



# Planning and provision for event tourism in National Parks: Challenges and implications

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## Abstract

Global tourism has witnessed a growth in the popularity and diversity of event tourism (ET), fostering tourism benefits in destinations. This paper is the first to consider the planning challenges national parks (NPs) face when planning and executing event tourism (ET), and the conceptual and practical implications of planning ET and tourism in NPs. Applying semi-structured interviews, the empirical data of this manuscript was collected from two popular NPs in South Africa, as well as from the head office of the governing body responsible for NPs, known as SANParks. Data analysis brought up three core themes that are significant for managers and planners dealing with ET in NPs. The first was conservational issues; the second, tourism market and marketing; and the third, local communities. Theoretical and practical implications necessitate the requirements for event planners to integrate ET planning and policy efforts to the inherent challenging characteristics of NPs. The impact of this paper lies not only in its originality, but also in its contributions to existing literature on event planning, sustainable tourism, and tourism in NPs.

**Keywords:** event tourism, tourism planning, national parks, event planning, protected areas.

## Introduction

The natural environment, which NPs form part of, often plays venue and host to various forms of ET, mainly to attract and maximise arriving tourists (Getz, 2013; Hvenegaard & Manaloor, 2006). There is very little research and evidence on the planning, production, management, and evaluation of ET in natural, protected areas. Hence, information on the planning and policy development of ET in natural settings with conservational sensitivities like NPs is rare (Whitford, 2009). Neither events (in general) nor scholarly literature on tourism or the tourism industry have so far taken a deep look at the conceptualisation, planning, and practising of more sustainable ET within the context of protected natural areas.

This study aimed to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the challenges associated with ET planning and provision in NPs, and associated planning and managerial implications. This study argues that identifying ET planning challenges in NPs and foreseeing the potential conflicts in advance could contribute to the development of more sustainable events and, as a result, less



destructive tourism within NP boundaries. In order to address these aims, the manuscript draws on the empirical work outlined in the methodology section and in two strands of literature: ET, planning and policy-making, and ET development in NPs.

### **Event tourism: planning and policy making**

Events and their role and importance in the development and marketing of destinations have been extensively addressed. However, ET was only established in the tourism industry and research community a few decades ago; the subsequent growth of this sector can only be described as spectacular ( Getz, 2008).

At present, planned events are the centre of attention of many communities, destination marketing organisations (DMOs), and businesses. They are regarded as tourist attractions and catalysts to enhancing destination image and developments. These events are regarded as ET due their tourism potential. The term was coined by the New Zealand Tourist and Publicity Department in 1987 ( Getz, 2008). The term was defined by Getz (1989:133) as “the systematic development and marketing of special events as tourist attractions.” ET embraces “all planned events in an integrated approach to tourism development and marketing” (Getz, 2008: 405).

All types of special-interest travel ET present supply and demand potential. From the supply side, destinations develop events “to attract tourists (especially in the off-peak seasons), serve as a catalyst (for urban renewal, and for increasing the infrastructure and tourism capacity of the destination), to foster a positive destination image and contribute to general place marketing (including contributions to fostering a better place in which to live, work, and invest), and to animate specific attractions or areas” (Getz, 2008:405). On the consumer side, understanding “who travels for events and why, and also who attends events while traveling” (Getz, 2008:405-406) is important.

From a planning perspective, existing evidence on designing, producing, managing, and evaluating is sufficient. However, a few pertain to nature-based events (Goldblatt, 2011). Ecotourism events refer to different themes, from wildlife to lifestyle, that appeal to families and interact with highly involved eco tourists. The most enduring ecotourism events are known as festivals, and nature-based events take on various forms, such as meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions, for instance, Bristol Festival of Nature (England), Morro Bay Winter Bird Festival (California), Jasper Dark Sky Festival (Canada) and Pacific Rim Whale Festival (MICE) (Getz, 2013).

