



Comprehensive Participatory Approach as a Mechanism for Community Participation in Ecotourism

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Abstract

This study was conducted at the Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve (OGNR) and surrounding communities (Murchison and Eshobeni) within the Ray Nkonyeni Local Municipality (RNM) under Ugu District, KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The study asserts that comprehensive participatory approach (CPA) could be an effective strategy for enhancing community participation in ecotourism development processes and can be explained within the expert-assisted and expert-initiated approaches. The study further asserts that both scientific and indigenous knowledge (IK) are important for facilitating comprehensive participation in ecotourism development process, especially in rural areas. Importantly, while IK may be insufficient unto itself, nor is expert knowledge lacking indigenous perspective to underpin it, they complement each other and both are needed to enhance participatory ecotourism development processes. The study aimed to find out how CPA can be used as a mechanism for community participation in ecotourism development processes at the OGNR and the surrounding communities. The study adopted an exploratory design and mixed methods approach during collection, analysis and interpretation of data. The data were interpreted to make meanings of the implicit responses against the research question. The study found that community members of the study area do not actively participate in ecotourism activities. The study concludes that a CPA needs to be incorporated in the ecotourism development activities of the study area.

Keywords: comprehensive participatory approach, community participation, ecotourism destination, indigenous knowledge systems.

Introduction

Ecotourism has gained an exponential global appeal as a sub-set of the tourism industry and a mechanism for alleviating socio-economic challenges both in developed and developing countries. The growth of ecotourism can be alluded to the fact that it does not ruin the environmental and cultural characteristics of a host destination (Garrod, 2003). As a consequence, ecotourism has been considered as one of the fundamental mechanisms that could be used for enhancing the local economies and for earning significant foreign exchange (Van Amerom, 2006). The development of ecotourism, however, extensively hinges upon collective participation of different stakeholders (Snyman, 2016). These stakeholders range from the public sector, private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), ecotourism operators, ecotourists, academic researchers, and community members (Kline & Slocum, 2015). The literature reveals that participation of community members in ecotourism activities, especially in developing countries, such as South Africa, has been very limited (Stone, 2015). For ecotourism to be viewed as a mechanism for development, it needs to consider and



recognise the importance of the involvement and participation of local communities, villagers, cooperatives, and entrepreneurs in its processes within a specific area (Fletcher, 2009). As part of a solution to address local communities' exclusion and/or limited participation in ecotourism activities undertaken within their communities, a comprehensive participatory approach has been advocated as an effective mechanism (Sangpikul, 2010). Importantly, scientific and IK and practices need to be integrated in ecotourism development processes to enhance comprehensive participation of all stakeholders. This study aims to find out how CPA can be used as a mechanism for community participation in ecotourism development processes at the OGNR and the surrounding communities.

Literature Review

In the context of ecotourism, CPA can be understood as collective participation of all stakeholders involved in ecotourism development processes. Against this background, this paper focuses on the application of CPA as a mechanism for facilitating effective community participation in ecotourism development processes at the Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve (OGNR) and the surrounding communities (Murchison and Eshobeni). Literature review discusses principles related to the concept of the study with specific reference to typology of participatory approach, community participation in ecotourism, components of successful community participation in ecotourism, and incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices into participatory approach.

Typology of Participatory Approach

In the context of ecotourism, there are various types of participatory approaches. Some are internally initiated and driven, while others are driven externally (Vaidya & Mayer, 2014). The expert-assisted approach is comprised of those participants who directly benefit from the ecotourism activities undertaken within their communities with their decisions and/or actions influencing or determining the sustainability of ecotourism development. In this manner, participants play a central role in defining the problem, identifying sustainability indicators by ensuring the provision of required information, and generating final set of indicators. In essence, key participants are responsible for the provision of information and/or judgements on which the sustainability indicators are entirely based (Simon & Etienne, 2009). The expert-assisted approach involves two types of stakeholder groups, which are: (a) community-based stakeholders, and (b) system-based stakeholders. The community-based stakeholders consist of community members also known as end-beneficiaries with the academic researchers often providing assistance in terms of facilitating discussions and allowing participants to define problems and suggest possible solutions (Vaidya & Mayer, 2014). In case of the system-based stakeholders, the participants comprise of a mix of representatives from the public, private, and governing sectors that can influence the operationalisation of the ecotourism initiative. This type depends largely on collaborative learning and system dynamics modelling and often involves more intensive activities and level of commitment of time and resources. It allows participants to identify indicators on the basis of demonstrated or modelled utility to monitor the activity, thereby fast-tracking the criteria, indicators analysis, and consensus-building process (Marques *et al.*, 2013).

