the reduction of poverty, fight climate change and contribute to sustainable development." Tourism encourages the preservation of cultural heritage. A close observation showed that one important element was the sale of handicrafts to tourists. Initiatives like cultural villages allow local artisans to showcase traditional crafts, such as beadwork and pottery, which fosters pride in local culture. Handicrafts are produced and sold by the local community, which has become a sub-chain of the tourism sector. Handicraft sales are one of the sources of income for the surrounding communities in KwaZulu-Natal. It was observed that most of these people are poverty-stricken, they have no skills to venture into other sectors for employment, and generally, they have no access to resources. Local guides often share their cultural heritage knowledge, like the Zulu traditions, providing jobs and income. Corporations may not fully

grasp rural communities' unique cultural, social, and economic dynamics. Most local community members have limited education and rely primarily on subsistence farming and other contract job opportunities with poor salaries. Hence, the production of handicrafts is the most alternative option for them since they use their traditional skills to produce them, and less investment is needed. For instance, one of the respondents indicated that, "In developing countries such as South Africa, ecotourism can be used to promote sustainable development. Here, there are few job opportunities, and most people are unemployed. Therefore, tourism has become an alternative source of sustainable livelihood options. From a business perspective, tourism has assisted in protecting the environment and creating many opportunities for the local community," Respondent 6. Therefore, the production and selling of handicrafts allow local communities to earn a decent income. Respondents indicated that handcraft production has played an important role in employment creation. While subsistence farming provides significant income in rural areas, handicraft production complements other economic activities. Increased tourism improves infrastructure, including roads, healthcare, and sanitation. For instance, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park development has led to better access and facilities for surrounding communities.

Table 7: Social factors that contribute to the decision to stay in a lodge

Motivation	Category	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Desire to learn the culture of the people within the surrounding areas	Yes	117	42.5	74.5
	No	23	42.5	-19.5
	Do not know	22	42.5	-20.5
	Refuse to rate	8	42.5	-34.5
To participate in local social programs like environmental education awareness campaigns	No	33	42.5	62.5
	Yes	105	42.5	-9.5
	Do not know	21	42.5	-21.5
	Refuse to rate	8	42.5	-31.5
To visit recreational facilities	No	10	42.8	103.3
	Yes	146	42.8	-32.8
	Do not know	9	42.8	-33.8
	Refuse to rate	6	42.8	-36.8
Friendly service is offered at the lodge	No	7	42.3	97.8
	Yes	140	42.3	-35.3
	Do not know	10	42.3	-32.3
	Refuse to rate	12	42.3	-30.3

About 60.7% of the participants indicated they were influenced by the need to participate in local social programs like environmental education awareness campaigns. Some tourism initiatives directly contribute to community development projects (Büscher, 2014). The income generated can be reinvested into education or health programs. An example is the Drakensberg community-based conservation projects involving locals in conservation efforts (Loza, 2023). This is important because social motives can only be satisfied at a local tourism destination, and the attraction motives can be satisfied anywhere in different destinations with similar scenery and landscape. One respondent reiterated that, "Eco-lodges should be involved in social, economic and environmental issues directly or indirectly. We have seen that in our lodge, the relationship between our company and the social and physical environment in which we operate is powerful. Whilst we do not have a CSR programme and an environmental policy, we have many environmental initiatives in place," Respondent 15. Respondents were interested in visiting recreational facilities (84.4%). Whilst there is no universal definition of what constitutes an eco-lodge, a wide range of social, physical, and environmental attributes are provided within these unique facilities. About 80.9% indicated that they were motivated by the friendly service offered at the lodge. The level of service delivery at different eco-lodges is influenced by patrons' importance of their experiences and the nature of the programmes offered.

Economic factors

Respondents were asked to rate statements regarding economic factors: one represented unimportant, two was least important, three was neutral, four was important, and five was highly important. From the table below, it was evident that lodge patrons considered value when choosing a lodge (36.4). Specific characteristics lodge patrons look for include architectural design, greening, landscape, food, and service. There are other factors that the patrons may consider, which may be classified under value for money. So, service delivery was rated as 37.6%, meaning that most respondents thought service delivery was critical in a lodge. A service can make or break any tourism experience. Lodges that provide poor services are not likely to receive repeat visits. Some Lodges even customise their services to get repeat business or referrals, which is a crucial marketing strategy in tourism. The quality of accommodation was rated at 36.4%, which shows that accommodation is an important element in choosing a lodge.