Getz (2013:431) noted that ecotourism events should collaborate with the “a) parks and protected area agencies who may host, produce, or benefit from the events; b) professional event producers including both under contract or independent; in or outside park; c) destination management companies (DMOs) and other development-oriented agencies; d) companies who will package and promote ecotourism events such as DMOs who provide logistical support; e) other necessary suppliers for instance accommodation, food, souvenirs, equipment, entertainers, educators, and researchers; f) community groups, clubs, lobbyists representing local interests, and culture; g) local government and regulators; and h) ecotourism and other nature-related societies (for supply and demand advice).” Any activity in protected areas needs to conduct accurate planning due to the conservation mandates and behavioural sensitivities within these boundaries. However, there is no single instrument to determine the best ET practice for such planning (Whitford, 2009; Steven, 2014). A collaborative approach to policy development and the partnership between event policy actors are rare, and yet need attention (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Whitford, 2009).



## Event tourism planning

ET needs to be studied from event and tourism perspectives. According to Getz (2008: 406), ET is “a market for event managers” and an opportunity for “destination development through events”. The tourism industry and destination development agencies appreciate events as valuable attractions and catalysts in destination marketing and place making ( Getz, Anderson & Sheehan, 1998).

From the perspective of ET, events occur to help destinations market and brand themselves and, consequently, attract more visitors than before. Thus, the key driver of ET is different from the initial intention of events to increase participation and engagement of local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Events are possible exploitable resources, which have social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental outcomes and impacts. Sustainable tourism attempts to balance tourism development with environmental and habits concerns and communities (Bramwell & Lane, 2008). Researchers such as Hunter (1997) and Bramwell and Lane (2008) argued that sustainable tourism embraces not only environmental sustainability but also social and economic sustainability (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010; Li, 2018; Raj & Musgrave, 2009). The economic value of ET should be considered and can be obtained by achieving sustainability and sociocultural and environmental aspects of events (Musgrave, & Raj, 2009). The World Tourism Organization (2001) defined tourism sustainability as:

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, and biological diversity and life support systems.

This definition indicates that tourism sustainability is a multifaceted practice that requires controlling the economic, sociocultural, and environmental aspects of a destination. Events are often counted as an important component of tourism marketing (Getz, 1989; McDonnell, 1999). Thus, the sustainable strategies for events should include both ends (Arcodia & Cohen, 2007).

From an event perspective, many planned events are not the target of ET. Events hosted with the goal of obtaining the cooperation of tourism agencies and recognition, must prove their economic value. The strategy of an event may be to develop into an event attraction to secure political support and tangible resources for achieving the aforementioned goal. This approach enables events to gain legitimacy, and this situation results in rapid growth in popularity (Getz, 2008). As a result, the first step to secure the position of ET is to prove its economic value, which may constitute a limitation to the sustainability of the event. In this regard, Getz and Page (2016, :614) mentioned that ET is “primarily driven by the economic drivers, while the environmental issues and impacts deserve greater attention in this scope”. Furthermore, the multifaceted interaction between ET and destinations results in desired (e.g employment opportunities, development of public infrastructure) and undesired impacts (e.g air pollution, traffic congestion) on the societal and physical landscape of the venue (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010). Considerable research related to the economic impacts of ET on destinations is mostly related to enhancing the community profile, boosting employment and income of locals, regeneration, and new trade opportunities that initially offer economic growth (Raj & Musgrave, 2009). From a sociocultural perspective, ET provides the destinations with various benefits. It increases awareness of the cultural heritage and nature of the destinations between the host and guest community (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010). This situation strengthens social cohesion and integrity; thus, it creates community access to the resources and engagement, and encourages intercultural contact (Getz & Page, 2016; Gibson & Connell, 2016).



Sociocultural and economic outcome assessments in the event industry have been explored, but environmental impacts have rarely been investigated. Studies about negative environmental impacts of events have focused on issues such as high congestion and possible degradation of the host community, air pollution due to the accumulation and emission of metals, and high ecological and carbon footprints, and the development of policies and practices to control environmental impacts and enhance green and eco-friendly events (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010; Li, 2018; Raj & Musgrave, 2009).

Research regarding the impacts of ET on destination resources can be divided into two streams. First, the discourse of ET should be observed as an individual or per event phenomenon and a systematically and universal team considering the overall long-term and cumulative positive or negative impacts (Getz, 2008; Raj & Musgrave, 2009). The second stream discusses the needs of developing a sustainability ethos in events to emphasise using a triple bottom-line approach in organizing, regulating, and provisioning events such as tourism-based events to minimise the impacts on resources (Raj & Musgrave, 2009).

