

Promoting Avitourism as a special niche area of Ecotourism in South Africa

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Abstract

Little attention has been provided to the relationships between various elements in the development of avitourism as an important tourism niche area in South Africa. From this perspective, the article discusses the role of involving local communities in supporting avitourism, and its influence on tourism in general, focusing on the synergistic relationship between these elements. The article has a conceptual analytical framework, and thus strives to analyse the role and contribution of avitourism in general economic development in especially rural areas in South Africa. It highlights the potential of avitourism as an economic activity that will contribute to the sustainable economic and social development of the country and also contribute to both environmental and cultural heritage preservation, while simultaneously ensuring the participation of the local communities and other stakeholders in the process. Another of the objectives of this article is to create a discussion regarding more dynamic approaches to avitourism promotion. To attain this objective, this conceptual paper relies on prior literature and logical reasoning to argue in favour of a more dynamic approach to avitourism in South Africa. Additionally, the study suggests how the proposed approach may be operationalised.

On one hand, the article is anticipated to provide a theoretical contribution to enhance the body of knowledge on avitourism and on the other hand, the study will explore a potential paradigm shift in avitourism marketing practices.

Key words: Bird-watching; avitourism, conservation; sustainability, job-creation.

Terms of reference

Ecotourism- Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, improves the welfare, sustains the well being of local people.

Avitourism- Travel beyond one's usual environment undertaken overnight, to view birds in their natural habitat.

Bird-watching or Birding – Observing or studying birds for recreation, usually with a binoculars and related equipment such as cameras, spotting scopes etc.

Birder- One who studies birds and looks for species they have not seen before.

Endemic birds- Birds limited to a specific geographic region.

Nature-based tourism- Tourism in natural environments with the specific

objective of viewing natural features. Its sub-categories include wildlife tourism, marine tourism, botanical tourism, Hiking/trailing and avitourism.

Ornithology- Studying of bird species by applying formal scientific research methodologies.

Twitcheer – a birder who is prepared to travel great distances to view birds that are rare.

Acronyms/Abbreviations

GDP – Gross domestic product

IBAs – Important bird areas

IDC – Industrial Development Corporation

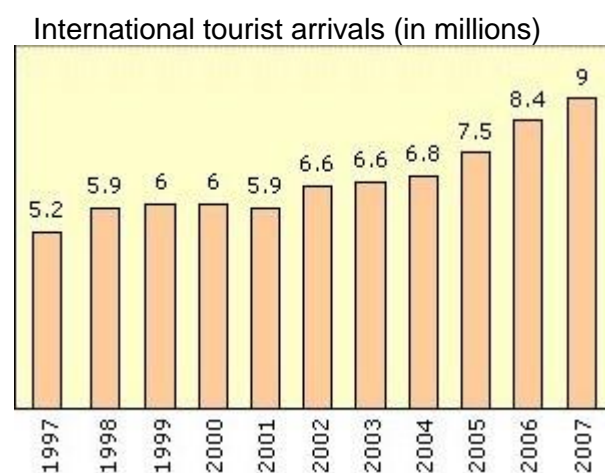
NDT – National Department of Tourism

SAT –South African Tourism

The dti –Department of Trade and Industry
DTA – Department of Tourism

Introduction

Travel from abroad to South Africa has grown rapidly since the end of the apartheid era. In 1994 there were 3.9-million foreign tourist arrivals and ten years later in 2004, this increased to 6.7-million. According to the DTA there are currently in excess of 9 million tourists gracing our shores per annum.



(Source: Department of Tourism)

Tourism is also the most rapidly developing global industry (WTTC, 1992), and it is viewed by many governments in especially developing nations as a means of simultaneously developing and conserving their natural resources. International tourism arrivals increased from 420 million arrivals in 1989 to well over 664 million arrivals in 1999, thus equaling more than 10% of the global population (Biggs et al.

2011). In 2001, global tourism confirmed 693 million international tourist arrivals, producing some US\$463 billion in international tourism receipts (WTO 2002). These trends are continuing despite global economic recession and ecotourism in particular is growing rapidly. Ecotourism is a special area of tourism created by the bonding between leisure travel to wilderness areas and the objective of

safeguarding the world's dwindling biological diversity (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996). Tourism is currently the most important contributor to South Africa's economy. It is estimated that tourism provides 8% of South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP) and the tourism sector employs a million people either directly or indirectly and is a key industry (AsgiSA, 2006). Tourism's contribution to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown from 4.6% in 1993 to the current 8% and this is a remarkable increase.