In the main, expert-initiated approach enables the non-local experts to develop a pre-existing framework and/or set of indicators that could be used as a starting point, followed by a participatory assessment to shorten the list. The participants in this approach could either be community-based or system-based, depending on the objectives and/or goals set for the ecotourism development activity, time, and available resources. In cases where expert-initiated criteria and indicators lists are used as a starting point, the academic researchers are likely to spend less of their time defining problems and collaboratively learning about the activity. Instead, they spend more of their time seeking consensus amongst participants on indicators and management strategies during participatory sessions, such as workshops

(Vaidya & Mayer, 2014). In this regard, Reed and Dougill (2002) caution that the generation of indicators by the external experts and/or agents without adequate knowledge of the basic characteristics of the activity, often fail to address the key and unique issues connected with the activity and do not adequately incorporate different perceptions, interests, and opinions off all key participants. However, this approach has been widely used as a strategy for assessing sustainability, efficiency, ease of use, and time saving requirements. It has also been used quite often to sustain ecotourism-related initiatives, such as resource conservation activities (Vaidya & Mayer, 2014).

Community Participation in Ecotourism

Community participation can be referred to as a process whereby local people are fully engaged and/or involved in ecotourism development initiatives happening within their communities (Magi & Nzama, 2009). In the context of ecotourism, community participation means that local people voluntarily participate in the ecotourism activities undertaken within the vicinity of their communities in a variety of means, such as planning and/or involvement in a process of decision-making (Wang *et al.*, 2015; Wen and Ximing, 2008). Numerous government policy documents regard community participation as an essential pillar for ensuring the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals-2030 (Mgonja *et al.*, 2015). The concept of community participation has emerged, popularised and has been considered by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) as one of the essential elements and/or principles of ecotourism development (Anup *et al.*, 2015). Garrod (2003) identifies five major components of successful community participation during in ecotourism activities. These components are illustrated in Figure 2.1 and further discussed in the subsequent sub-sections.

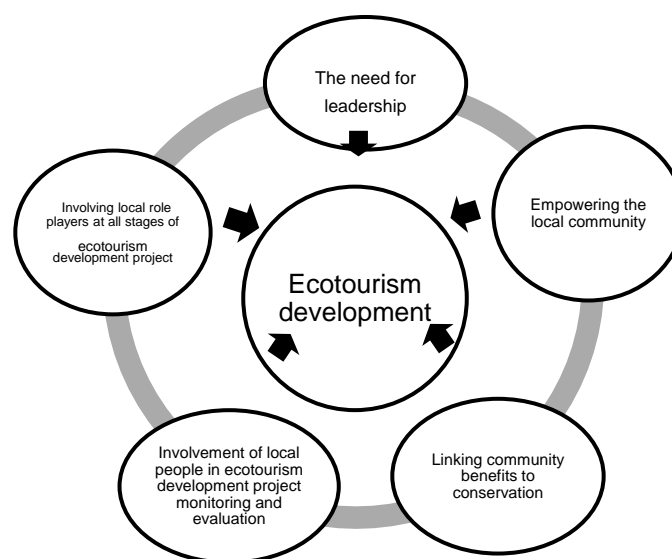


Figure 1: Components of successful community participation in ecotourism activities (Source: Garrod, 2003).

Figure 1 indicates that there is a need for a strong leadership during participatory planning process in ecotourism, hence different stakeholders may have different views and/or objectives with regard to their expectations for the project. For instance, those who own accommodation facilities may wish to accommodate more visitors, whereas the owners of the ecotourism attractions may want to regulate the number of visitors due to the antagonistic impacts resulting from mass tourism. Based on the eruption of such contrasting views, an assertive leadership is required to make resolute decisions that could amicably benefit all parties involved. In the context of ecotourism development, empowerment can be understood as the effort to fully involve the local community in the decision-making processes



pertaining to the ecotourism project(s). The promotion of local people's inclusion and participation in setting the goals and deciding on how benefits should be shared, could positively contribute towards improving locals' support and strengthening relationships amongst stakeholders (Thondhlana & Cundill, 2017).