In the context of an event, sustainability is defined as a “discursive notion, which lacks a single definition” (Zifkos, 2015: 3). As a result, turning its principal skills into action is difficult (Jones, 2014). Raj and Musgrave (2009) referred to sustainability as a multidimensional and relatively new concept. Its characteristics such as temporary, infrequently, and limited time frame, contradict the requirements of sustainability and lead to ambiguity.

### **Event tourism and national parks**

Planned events play a vital role in nature conservation. Protected areas, such as national parks, can benefit from planned events as much as communities and tourist destinations can, by including them with other services and attractions on offer (Getz, 2013). NPs offer a unique setting with a range of necessary and complimentary products and services vital for ET.

The main objective of NPs is to protect the extraordinary nature of biocultural resources. In parallel, the introduction of recreational facilities at NPs to the public has always been considered a priority (Frost, 2012; Lane, 2001). ET can motivate new visitors while retaining the existing market. Introducing a balanced portfolio of events throughout the year helps overcome seasonality of demand and increases publicity. Also, NPs benefit from ET by providing new infrastructure and improving marketing to avoid offering duplicate experiences (Getz, 2013).

Despite the opportunities of ET for NPs, the vulnerability and unique balance of the biocultural resources within their fences require protective regulations. Consequently, sustainable development plans should provide for these very particular requirements and guidelines. National park authorities and event organisers should have a thorough understanding of the principals of sustainable events and be able to implement them carefully within their organisation and during the execution of the ET (Donald Getz, 2013; Raj & Musgrave, 2009). Thus, the management of NPs should purposely identify events that embrace these principals and are aligned with the conservational objectives.

### **Methodology**

The empirical data of this manuscript was collected from two functional and very popular South African NPs as well as the head office of SANParks, the governing body responsible for NPs in the country. One of South Africa's best-selling tourism features is its diverse natural beauty that includes the dynamic ecosystems and rare wildlife to be enjoyed in its NPs (Hermann, Van der Merwe, Coetzee & Saayman, 2016). Official reports indicated that South African NPs had received 6,750,000 visits by the end of 2017. This amounted to a 14,1% increase from the previous year, this number shows 19.3% growth over the annual target of tourism enhancement



(SANParks, 2017). Unfortunately, there is no official report detailing the number and type of events that normally take place in and around SANParks NPs. However, a quick search reveals a range of events taking place in most of the NPs in SA to promote tourism, generate revenue, educate the public, market the park, and sharing the parks' heritage.

The reasons for selecting these two parks were their popularity as international tourist destinations, and the fact that – unlike most other NPs in SA – they had been hosting a wide range of annual tourism events for some time.

The world-renowned Kruger National Park in South Africa receives more than 1,5 million tourists annually. It is one of the best destinations for viewing the big five, and for attending biodiversity and cultural activities and events (Hausmann *et al.*, 2018; SANParks, 2018a). Every year, the Kruger NP hosts meetings and conferences in eight modern equipped venues across the park, with each offering different settings and capacities. These venues are ideal for professional conferences and seminars, team building, church groups, and other events. The Kruger also boasts smaller venues for smaller gatherings or private events (SANParks, 2018b).

Besides the obvious attraction it is named after, the Au-grabies Falls NP is also popular for the Kalahari Au-grabies Extreme Marathon (KAEM), a self-sufficient, multi-stage foot race that also covers a section of the park. SANParks is one of the sponsors of the annual event, which takes place in October and is renowned as the Big Daddy of extreme marathons around the world. Since the very first race in 2000, the Au-grabies NP management has been deeply involved in planning and providing for this event in addition to a range of other smaller events that include regional cultural events (KAEM, 2018).

## **Methodology**

As planning is best understood by examining real-life experiences grounded in detailed accounts of the context (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011), the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to fully explore participants' interpretations of the subject (Creswell, 2007; Esfehiani & Albrecht, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews were applied to capture the expressions and interpretations of the officials selected from Kruger NP and Au-grabies NP. Six participants from Kruger NP, two from Au-grabies NP, and four from SANPark Head Office were interviewed in an aim to include the opinions of on-site and institutional staff. The purposive sampling of participants was applied in cooperation with SANParks' Research Department, who helped identify individuals who had prior experience with the planning and hosting of events in NPs.