Either directly or indirectly, tourism represents about 7% of employment in South Africa and it is considered to be the current main growth sector. (<http://www.southafrica.info/business/economy/sectors/tourism/overview.htm#ixzz1bm8AWHFv>)

In this article, 'aviturismo', 'birding' and 'birdwatching' are used interchangeably. Definitions of 'aviturismo' in the literature also include birding and birdwatching. Sekercioğlu (2002), states that birding is the act of observing and identifying birds in their natural habitats. Birdwatching on the other hand is 'aviturismo' or 'birding tourism' provided that if the avitourist takes a trip of at least 1.5 km) or more from home to view birds (La Rouche, 2003). Hvenegaard (2002) has classified aviturismo as a sub-set of ecotourism as it promotes conservation and environmental sustainability. Bird-watching or 'birding' as it is now commonly referred to, is one of the fastest growing pastimes in the world and a new alternative of niche tourism and it can be conducted virtually anywhere. Aviturismo is one of ecotourism's major supporters, as it comprises the largest single group of ecotourists (Cordell & Herbert, 2002).

Due to its vast ornithological variety, Africa is a top-priority for many avid birdwatchers from abroad and as far as especially Southern Africa is concerned, aviturismo is a rapidly growing niche tourism market. If aviturismo was marketed more vigorously, the potential market size for

South Africa would be far larger than it currently is. Many tourists visiting South Africa seek nature-based experiences including bird-watching and the country hosts 920 species which accounts for about 10% of the species encountered globally. Increasing avitourism to South Africa, would not only bolster job creation and enhance community development but concurrently also promote conservation and sustainable environmental management. This is supported by the NDT and the IDC. Avitourism can also contribute to the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA), which is a governmental scheme to cut unemployment and reduce poverty through sustainable employment creation (DTI, 2008:6).

There are currently a wide range of important niches in tourism emerging in South Africa and globally. Rapidly growing niches *inter-alia*, include medical tourism, battlefield tourism and sports tourism. Bird watching or birding tourism (called avitourism) is a highly specialised sector of nature-based tourism and is fixed on viewing avian species in especially their natural settings. Avitourism is a niche which has its basis in ecotourism and its significance as a niche market in tourism is already documented (Cordell & Herbert, 2002). It is a niche which has great potential to contribute to international tourism growth to South Africa and elsewhere. Niche markets such as avitourism, encourage the diversification of products and promote the growth of inbound tourism (DTI, 2008).

Avitourism can contribute towards a number of tourism sector objectives such as increasing tourists' length of stay, spending patterns, geographical distribution of tourists and volumes; reduction of seasonality and it can also promote transformation (South African Tourism, 2008). Avitourism is a very fashionable hobby and it is a sub-category of Nature-based tourism, along with wildlife tourism, marine tourism, hiking and trailing and botanical tourism (Keyser, 2009). Avitourism is tourist's travels to

view birds in their natural habitat, usually with binoculars. It is steadily increasing in popularity and is an expanding nature-based tourism activity in many countries such as India and Thailand. It includes Bird-watching or 'Birding' which has been a popular hobby in many countries across the globe for centuries as well as Twitching, which refers to birders who travel long distances to site rare bird species. Birdwatchers are seemingly interested in the detailed study of bird types, the scientific classification of avian species and are also concerned with environmental issues.

Twitchers on the other hand are more likely to be focused on finding birds and especially rare ones at that. They do not generally want to experience more fauna and flora or even cultural heritage (Dooley, 2005). They consider themselves to be avitourists who are creating an identity for themselves through their pleasurable birdwatching experiences. In South Africa, avitourism can be quite an adventure for avitourists, either domestic or international, as they visit different places seeking to view species of birds they have not seen before or to witness unusual bird behaviour. Birdwatching is commonly peri-urban in character as many species live in cities or on their outskirts. However there are many varieties of birds that are to be found in outflung localities and distant rural regions. Many are encountered in areas that 'would make the general public blanch' (Weidensaul, 2007) such as garbage dumps and sewerage farms.

Who are the avitourists?

The global growth of avitourism is clear to see in the development of tourism companies which recommend avitourism experiences. In addition to these, many websites and tourist guidebooks promote avitourism. A wide range of bird-safaris and avi-adventures have been designed for serious bird watchers. Avitourists in general, are typically involved in viewing as many different bird species, especially rare and endangered species (Leuschner et al., 1989). This search for new and rare

species of birds takes birdwatchers from across the globe to progressively distant locations and this undoubtedly leads to the emergence of once insignificant places as modern niche avitourist destinations. The vast majority of birdwatchers who become avitourists, generally emanate from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, Australasia as well as Scandinavia. They are usually relatively well educated middle-aged males with money available to spend on travel abroad (Jones & Buckley, 2004). As in the case of most nature-based tourists, birdwatchers generally emanate from the affluent strata of their societies (Mehmetoglu, 2007). More often than not, due to job constraints, they do not have much time to spend on trips abroad and are consequently likely to spend more money on avitourism over a relatively short period of time so as to gain maximum benefit from their experiences (Eubanks et al., 2004).