The empowerment of local people is essential for the genuine and long-term support these projects (Garrod, 2003). In connection with the above, Scheyvens (2000) suggests four types of community empowerment, and they are: economic empowerment, social empowerment, psychological empowerment, and political empowerment. With regards to the economic empowerment, first, this form of empowerment is based on ensuring that local people are provided an opportunity to make decisions on the economic development of ecotourism. Second, it refers to access that local people have to the resources targeted by the ecotourism. Social empowerment ensures that local people are able to determine the social impacts resulting from the ecotourism development. Social cohesion, and integrity of the local people form part of social empowerment. Psychological empowerment is concerned with the attitudes that local people develop towards ecotourism development. On the other hand, political empowerment deals with the ability of the locals to voice out their concerns towards directing, formatting, and accelerating ecotourism development.

The fact that an ecotourism approach prioritises the protection of the natural environment, serves as the fundamental justification for its development. The economic gains generated from the ecotourism activities, therefore, have to be linked to the conservation of natural resources (Garrod, 2003). For instance, the revenue derived from ecotourism activities has to be used for maintaining and sustaining the natural resources that might have been adversely affected due to ecotourism activities. This could, in turn, assists in meeting the needs of the future ecotourists. It is of imperative importance to ensure that local people are represented in all stages (i.e. conceptualisation, execution, monitoring, and evaluation of the ecotourism development activity). Generally, if the locals have the sense of ownership or custodianship of ecotourism activities, they are more likely to commit themselves to such activities in the longer period (Mgonja *et al.*, 2015). There is a generally perception that ecotourism projects pay inadequate attention and/or allocate inadequate resources towards monitoring and evaluation of their operationalisation. In the context of ecotourism, local community participation in monitoring and evaluation could increase efficiency and positively contribute towards sustainable development of ecotourism activities. Moreover, it could enhance monitoring and evaluation in numerous crucial means, for example, helping in enhancing the capacity of the local stakeholders and other intended beneficiaries of ecotourism (Garrod, 2003).

However, the urgent question remains is: 'how community members can be motivated to take part in ecotourism activities?' In addressing this question, most researchers and planners involved in ecotourism have espoused what Honey (2008) referred to as 'stakeholders theory'. This phenomenon is based on the notion that community members would be inclined to protect what they reap benefits from. For instance, when local people start to receive economic gains and treated as custodians and important role players in an ecotourism activity, they tend to develop an inclination and/or burden to protect the natural environment. Generally, if ecotourism development is planned and managed by the local community, it allows them the opportunity to make informed decision on the form of growth needed, while assisting in the management of adverse impacts, foster a sense of pride, ownership, and create opportunities for establishing new local nature-based enterprises and sometimes enhance infrastructural benefits, including educational and medical facilities (Butcher, 2005).

From a different perspective, Stronza (2007) argued that the promulgation of the stakeholders' theory as the basis for local community participation in ecotourism has not been empirically tested, therefore, its efficacy remains an untested assumption. This author further contends that the connection between economic incentives and community participation cannot be easily determined.



Linked to the above, is the aspect of cultural sensitivity (CS), which has to be considered when involving local communities in ecotourism development activities. The involvement of local people and their active participation in decision-making pertaining to the ecotourism development, ensures that their cultures and values are treated with great respect (Li, 2006). In the context of ecotourism, CS can be understood as the extent to which the antagonistic impacts related to natural and cultural environment are alleviated by the key role players by; First, ensuring that intercultural awareness and respect are encouraged. Second, contributing towards the protection of the existing cultural heritage. Third, encouraging voluntary participation and ensuring that local people are empowered. Finally, fully respecting the socio-cultural values of the local community (Donohoe, 2011). Numerous ecotourism components are likely to be alien to the local residents, especially in developing and/or quite often non-Western communities where ecotourism is still under promotion. Therefore, ecotourism development in these societies may require rigorous cultural transformation with regards to cultural sensitivity (Fletcher, 2009). Fletcher (2009) continues to maintain that ecotourism development can be influenced by numerous non-economic issues, inter alia ethical, cultural, and aesthetic issues.