Table 8: Economic factors

	Impression on economic factors	Highly important	Important	Somewhat important	Not important	Neutral	System
		%	%	%	%	%	%
1	Value for money	36.4	28.3	12.1	3.5	17.3	4
2	Service delivery	37.6	32.9	6.9	1.7	19.1	3
3	Quality of accommodation	36.4	32.9	5.8	2.9	20.2	1.7
4	Location	47.4	26.0	5.2	5.2	14.5	1.7
5	Communication	30.6	29.5	13.3	6.9	17.9	1.7

Lodge patrons look for a bed and consider several factors in a room. These factors may include the space in a room, the room's design, the quality of bedding utilities, showers/bathtubs, lighting and other factors. Tourism opens opportunities for local entrepreneurship. Businesses like guesthouses, restaurants, and craft markets thrive as tourists seek authentic experiences. For example, the Coastline of KwaZulu-Natal is an excellent example of the local market.

Discussion and implications

Using CSR to uplift rural livelihoods in KwaZulu-Natal

The extent to which CSR can uplift rural livelihoods depends on the depth and longevity of commitment from eco-lodge operators. Sustainable development requires continuous engagement, transparent practices, and genuine efforts to empower local communities. Therefore, tourism organisations should adopt green practices to procure products and services. Available evidence further emphasises that green products and services have gained tremendous attention because customers are more concerned with environmental sustainability and the deteriorating environment (Khonje et al., 2021). Many CSR initiatives have a limited timeframe, focusing on immediate results rather than sustainable long-term solutions. Eco-lodges are intended to be accommodation facilities that support environmental conservation while providing economic benefits to host communities (Sumanapala et al., 2017). Furthermore, eco-lodges offer learning opportunities about biodiversity and provide natural resource-oriented activities. Hence, among these, the accommodation concept known as “eco-lodge” has gained broader recognition, particularly in the nature-based tourism sector, which offers accommodation facilities that support environmental conservation while providing economic benefits to host communities (Sumanapala et al., 2015). CSR initiatives associated with eco-lodges can invest in community development projects. These may include building schools, healthcare facilities, clean water infrastructure, and enhancing education and health standards in rural areas. Eeco-lodges contribute to rural economic growth through job creation. They employ residents in various roles such as hospitality, tour guiding, and maintenance, reducing unemployment rates and enhancing household incomes. Such responsible practices ensure a positive cycle of social and economic benefits for the eco-lodges and their communities. However, the paper concludes that addressing poverty alleviation through CSR is inconclusive since the role of eco-lodge business in social development remains a contested issue with emerging patterns of vastly different factors affecting eco-lodge business operations.

The rationality or morality of using CSR in eco-lodges

Ecotourism is considered a key instrument that might provide a win-win or a conciliatory yet compelling solution to such seemingly polarised positions towards conservation between residents and the authorities who manage such global commons (Ghosh & Ghosh, 2019:346). Eco-lodges are environmentally friendly accommodations that promote ecotourism, often located in rural areas, creating opportunities for the local communities. Companies often contribute resources that do not align with the community’s needs. The results show that the relationship between tourism and society is complex, and all the pro-poor needs are unlikely to be met through CSR alone. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of eco-lodges plays an important role in the conservation, preservation and sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage. Therefore, eco-lodges should meet the following design requirements: They have to be designed in harmony with the local natural and cultural environment, using the principles of sustainable architecture, maximise the use of renewable energy resources and use renewable materials for construction, where possible, using recycled materials, work in harmony with communities offering jobs with a wide range of responsibilities and employment via contracts with other vendors, provide benefits to local conservation and research initiatives both public and private and offer excellent interpretative programs to educate the clients about the local environment and culture (Ferreira & Perks, 2022). Applying Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in eco-lodges can significantly uplift rural livelihoods by fostering sustainable development and positive socio-economic impacts. The success of tourism development in a rural setting depends on securing the support and active participation of stakeholders, particularly the community (Litheko & Potgieter, 2021). CSR efforts can fail if they do not involve community voices in the planning and execution stages. Eeco-lodges often focus on preserving the environment and promoting sustainable practices. This can lead to biodiversity conservation, protection of natural resources, and the revival of traditional sustainable livelihoods such as handicrafts and agriculture. However, a renewable energy project might overlook local input, resulting in technology not meeting the community's energy needs or preferences. Nevertheless, partnerships with local suppliers for food, crafts, and services can further stimulate the local economy.