Birdwatching is growing in part due to the increase of nature-based television programmes being produced globally which tend to encourage potential avitourists to undertake trips abroad mainly as a form of escapism from the concrete jungles which are modern cities, and to experience unique parts of the globe and see exotic species (Rodger et al., 2007). It is significant to note that the quantity of global avitourists has noticeably appreciated in first-world nations. According to Scott and Thigpen (2003), there has been a marked 225 per cent increase in the number of birdwatchers in the United States of America between 1982 and 2002 and the numbers are growing even more as birdwatching is becoming a very popular recreational pastime (Weidensaul 2007; Sali et al., 2008). There has also been a significant rise in birdwatching in the United Kingdom, where membership of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has doubled (Huxley, 2007). Similar increases in birdwatching numbers are also documented for France, Australia and New Zealand and the potential impact on avitourism is great. The majority of

birdwatchers appear to be over the age of 55 with hardly any teenagers partaking in avian species related activities. This is particularly the case in the United Kingdom (Lovibond, 2005). It is also noticeable that birdwatchers and consequently avitourists, emanate from the upper socio-economic strata in their respective countries of origin and they generally have a higher education level (Sali et al. 2008). In Turkey, avitourism is considered a novel tourism niche which attracts predominantly younger males (25-35 years of age) but it is not confined to them alone (Cakici & Harman, 2007). Birdwatching is estimated to generate huge amounts of income from tourists (Stratton, 2004) and as much as US\$103 million is estimated to have been spent by avitourists at Lake Manyas in Turkey over a short period of time (Gurluk & Rehber, 2008).

Sali & Kuehn (2007) applied a qualitative methodology to analyse what motivates avitourists and isolated 24 factors that motivate avitourists. Their research findings point towards five categories of motivation for avitourists including:

- An emotional motivation linked to feelings.
- An intellectual motivation relating to knowledge acquisition.
- Physical motivation for exercise.
- Social motivation related to interaction with other people with similar interests.
- A spiritual motivation relating the intangible and non-material things in life.

McFarlane, (1994) expresses the opinion that avitourists generally seek a pleasurable experience of enjoying nature and all that it has to offer. Birdwatching thus epitomizes an increasingly important sub-category of ecotourism that is developing due to greater affluence and relative ease of entry. It is also increasing global awareness and interest in conservation and many avitourists are a high-volume tourism base as they tend to be highly enthusiastic about their pastime.

They are thus a very lucrative target segment, particularly amongst the middle aged, usually higher education level middle class. Even avitourists who are not as fanatical as others can make a significant contribution to tourism growth in South Africa. Tourists from China can be an important market as many Chinese appreciate birdlife and if there are diversified and high quality products on offer, they may visit South Africa in increasing numbers. China is Australia's fastest growing inbound tourism market. Many Chinese are obsessed with birdwatching (Dong, 2011). Sekercioglu (2002) states that birdwatching has become so popular that there were 125 specialist bird-tour companies and travel agencies across the globe just under ten years ago. The current number has certainly increased and even guidebooks such as Lonely Planet and Fodor's, are increasingly including birdwatching sites in their publications. It is apparent from recent studies by the *dti*, namely Avitourism in South Africa, that domestic and international avitourists exhibit different travel behaviours and also spend money differently on avitourism activity. South Africans tend to spend about 38 days per annum on avitourism and about 60% of this takes place outside their home provinces. They also tend to spend 23% of their avitourism time outside of South Africa. International avitourists appear to be more dedicated to their hobby and about 77% of them undertook short trips to Africa and visited Southern African birding destinations. International tourists also preferred to embark on specialist birding tours run by operators and they were also more likely to indulge in pelagic bird viewing than locals are.

Why Birding in South Africa?

Avitourism offers a number of important economic, social and conservation benefits for South Africa. In the first instance, greater amounts of needed foreign exchange is spent by avitourists on travel abroad and accommodation in particular. This generates needed employment in economically depressed

times and provides the national fiscus with additionally needed money. The social benefits are huge as regional and rural development is promoted and local communities and other stakeholders participate in tourism initiatives. Most importantly, conservation is encouraged and fragile ecosystems and the wide range of avian species and biodiversity are sustained. Avitourists experiences are enhanced by the provision of quality guiding and local communities are more likely to support tourism initiatives once it becomes clear that they will ultimately benefit by such initiatives.