The demographic profiles of the interview participants are shown in Table 1.



Semi-structured, in-depth interviews explicitly addressed planning and executing ET in parks and focused on the challenges and problems, and their likely implications for planners. All interviews took place in English at participants' places of work. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded, and to make absolutely sure that all details were documented, the first author also took notes during conversations.

Participant Code	Gender	Age	National Park	Profession category
P1	Female	45	KNP	Tourism/management
P2	Male	48	KNP	Conservation/ management
P3	Male	52	KNP	Marketing
P4	Female	39	KNP	Tourism
P5	Female	60	KNP	Management
P6	Male	50	KNP	Conservation
P7	Female	55	Augrabies NP	Tourism & Event/ Management
P8	Male	63	Augrabies NP	Conservation and Event
P9	Female	44	SHO	Tourism
P10	Female	36	SHO	Conservation
P11	Female	38	SHO	Marketing
P12	Male	58	SHO	Tourism/management

Table 1: Demographic Profile

The researcher obtained approval from SANParks after following due process. Ethical approval was also granted by the University, as per the requirements of conducting ethical research.

## Analysis

The data was analysed by means of thematic network analysis, an increasingly widespread tool for qualitative data analysis in tourism and hospitality (Esfehani & Walters, 2018). It is a process of bringing order to data, producing global themes, organising themes, and basic themes. Thematic analysis can be used to construct a network of related themes in order to construct and interpret the data in context and determine its relation to other themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun, 2006; Esfehani & Albrecht, 2019). Data was transcribed verbatim to facilitate in-depth familiarisation with the data, allowing the researchers to identify in-depth themes rather than mere surface-level codes (Petrova & Hristov, 2016). Themes were formed by relating data that shared common messages and ideas.

Data analysis brought up three organising themes that are significant for managers and planners who deal with ET in NPs: conservational issues, tourism market and marketing, and local communities. Figure 1 shows an overview of the thematic network analysis results. The following sections outline and discuss these themes.

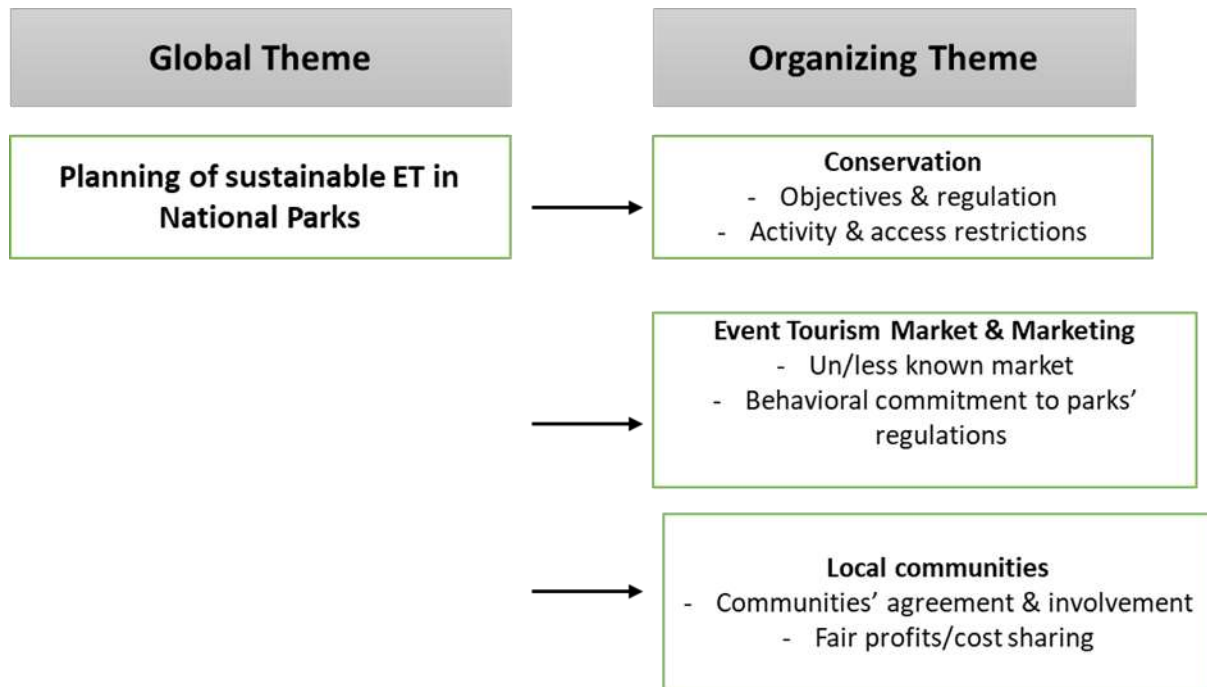


Figure 1. Global and organizing themes emerged from data analysis

## Findings and discussion

### Conservational issues

The interaction between ET and conservation in NPs was frequently mentioned in the interviews.