With respect to cultural perspective, West and Carrier (2004) assert that ecotourism incorporates socio-cultural component or the aspiration to interact with local people characterised by exotic customs and appearance in a manner that shows respect to and benefits of the locals. In overall terms, understanding, respecting, and considering the socio-cultural features of the local residents play an essential role towards ensuring long-term relationship and participation of community members in ecotourism activities. Ironically, there has been a very low participation rate of the Black communities in ecotourism events, such as sardine run in the KwaZulu-Natal Province as opposed to White, Coloured, and Indian communities (Myeza *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the benefits have been predominantly shared amongst the hoteliers and bed and breakfast owners from the above ethnic groups, hence they have facilities and/or amenities needed by local and international ecotourists during their vacations. The exclusion of black residents from participating in ecotourism activities could jeopardise its development and result into considerable threats, such as crime, antagonistic attitude, and fractured state between ecotourism destinations and local communities (Myeza *et al.*, 2010).

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge and Practices into Participatory Approach

More emphasis has been put on the significance of integrating indigenous knowledge (IK) and practices with development processes and projects (Mercer *et al.*, 2010). One of the basis for this emphasis is the fact that IK has been considered as a rational, reliable and important knowledge generated through native people's intimate contact with their environments (UNEP, 1998c). Owusu-Ansah & Mji (2013) define IK as worldview and cultural experience-based rational knowledge. It encompasses wholeness, community and harmony which are deeply embedded in cultural values. The importance of IK has drawn the attention of scientists, managers and policy-makers alike and has become a central subject in both national and international law (Anaya, 1996). However, the manner in which IK has been perceived serves as the main challenge underpinning poor participatory processes. Hence, limited participation of local communities in decision-making and development processes has been justified by knowledge (Eversole, 2012). The author goes on to argue that citizens, communities and community organisations have been seldom referred to as repository of knowledge. As such, knowledge is quite often believed to have been synonymous with experts (Adams, 2004; Herbert-Cheshire & Higgins, 2004). Based on this belief, expert knowledge has been considered to be trustworthy even in circumstances where the problem(s) or issue(s) in hand could not be addressed using this form of knowledge (Everson, 2012).



In contrast, IK has become the most commonly used concept in development studies for the past thirty years, hence it has been referred to as a catalyst for participatory development processes (Sillitoe, Bicker & Pottier, 2002). As a result, sub-fields of development studies, such as natural resources management and agricultural extension have adopted and applied the idea of IK to community-based development projects (Warren, Slikkerveer & Brokensha, 1995). There has been literary consensus that IK has a great potential for complementing, correcting and/or providing alternative to the so called 'scientific, professional or expert knowledge' by which development policies and practices have been usually informed (Everson, 2012).

IK holds no inferior importance status to expert knowledge, hence it in essence follows a different path to that of expert knowledge and tends to solve problems and/or few things that the latter could not. For instance, IK is known for its deep embeddedness within particular environment. Therefore, local communities quite often know and respect certain constraints and/or opportunities found within their physical ecosystem or cultural value system. Whereas, outsiders are prone to suggest solutions which are inappropriate or quite ignorant to the view of the locals (Hobart, 1993; Everson, 2012). IK incorporates lived experiences and broad understanding of nature and interrelationships compared to professionals who extensively rely on particular silos of expertise. In this sense, professionals tend to struggle with regards to bridging various sectoral or disciplinary silos to assign to blanket approach towards interrelated community issues (Everson, 2012).

Although it may be overshadowed by rapidly growing popularity of expert or scientific knowledge, IK has been eminently participatory in nature (Schilderman, 2002). Importantly, while IK may be insufficient unto itself, nor is expert knowledge lacking indigenous perspective to underpin it, they complement each other and both are needed to enhance participatory ecotourism development processes.

Aim and objectives of the study

This study aimed to find out how CPA can be used as a mechanism for community participation in ecotourism development processes at the OGNR and the surrounding communities. In line with the aims of the study, the specific objectives of the study were as follows:

- (a) To establish the understanding of ecotourism by the community members of the study area,
- (b) To ascertain if the community members of the study area participate in ecotourism activities,
- (c) To explore the possibility of applying the CPA in the study area.