The best part of selecting a bird safari in South Africa, is that it offers a great opportunity to spend time the sunny outdoors. Spending time in South Africa's beautiful natural surroundings along with viewing of birds is also an exceptional holiday for guests who live in sprawling metropolitan areas across the globe and who live in high rise apartments. The sheer size and extent of the landscape is generally breathtaking for tourists, and a feeling of being in a special place is further intensified by the unique wildlife that inhabits the areas where avitourism is undertaken.

Avitourists are that segment of ecotourists that relish the idea of traveling to relatively undisturbed or unpolluted natural areas with the specific objective of appreciating, studying, and taking pleasure in bird-life. Avitourists have the opportunity of engrossing themselves in nature in a way that most people cannot in their mundane, urban lifestyles. They thus intentionally travel to natural areas to simultaneously study the local cultures as well as to view exotic bird species in what are generally unique ecosystems, carefully striving not to modify the integrity of the environment. Observing avian species in their natural outdoor settings is an emotionally, intellectually and spiritually rewarding experience. It provides many people with a special feeling of natural authenticity and marvel (Shelton & Lubcke, 2005). There are over 900 avian species in southern Africa, and approximately 725 species are

to be found in South Africa. In fact most of South Africa's endemic avian species are situated in a variety of habitats, either grassland, cultivated lands, wetlands, fynbos, thornveld, woodland, evergreen forests, mountains or karoo biomes. There are also 122 Bird Areas that are home to some 45 threatened avian species. Bird distribution is of course, in a continual state of flux. It is not uncommon for entire avian populations to relocate, often influenced by climatic cycles or environmental degradation.

Avitourism marketing and entrepreneurship possibilities

South Africa has many birding routes and makes provision for avitourists by providing many national parks and nature reserves where bird-life is copious. From 2004, nine additional birding routes including the De Beers-linked Diamond Birding Route have been brought to fruition in South Africa. These birding routes have been created as a marketing tool to promote avitourism and to stimulate rural communities socio-economically while empowering the indigenous population. In a nutshell, they create many opportunities for local communities to become formally involved in the avitourism economy and also promote conservation initiatives.

The birding routes encompass the following birding assets nationally: The Diamond Route, Western Cape birding route, Eastern Cape birding route, Zululand birding route, Southern Kwazulu-Natal birding route, the Mpumalanga birding route, the Gauteng birding route and the Greater Limpopo birding route. The national parks include *inter-alia*, the Kruger National Park, the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park, the West Coast National Park, the De Hoop Nature Reserve, Ndumu Game Reserve and the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. In addition to the marketed birding routes, there a number of annual birding events such as the National Bird Week, Sappi BirdLife SA Big Bird Day, the SASOL Birds and Birding Fair and special birding weekends

which are held on an ongoing basis. Avitourists of necessity require highly specialised information and marketing.

Using travel magazines such as Conde Nast and newspaper supplements which have articles promoting avitourism initiatives are essentially non-negotiable. There are not enough feature articles relating to avitourism in South Africa. An ideal platform to promote avitourism would be the Sunday Times Travel Weekly. In addition to such marketing drives, local ornithologists could provide lectures as well as guide day tours to selected birding hotspots. South African Airways, SA Airlink and other airline in-flight magazines could also support avitourism by including regular articles relating directly to avitourism. This would also boost airline ticket sales. While word-of-mouth marketing is valuable, bird publications are also essential tools to be utilised for marketing, as are the newsletters of bird clubs which highlight special events. Avitourists also require bird lists with updated information on local avian species that can be encountered. Bird hides suitable for photographing rare species are also a necessity. Such ideas create opportunities for aspirant avitourism entrepreneurs on specific bird routes. Entrepreneurs should in any event forge links with tour operators and tour guides and establish whatever relevant business they may deem appropriate in IBAs. There are also many opportunities for budding avitourism guides, and accommodation providers, provided that such individuals develop a real passion for birdwatching activities and are willing to learn as much as possible about avitourism.

In our neighbouring state of Botswana, the value of wetlands in the Okavango and Chobe areas has been recognised and preserved through birdwatching. South Africa could easily emulate this. From the North to South and East to the West, every region of South Africa offers a great diversity of avian species. Avitourism is principally significant in more remote regions such as deserts, semi-deserts, savannahs and wetlands. Offshore

islands, where more unusual and rare pelagic species are to be found also prove to be trendy avitourism destinations.