The main theme that emerged in this section was that, as a tourism-driven activity, ET benefits parks in various ways, such as creating revenue and jobs (Felix G Bello, Lovelock & Carr, 2018; Donald Getz, 2008; Stokes, 2006). However, events must promote and sustain the conservation effort, as that is always the overarching goal of NPs. Accordingly, "...a considerable group of ET may not be doable within parks at all" (Participant 12).

Participants perceived conservation mandates as the most crucial driver of sustainable development in parks. It was also mentioned that conservational setting and goals constantly interfere with the selection, planning and provision of any activity in NPs including ET. P9 stated that "The fundamental goal of parks establishment is to protect nature and its resources. Certain restrictions are strictly applied to minimise any possible risks associated with the hosting of ETs in parks".

Participants widely discussed traffic and sound pollution as direct consequences of events and two of the main concerns that threaten the peace and wellbeing of NPs. Interviewees clearly stated that "ET can cause flora and fauna displacement in the park" (P5). To prevent this, the hosting of the event itself and those attending it should strictly adhere to a set of rules designed to "limit their activities and access to the resources" (P1). Although the parks zoning system



already controlled tourism free access to all parks resources, it seems that stricter limitations should apply in the planning and provision of ET.

Different rules apply when NPs are used as venues for tourism events (Donald Getz, 2013; Hvenegaard & Manaloor, 2006), as their tourism development plans include limitations and precautions to ensure the “wellbeing of the existing bio-cultural heritage” (P2). This theme holds a number of practical implication for park managers and ET planners. The promotion of ETs in NPs faces the critical challenge of limitation of access, movement and activity. Moreover, event planners are expected to comply with the regulations and sustainable development goals of NPs to ensure less disruptive and more environmentally sustainable ET on the premises of all SANParks. Notably, addressing and implementing these expectations will clearly affect the process, objectives and outcomes of ET planning and policy making in NPs.

### **Event tourism market and marketing**

Tourism has been recognised and promoted as a positive socio-economic tool (Felix G. Bello, Carr & Lovelock, 2016; Esfehni & Albrecht, 2016) in NPs since the recognition of the first modern park (Frost, 2012; Lane, 2001). In this study, participants believed that tourism marketing in NPs was well-established; nevertheless, “it appears to be less known and more challenging discipline when it comes to ET” (P5). P3 stated that “ET has recently been introduced to NPs... to implement it as financial driver, parks’ marketing teams need to learn a lot”. According to data, inadequate information about potential markets is the first and main challenge ET planners must deal with in parks.

Participants declared that ET can “expand parks’ traditional attractions” (P3) and diversify the existing market. They alluded to the fact that modern visitors are seeking novel and diverse experiences (Giudici, *et al.*, 2013). ET could add fresh elements to the “parks’ historical impression and image” (p8) and attract more people. However, the traditional perspective about NP attractions has moulded “a specific conventional tourism market” (P3). In line with this, P7 added that “People go to NPs mainly to visit the pristine ecosystem and natural landscapes... We are not sure whether they would be interested in attending an event as well... the current parks’ tourism market must be studied and explored deeply to answer this question”. The second issue relates to the ecological characteristics of the ET market(s); ET should proceed with caution in the context of NPs primary objective of conservation. Yet, “the level of event goers’ commitment to conservation and their typical behavioural pattern is not clear” (P4). The same concerns were expressed in terms of the attitudes and behaviours of ET planners and organizers.

These points have two implications: one conceptual and one applied. Firstly, the abovementioned quotes from participant interviews emphasise the need for academics and industry to expand the literature on ET in NPs and market it as a tourism product. Secondly, lack of efficient theoretical and practical information means that ET marketers and planners and NP management are traversing a minefield. These role-players are faced with the challenge of recognising the target market(s) that will remain committed to park regulations and prospects over time.