Methodology

The study adopted an exploratory design based on the nature of the research question. A mixed methods approach was used in the study during collection, analysis and interpretation of data. The target population of the study comprised of municipal official responsible for tourism, community tourism organisation, community leaders and households of the communities adjacent to the OGNR. Convenience sampling technique was used in the study on the basis that it enabled the researcher to select the respondents based on their accessibility, convenience, proximity, willingness to participate in the study, and knowledge of the chosen topic (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Having realised the impossibility of including the entire population in the study coupled with other critical considerations, such as financial constraints and timelines, a sample of 384 respondents was drawn through Research Advisory Spreadsheet 2016. Survey questionnaires were used to collect primary data from the relevant respondents through face-to-face mode of enquiry. The secondary data were collected through reviewing discussion and policy documents, scholarly journals, internet sources,



textbooks and published and unpublished theses. The quantitative data were analysed by means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS V. 24), while the qualitative data were analysed through a content analysis.

Results and discussion

The first part of this section focuses on the socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. For the purpose of this paper, specific attention was paid to the distribution of gender, age, and education of the respondents. The findings indicate that females were the majority (53 percent) in terms of participation in the study as opposed to males who accounted for 47 percent. Based on the researcher's observation and the IDP report of the Ray Nkonyeni Local Municipality (2016/17), this finding has been attributed to two reasons, which are: (a) the outmigration of males to other parts of the country in search for job opportunities, while females remain at home to take care of the families, and (b) the fact that the total number of females exceeds that of males in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province and the country at large. The study found that the youths in the ages between 18 to 28 years were dominant in terms of participation in the survey, hence they constituted higher percentage (33 percent) compared to other age categories. In terms of education, the majority of the respondents (45 percent) had secondary education. Looking at both variables (age and education), it could be noticed that the study area is characterised by the youths with moderate level of education.

The study found that the concept 'ecotourism' is not fully understood by the community members of the study area. The basis for arriving at this conclusion is the fact that the significant majority (63 percent) of the respondents indicated that they do not understand ecotourism. Only 37 percent revealed that they understand the ecotourism. This finding may have been triggered mainly by two reasons, and they are: (a) It was found during data collection that the majority of the respondents were not trained or educated in tourism-related programs, and (b) the majority of the respondents have never visited the OGNR for tourism purposes even though it is situated in the proximity of their communities. As a consequence, most of the community members revealed that they do not even know the services offered by the OGNR to its clients (tourists). Table 5.1 illustrates the distribution of the respondents by participation in ecotourism activities.

Response	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	25	6
No	161	42
Not sure	198	55
Total	384	100

Table 1: Community participation in ecotourism activities

Regarding participation of the community members in ecotourism activities, the findings indicate that community members of the study area do not participate in ecotourism activities undertaken in the OGNR. Hence, 42 percent of the respondents revealed that they do not participate in these activities. Only 6 percent of the total respondents agreed that they participate, while 52 percent stated that they were not sure whether they participate or not because it might happen that the community leaders participate on their behalves. They mentioned that perhaps these community leaders participate in meetings discussing ecotourism development issues between the OGNR and community members. Based on the



findings, the study inferred that the reason for the respondents' uncertainty regarding their participation might have been triggered by two reasons, which are: (1) it could be the fact that they are represented by people (when referring to community leaders) who do not commit themselves to communicating information to community members, and/or (2) the community members do not attend community meetings discussing community development agendas. Interestingly, large proportion of the community members revealed that they are willing to participate in ecotourism activities.

On the basis of the findings regarding both understanding of ecotourism and participation in ecotourism activities, the study concludes that there is a dire and urgent need for the implementation of CPA in the study area so that community members who are willing to participate would get an opportunity. Possibly, the CPA can be applicable in the study area, hence, the community members revealed their willingness to participate in ecotourism activities.

Conclusion

Although ecotourism has been considered as one of the effective strategies with which the socio-economies both in the developed and developing countries could be enhanced, there remains the fact that its success extensively hinges on comprehensive participation of all stakeholders, including local communities. In many developing countries, including South Africa, community participation in ecotourism activities has not been satisfactory. As a consequence, the concept 'ecotourism' has not been adequately understood in the communities within which this phenomenon is being practised. There are factors that have been hindering effective participation of local communities in ecotourism activities. One of these is the shortage of training and skills required for enhancing ecotourism development processes. Thus, empowering local communities has been considered as the fundamental component with which CPA in ecotourism development could be realised. Importantly, both scientific and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) need to be integrated in ecotourism development processes to enhance comprehensive participation of all stakeholders.

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