India as an example of an Avitourism destination

In the last couple of years, India tourism has undergone trend shifts in terms of both economic and socio-cultural values and the attitudes and perceptions of Indians toward avitourism has altered. People are generally more environmentally conscious and relish any opportunity to escape to nature. Consequently, avitourism and wildlife destinations in general, are emerging as favoured destinations of indigenous Indians. In terms of Government of India policy, a new ecotourism drive is generating huge amounts of needed foreign revenue. Avitourism is increasing in popularity as more services and facilities are now provided for the avitourist. Unfortunately, in some cases, such tourism often results in the displacement of local communities who increasingly feel isolated from any socio-economic benefit. This major management issue is important for South Africa to note as this type of problem must be addressed at the policy level stage of avitourism development.

Traditionally, Brazil, Thailand and Australia are the main competitors of South Africa when it comes to avitourism. However, in recent times, Indian tourism has greatly developed its avitourism niche market and some of the best bird watching vacation packages that are available worldwide are to be found there. India boasts about 1000 different species of birds which may be viewed across its many states and regions. Avitourism focuses on the positive contribution of conservation of very fragile ecosystems and protected areas, through private and governmental financial support; active participation from local communities and indigenous people who benefit socio-economically and education on conservation issues and the environment for locals as well as avitourists.

Amazing national parks such as Ranthambhor National Park and Kaziranga National Park promise exciting viewing opportunities of endemic Indian avian species. In addition to these parks, India also possesses a number of impressive bird sanctuaries including the Nawabganj Bird Sanctuary, the National Chambal Sanctuary, Ranganthittu Bird Sanctuary and the Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. India also has specifically demarcated bio-geographical regions for birding including the Gangetic plain, Trans Himalayan, Eastern Himalayas, Central India, the Western Ghats, the Eastern Ghats, the North East, the Coastline and the Andaman Nicobar Islands. It is recognized that if the needs and wants of local communities are met, then natural resources are far more likely to be conserved (Dugelby and Libby, 1998).

Local communities in the holy Hindi city of Haridwar, that participate in the avitourism projects and serve as guides for avitourism, experience competence building and feel empowered. A problem area may arise where local guides are not adequately trained or mentored and thus lack confidence to deal with sophisticated avitourists from especially the United Kingdom and the United States. If adequate training is put into place, avitourism can create many job opportunities and uplift economically depressed communities. The main source markets for avitourists to India are the United States, United Kingdom, Continental Europe (mainly Germany, Netherlands, France) and Australia. India has 1214 species of birds including 34 endemic species. In the duration of a three week trip to India, an avid avitourist should see approximately 440 species. Delhi has a population of well over 11 million people and a geographic spread of 500 sq. kms. It currently houses 450 species of birds making it, after Nairobi, the second most worthwhile city in the world to visit for all types of avitourists. <http://www.camacdonald.com/birding/asia/india.htm>. Local avitourism guides not only lead avitourists to birdviewing sites but

also create a deeper understanding of the cultural heritage and natural history of India in the process.

In India, many birdwatchers erroneously believe that they can enter the avitourism business without really making any effort to study the potential pros and cons of such a venture. Because they happen to be avid birdwatchers, they believe they can make a success of a new enterprise. It is critical to realise that avitourism is a dynamic industry. Indian birdwatching tour operators are all suddenly complaining about reduced profits. Consequently, a number of avitourism operators have closed down. Clearly, research is needed before embarking on any business venture. What is required first and foremost for entrepreneurs is a workable business plan which considers all the aspects involved in the industry. This logic applies equally to any South Africa entrepreneur keen on avitourism as a career.

Avitourism's value for South Africa

When avitourists undertake environmentally friendly and responsible travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas and have a low negative impact, in order to enjoy and appreciate unique avian species in their natural habitats and conservation is promoted, avitourism is welcome. It is even more beneficial when the active socio-economic involvement and participation of local communities are sought (Honey, 1999). Avitourism has a very limited environmental impact as it is vital to protect specific habitats. It thus preserves rural natural resources as it is generally undertaken in ecologically fragile and usually protected areas and is thus somewhat low impact and small scale. Its very nature makes it educational for participants and it encourages conservation. More importantly, it can directly support economic development and empower local communities by especially new job creation. Such jobs would be sustainable for at least one year or longer and ideally be supported by government initiatives such as training and

entrepreneurial venture support (Urban-Econ, 2000.)