### **Local community**

Literature reveals that the underlying role of tourism in the mutual relationship between NPs and adjacent communities can be viewed from different angles (Bushell & Eagles, 2007; Esfehni & Albrecht, 2016; Whitelaw, King & Tolkach, 2014). In this study, the participants were asked to express their insights into how ET fits into this relationship.

It was outlined that ET operations in parks could provide the local community with different socio-economic benefits like creating revenue, jobs, exposure for local cultures, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Participants expressed the creation and maximisation of these benefits as





“not an easy task” (p.11). Obtaining the approval and cooperation of local communities and ensuring fair “profit and cost sharing between an NP and its people” (P1) are two of the most important challenges foreseen. Participants focused on the rights and ownership local people in NPs as their ancestral territories (Esfehani, 2017; Lockwood, Worboys & Kaa-lya del Gran, 2008; Stevens, 2014), as well as fears about marginalisation (Nunes Jr and Pereira, 2019). P5 stated that “events must be operated through agreement and collaboration between the park officials and adjacent communities, and none of these two parties must be excluded from ET benefits”. Communities surrounding an NP should also be consulted on ET, as such events “usually involve their lands, resources and affect socio-cultural rights and ownership” (P9).

Overall, participants perceived ET planning situations as particularly challenging, as “the degree of agreement, participation and outcomes distribution between stakeholders are critical determinants of the planners”. The results of this section presents the practical implications for ET decision-makers, with the perspective that the best approaches and successful practices in promoting sustainability depend on the local context (Fletcher, Pforr & Brueckner, 2016). In line with arguments by Mason (2015) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2015), this section suggests implementing an attentive and problem-solving approach to local communities in NPs to maximise their agreement, participation, and benefit sharing through ET promotion.

## Conclusions

Even though ET is increasingly promoted and consumed as an inherent element of destinations around the world, there is limited understanding of the academic and practical implications of practising more sustainable ET (Getz & Page, 2016). This shortage of knowledge extends to the various aspects of ET planning in natural protected areas like NPs. This manuscript addresses the existing knowledge gap by: a) identifying and discussing challenges of planning and provision of sustainable ET in NPs due to the inherent features and managerial regulations in this territories; b) exploring the possible conceptual and practical implications of the challenges in ET planning and policy making in NPs. Three main themes emerged from the data that are significant for ET planners in general and NPs authorities in particular.

The primary goal of conservation in terms of setting and objectives was found to be the main driver differentiating NPs from other typical event venues. ET must take place within the very narrow confines of strict rules and limitations that are essential when operating within the boundaries of a NP. Planning is expected to respect the preservation of environmental and socio-cultural heritage, while facilitating financial benefits for the park and its inhabitants, but without transgressing the measures that regulate traffic and pollution in our NPs.

The shortage of theoretical and practical knowledge about the ET market and marketing approaches in NPs was also discussed. The traditional impression of NPs and the existing conventional tourism market was identified as an essential agent in challenging ET provision. ET promotion diversifies the conventional tourism market, but insufficient marketing information in this area affects the planning process from the beginning stages. Overall, the identification of the most appropriate market and its characteristics is an important phase that ET planners in NPs have yet to deal with.

Finally, local communities and consideration of their societal rights and participation in NP decision making must also be accommodated in events planning and provision. Deciding on a planning approach that satisfies both locals and SANParks authorities was found to be a challenging process. The conceptual contribution of this study extends to tourism in protected areas as well as ET planning. Specific implications in ET planning literature indicates to the



challenges incorporated with promoting events in areas with environmental and/or societal sensitivities and the potential impacts of the challenges on ET planning and policy-making.

The practical contribution of this study suggests the need for a different approach to planning and promoting ET in NPs and other protected areas; an approach that may differ from typical considerations of ET planning and management in other destinations. The unsatisfactory state of research on the relation between natural NPs and ET implies that there is a clear need for future studies to explore the different angles of the relationship. This paper was limited to only one aspect of the relationship, implementing a specific methodology and geographical location. Future research is thus recommended to study possible solutions for existing challenges that should benefit both ET and NPs.

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