Application of CSR in eco-lodges

The tourism sector is regarded as a modern-day engine of growth and has significant potential to serve as a vehicle for socio-economic upliftment (Lewis et al., 2021). The application of corporate environmental responsibility constitutes the prevention of pollution, the product includes stewardship, which focuses on the environmental impact of the life cycle of the product, and the third and last step is clean technology, which leads to the development of new technologies and innovation (Metaxas & Tsavdaridou, 2014). CSR in ecolodges can provide high-quality experiences for tourists and create social benefits and infrastructure improvements. CSR can stimulate national and/or local economic development by diversifying/complementing the local economic base. Corporate philanthropy should concentrate on supplying resources or equipment that could be used as a working tool, and corporations are advised to link pro-poor CSR policies with their primary business as much as feasible (Ventura & Jauregui, 2023). Eco-lodges can generate funds for management and provide economic justification for protecting natural resources. While residents’ positive attitudes towards tourism development and willingness to host tourists, reasonable availability of infrastructure, and rich eco-tourism potential can be identified as the most important opportunities for

Community Based Tourism development in the local area, weak tourism marketing, limited upmarket accommodation facilities, and limited community awareness are the worst challenging (Gebreyesus et al., 2022). Eco-lodges can engage in community development by creating job opportunities for the local population and investing in education and healthcare infrastructure. CSR is not working as an effective tool for development because every agent involved gives a different definition of CSR, its implications and the proposals made for its implementation since they are ideologically conditioned (Merino & Valor, 2011:164).

Companies implement internal CSR programmes to address poverty among staff members and other internal stakeholders, and universalist CSR programmes work to address poverty at the community level (Ahmed et al., 2019). Multinationals are more likely to adopt internal initiatives that deal with content issues (equality of opportunity and treatment, working conditions, collective bargaining) than external initiatives that deal with context issues (reflecting local conditions, dynamic comparative advantage, training, monitoring). They also concluded that context-related concerns must be addressed to find lasting solutions to poverty. As a result, they recommended providing the poor with sufficient tools (know-how, technology, and resources) to help them escape poverty (Medina-Muñoz, 2019). Eco-lodges can foster environmental awareness/values and conservation support among residents and tourists through on-site educational opportunities. They promote cultural preservation, collaborate with nearby communities to preserve their cultural heritage and protect indigenous knowledge. Cheruiyot-Koech & Reddy (2022:6) argue that Powerful players in some businesses, such as industry associations, dictate the rules and regulations. These laws and regulations may concern social issues, including employment, worker health and safety, and the environment. When businesses compete to join the supply chain, they frequently pressure one another to follow these regulations and standards. Eco-lodges can educate guests about the fragile ecosystems they are situated in, encouraging respectful behaviour and minimising the impact on the environment. Core business-related initiatives make up the first subcategory of pro-poor initiatives. Businesses should help the poor obtain reasonably priced goods and services that satisfy their fundamental requirements and prevent and manage the adverse effects of their core business on them. Building relationships and working with community stakeholders are part of the second category of pro-poor practises (legitimation activities), which aim to eliminate poverty and permit organisations to operate in the area. As a result of their extensive knowledge of poverty causes and conditions, stakeholders from poor communities. The requirement to interact and cooperate with them. To determine the most urgent requirements of a community, businesses should work with local stakeholders (Medina-Muñoz, 2019). CSR can increase environmental sustainability by implementing energy-efficient technologies, water conservation measures, and waste reduction initiatives. Contrary to other studies (Cheruiyot-Koech & Reddy, 2022; EC, 2011) that argue that CSR involves the firms' societal concerns about social, environmental, and ethical issues, in this study, the evidence shows that Eco-lodges place great emphasis on the environmental dimension of CSR than the social aspects. CSR can assist in sourcing locally produced and organic materials for construction and amenities, reducing their carbon footprint and supporting local communities.

Conclusion

Eco-lodges have gained broader recognition, particularly in the nature-based tourism sector, which offers accommodation facilities that support environmental conservation while providing economic benefits to host communities. Consequently, eco-lodges offer learning opportunities about biodiversity and provide natural resource-oriented activities. Such responsible practices ensure a positive cycle of social and economic benefits for the eco-lodges and their communities. They employ residents in various roles such as hospitality, tour guiding, and maintenance, thereby reducing unemployment and enhancing household incomes. The role of eco-lodge business in social development remains a contested issue, with emerging patterns of vastly different factors affecting eco-lodge business operations. Evaluating the impact of CSR initiatives can be complex. Eeco-lodges often focus on preserving the environment and promoting sustainable practices. This can lead to biodiversity conservation, protection of natural resources, and the revival of traditional sustainable livelihoods such as handicrafts and agriculture. Without clear metrics, companies may struggle to assess whether their projects genuinely improve livelihoods or merely create the illusion of progress. CSR in Eco-lodges can contribute to sustainable development through human resource development, natural resources conservation, and generating economic and social benefits. Eco-lodges can foster environmental awareness/values and conservation support among residents and tourists through on-site educational opportunities. Promote cultural preservation, collaborate with nearby communities to preserve their cultural heritage and protect indigenous knowledge. By practising CSR, eco-lodges enhance their reputation and contribute to preserving natural and cultural assets in the long term. However, the paper concludes that addressing poverty alleviation through CSR is inconclusive due to other factors. Nevertheless, CSR can make eco-lodges more attractive to environmentally conscious travellers and promote sustainable tourism practices.

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