The last two decades have witnessed the transition of Birding from a predominantly domestic hobby to an important constituent of avitourism as a tourism niche. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (2001), three million trips are undertaken annually for avitourism purposes. The Tourism Directorate of the Department of Trade and Industry (*dti*), in South Africa also states that it is an important niche which should be further developed. In 1998, South Africa received between 750 and 1500 avitourists and by 2009, it has been estimated that there are up to 40 000 avitourists in South Africa per annum (Turpie and Ryan, 1998). The benefits derived from promoting such a niche are potentially huge. For example, by creating new markets, greater diversity is brought to the tourism economy. New jobs requiring specialised skills can be created and increased volumes of tourists to areas generally beyond the traditional tourist destinations and greater local spending, would certainly bolster South Africa's foreign exchange earnings.

Brau, R. (2008), supports the notion of demand-driven sustainable tourism which South African avitourism has the capacity to be, given the wonderful climatic conditions that are enjoyed in the country. Avitourism can lead to the creation of a plethora of economic opportunities to make the conservation of natural resources advantageous to local people in rural as well as remote areas. Avitourism could thus enhance South Africa's tourism competitiveness and is in line with the National Department of Tourism (NDT) Tourism Sector Strategy as well as the South African Tourism (SAT's) Marketing Strategy.

For avitourism to be sustainable tourism it should conform with Bramwell's and Lane's definition of sustainable tourism (1993). They state that sustainable tourism is "an economic development model conceived to improve the quality of life for the local community, and to

facilitate for the visitor a high quality experience of the environment, which both the host community as the visitors depends". On the one hand, if conducted properly, avitourism, can provide the ecotourist with a quality "green" vacation that is conducive for both the local environment and the ecotourist. For example, the people in or near many wildlife parks or other areas in South Africa rely on the money that ecotourists bring when they come to view wildlife including avian species. Any income accrued then provides a strong incentive for local peoples to preserve, rather than to hunt, trap or otherwise exploit the wild birds that are either migratory or endemic in any particular region. On the other hand, avitourism, when conducted *inappropriately*, often results in the destruction of habitats of avian species, including the disruption of their feeding and breeding patterns. As a result, local people may shy away from conservation measures themselves as these appear to be an exercise in futility.

It is estimated that avitourists spend R927 million to R1,725 billion annually on birding trips the relevant support services and required equipment in South Africa. Consequently, the contribution to South Africa's GDP is in the billions of rands. The local avitourism market predictably ranges between 20,000 to 40,000 avitourists per annum. Of this number, approximately 18 000- 23 000 are domestic avitourists. The economic impact of birdwatching is considerable, when one considers food, accommodation and transport, in especially remote places such as the Northern Cape Province, where there are fewer alternatives (La Rouche 2001). The limited tourist season can also be extended to take account of avian migrations, and this could significantly boost the levels of income of the involved communities. When avitourists travel to view distinct and rare species present throughout the year, this would undoubtedly contribute to the sustainability of rural societies and the economy in general, and can also play an important role in the conservation of our fauna and

flora in general. Given that avitourists stay over at specific sites for longer-than-average periods, have higher trip expenditures and prefer birdwatching to other tourism niches, they are vital to our tourism growth. Interestingly, up to 60% of avitourists tend to make their own local or international travel arrangements. The other 40% opt for the use of specialist birding tour operators sourced on the internet. They spend a lot of money on accommodation and transportation and this is welcome foreign exchange. Research conducted for the *dti* makes it apparent that as much as R47 million is spent every year in South Africa on tour guides by both international and domestic avitourists. International avitourists who visit South Africa have been profiled as follows: origin - Europe (60%), Africa (24%) and USA (8%); gender - male (82%); age - 53-years-old on average, 87% between 41 and 65 and 4% over 65; and education - 61% possessed higher education qualifications. Many of these are avitourists who use the same lodging and travel services as other tourists and tend to stay over in South Africa an average of 20 days per annum in particularly self-catering accommodation and they seek rare and endemic birdlife they have read about in birding books or the internet. Many of course visit because of the positive recommendations of friends or family. Most avitourists visit with a friend or spouse and often in groups of up to at least eight avitourists. Avitourism also provides an opportunity to bring avian scientists into an area, and this in itself brings economic and social benefits for local communities (Wright and Andriamihaja, 2002) and promotes respect for diverse cultures as well as human rights (Hillel, 2002).

Multi-national corporations and parastatal organizations should become more involved in avitourism businesses and thus assist in the drive to reduce poverty. There are according to Roe et. al. (2002) many ways in which such enterprises tourism can positively affect the lives of poor communities. They could, for example, improve transport and roads for

tourism and benefit local communities by providing access to medical facilities and water. They can also support community initiatives in participating in avitourism in planning and by encouraging communication between tour operators and community members through meetings and training. As crime is an impediment to greater tourism numbers in South Africa, improved security for avitourists would also serve locals well. There is also a serious need for greater research to be conducted on the financial contributions and environmental impacts of independent avitourists and tour companies who focus on birdwatching, especially in less-developed countries (Kerlinger & Brett 1995). When more meaningful information on the financial flow from diverse types of avitourism is available to would be avitourism entrepreneurs, the industry can be greatly enhanced.

Environmental impact

Sustainable avitourism must initially assure the important relationship between the local community and avitourists. In this regard, local governments should develop suitable policies (Accinelli et al, 2008); Conservation issues are paramount and the NDT and other stakeholders should formulate policies that focus on environmental protection, education and effective marketing and assist local communities to implement ecologically responsible measures and develop suitable local amenities.

Avitourism can create environmental impact problems if not managed correctly as is the case in Otago (Dunedin, New Zealand), which is an important birdwatching site. It is the only global mainland breeding site of the albatrosses and it is also the home to the endangered yellow-eyed penguin. As most species are sensitive to outside interference, avitourism with flash cameras could be a factor in the disruption of migration patterns, breeding and even feeding patterns (Valentine, 1984). A negative

impact is also apparent in the reduction in species numbers at often visited sites (Jones & Neelson, 2005). The environmental impact of tourism varies between species and from location to location and has hardly been studied over a long-term period (Lindsay et al. 2008). Where there are common species that are relatively easy to view, and where the knowledge of birdwatchers is somewhat limited, birds may be coaxed to an area by the provision of food and nesting boxes that are easily viewed from bird hides. Such actions encourage birds to remain in an area for longer than usual.

South Africa has two exemplary bird parks, namely the Umgeni Bird park in Durban, and the Montecasino Bird park in Johannesburg, and a number of zoos hosting a wide range of species, amongst others. These types of facility encourage and boost tourism and have a limited environmental impact. Ironically by commodifying birds in this way, there may well be a regeneration of an otherwise ecologically degraded landscape (Head, 2000). These facilities are also ideal places for new avitourists to introduce themselves to birdwatching as very often, rare birds are usually difficult to spot in natural settings (Rodger et al, 2007) and in any case, new birdwatchers rarely have the necessary telescopes and binoculars for viewing. Ecologically responsible avitourism should in any event, be non-negotiable (Shen & Zheng, 2010). Affluent environmentally aware avitourists could also play a role in influencing the local community service providers to invest in their facilities' modernisation so as to make them more ecologically sound operations (Claude & Zaccour, 2009).

Local communities and avitourism projects

In 2009 *Avitourism in South Africa*, conducted a consumer survey as part of a study, It categorised avitourists as being either casual (33%), enthusiastic (57%) or fanatical (10%). Those under the 'enthusiastic' label spent on average three times more than was the case ten years

ago and this trend bodes well for the less known and smaller tour operators and under-utilized community birdwatching guides who will benefit the most. The establishment of a bird guide training centre in Wakkerstroom in 2000 has further developed the awareness of the immense prospect of training bird guides for a multiplicity of avian viewing sites across the country. Wakkerstroom was selected as it is situated in the Grassland Biosphere Reserve which is one of the top biodiversity areas in Africa and is also regarded as one of the top birdwatching destinations in South Africa (Barnes 1998).

It is of course, prudent to ask and answer the important question "who is the community?" Who could get to participate in the planning process of creating regional birdwatching guides and how much credence is given to the views of all stakeholders? The *dti* has stated that some R47 million is spent annually on tour guides by local and international avitourists. This provides opportunities for the provision of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) owned and managed accommodation in previously underutilized areas. By using local community guides, much economic benefit could result for a community as sustainable livelihoods develop and local capacity is enhanced. Furthermore, a sense of pride in the local environment is fostered in locals, and they will hopefully develop a yearning to share new knowledge with others in their community as well as avitourists.

Whether or not community-based enterprises are successful depends on the understanding of the term 'community'. Community studies on ecotourism tend to group people living together in a geographic area as being a 'community'. It should also refer to a place in which the bonds between people and those between people and the natural world they inhabit, craft a model of connectedness to an area, responsible action and common need. An effective community promotes human dignity and worth, competence and

opportunities for participating in meaningful employment. Birdwatching must be the 'glue' which holds the community together and it should be their goal to encourage and promote tourism. The attitude of locals towards ecotourism in general is a paramount consideration. How do they feel about conservation per se, and do they use their land effectively? (Sirakaya, *et. al.* 2002).

Local communities seeking to promote avitourism face many challenges such as creating marketable avitourism ventures. Those seeking to develop avitourism from without, need to respect local cultures and take cognisance of the wishes of rural communities. If changes are imposed on local communities, without their input, there is likely to be severe backlashes such as lack of cooperation and even sabotage of avitourism activities as was the case in Sri Lanka (Stegeborn, 1996). Any avitourism projects should lead to sustainable development and be concerned with the sustainable use of biodiversity and all available natural resources. Furthermore the impact of projects must be positive and local stakeholders particularly local communities must be empowered as a result thereof. The environmental education of both locals and avitourists should be augmented as a result (Hillel, 2002).

Community leaders should be surveyed about their attitude to birdwatching and avitourism in general, but care should be taken to make certain that the responses obtained from leaders are in fact representative of the whole community (Bernard, 1995). Failure to do so could become somewhat problematic as avitourism plans, and land use plans for community development, or even zoning and designation of land use, when discussed with only 'leaders' or prominent entrepreneurs', can be against community wishes (Lash and Austin 2003). Research shows that non-cash benefits for a community, such as the extent of local ownership and local property rights, education level of the community, equity

and empowerment are deemed to be far more important than monetary incentives when conservation is an issue (Berkes 2004; Fabricius 2004). If avitourism is to be developed in especially rural communities these considerations need to be carefully weighed-up. Local guides need to benefit financially if they are to support an avitourism initiative (Sanderson, 2005). It seems that when there are financial incentives for local communities to participate in avitourism, positive conservation attitudes and actions are also engendered. The feeling of participation of the community involved is also strengthened if there is a possibility of educational benefits and a sense empowerment exists.

Community ownership in any avitourism project that is undertaken is thus critical to success (Morgan-Brown *et al.* 2010). Any local person in a community keen to embrace avitourism as a possible career path, must acquire a genuine awareness and special knowledge of the natural environment and local cultural characteristics, that will convert him or her into serious conservationists. In terms of attracting local avitourists, these should pay much lower fees than the avitourists from abroad. This is common practice in many countries (Becker, 2009).

Conclusion

Avitourism is amongst the most rapidly growing tourism niches in the world and is an important niche market for South Africa, as it is in India. The economic, social and conservation advantages of avitourism cannot be overestimated. There is huge scope for increased avitourism to South Africa. The notion of avitourism, once entrenched as a community-based variety of ecotourism, has the potential to become an important instrument which can serve to promote remote rural towns and transform their existing images. It also has the potential to create jobs. Avitourism is thus a type of tourism that emphasises sustainability, as well as supporting far-flung not often visited places by promoting economic

regeneration through the creation of hotels, guest lodges, restaurants and other tourism necessities. Places once regarded as boring can change to vibrant places with exotic and rare bird-species on view. Before any avitourism development project can be successfully implemented, it requires the input and backing of the main stakeholders, namely the local community involved. No changes can be meaningful unless the buy-in of locals is obtained. In addition to this, avitourism must be sustainable, well marketed as a unique niche, and seek to preserve both the natural and cultural heritage of an area as it attracts much needed external capital inflows. The avitourism area involved must be pristine and well managed to maintain effective environmental conservation and biodiversity should be integrated (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 2001). It must also be relatively crime free. Locals must be educated as to the importance of conservation for both their and future generations benefit. Avitourism has proved to be a very useful tool in promoting conservation as has been the case in numerous lower and middle income nations (WTO, 2007). It is vital that experts on ornithological and conservation matters educate the government, companies, and individual avitourism stakeholders such as tour companies, local guides and accommodation providers etc, on the potential negative environmental impacts of avitourism, as well as on ways to limit or negate these. This is an important matter that is also fundamental to the long-term success of avitourism in South Africa.

Birding guides should ideally emanate from local communities and undertake relevant training and courses on avitourism, preferably with governmental as well as NGO support. They should be employed by tourist operators who can provide a constant source of business for an area. They should play a pivotal role in teaching their communities about conservation matters (BirdLife South Africa 2009). As stated earlier, birdwatchers tend to be relatively wealthy and their pastime often

occurs 'out of season' and consequently extends current seasons for tourism. If there are effective support mechanisms, and a genuine desire to create additional sustainable job opportunities for local communities and promote conservation (Roe et al, 2002), avitourism is one answer. Avitourism is a branch of ecotourism which shows great potential because birdwatchers are usually from the ranks of the relatively well educated and wealthy individuals who are passionate about observing birds in their natural habitats. Avitourism also has huge potential to add value to local communities. Local communities could be educated on aspects such as biodiversity and ecology, and may be provided with socio-economic incentives for the successful protection, sustainability and preservation of natural areas in which they reside. If managed correctly, and partnerships are forged between NGOs and the government as well as external benefactors, avitourism has the potential to empower local communities, promote diverse cultures as well as further educate the avitourists that would grace our shores.

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