


Stakeholders' Perceptions on the Economic Impacts of Vredefort World Heritage Site

Abstract

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Tourism has impacts, which strongly affect the environment, economy and society; hence, stakeholder's perceptions of tourism impacts are important. The main aim of this study was to determine the stakeholders' perceptions about the tourism impacts of the Vredefort Dome World Heritage Site (WHS) in the Free State province, South Africa. This study was quantitative and followed a descriptive research design. A non-probability purposive sampling technique for collecting data from government officials and tourism business owners was utilised, while a convenience sampling technique was used for the tourists and the local communities. The study results show that the local communities receive minimal economic benefits from the WHS, while the tourists, tourism business owners, and government officials slightly agreed that there are economic support and benefits contributed by the WHS. The study concludes that the local communities have limited economic benefit, from the Vredefort Dome WHS. It is recommended that continuous educational training and awareness should be adopted by the local municipality to change the local communities' perceptions regarding the economic impacts of tourism.

Keywords: Stakeholders, perceptions, tourism, economic impacts, World Heritage site

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Introduction

Tourism is the processes, activities, and outcomes arising from the relationship and interaction among tourists, tourism supplies, host government, host communities, and surrounding environments, that are involved in the attracting and hosting of visitors (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Prior to COVID-19, tourism was one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the world (Khurramov, 2020). According to Higgins-Desbiolles (2018), tourist attractions have the ability to draw people's attention and create the satisfaction needed for the protection and improvement of the natural resources for the current and future generations. Therefore, tourism is the sum of phenomena and activities that arise from persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year, for leisure, business, and other beneficial purposes, so long as this does not result in permanent residence and/or any kind of earning (Stojanovska-Stefanova et al., 2019). International tourism accounts for a larger share of foreign exchange of receipts and export earning than other industries in the world (Bhattarai et al., 2021). Thus, tourism is an increasingly important source of income, employment, and wealth in many countries (Menzoor et al., 2019:3789). Tourism is primarily influenced by the curiosity and desire of mankind to discover natural and cultural identities around the world (Cakar, 2020). The diversity of cultural and natural heritage sites differs greatly from one destination to another, and includes scenic landscapes and revitalised old towns (Taylor, 2009; Bleibleh & Awad, 2020). According to Ryan Silvanto (2009), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) WHS's listing has proven to be a powerful draw for tourists, and tourism also plays a crucial role in protecting and enhancing these sites. The UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Program was established to protect cultural heritage and achieve sustainable economic development within the regions of these sites (UNESCO, 2018). The sites are of 'outstanding universal value to humankind', each protected for future generations through the efforts of UNESCO, which works to safeguard these World Heritage Sites (Duval & Smith, 2013:135).

According to UNESCO (2018), the Vredefort Dome is one of the 10 World Heritage Sites in South Africa with great significance in astronomical history, as the dome is the oldest astrobleme yet found on Earth. UNESCO (2018) further echoes that the dome provides critical evidence of the Earth's geological history and is crucial for the understanding of the evolution of the planet. Thus, the Vredefort Dome was declared as a WHS in 2005 for its protection and conservation (Glass, 2019). The basis of this study is centered around the stakeholders' perceptions of economic impacts related to the Vredefort Dome WHS. When tourism increases in a region, some form of revenue is injected into that particular region's economy, either through tourist expenditure patterns or foreign exchange (Vareiro & Mendes, 2015). However, this could negatively influence the perceptions of stakeholders if there is no sign of infrastructural development that could benefit the stakeholders; for example, if the locals are not being given an opportunity to exploit possible available business opportunities (such as selling souvenirs) because all these opportunities would lead to the improvement of the stakeholders' lifestyle, especially of the communities adjacent to the WHS (Cochrane & Tapper, 2006). Economic impacts on stakeholders also brings a sense of pride to them, but it is not possible to avoid the increasing levels of crime, prostitution, disrespect towards the elderly, and loss of authenticity of culture and heritage (Fletcher et al., 2013). Recognising the importance of stakeholders' perceptions regarding the tourism impacts, the present study aims to analyse the stakeholders' perceptions towards economic impacts. The respondents of this study were local communities, local business owners, tourists, and municipality/government employees.

Literature review

Economic impacts of tourism

It is often the positive economic impacts that persuade governments, companies, and individuals to get involved with the development of tourism destinations (Gunn & Var, 2002; Kumar & Hussain, 2014). Despite the many reasons sometimes put



forward to support the case of tourism development, it is the economic benefits that provide the main driving force for tourism development. Foreign exchange earnings, income, and employment generation are the major motivations for including tourism as part of a development strategy (Fletcher et al., 2013). Furthermore, the high levels of economic activities that result from tourism lead to increased domestic income and foreign currency through the international travel of tourists, who usually have greater spending power within the host region (Fennell, 2015). Research has shown that the amount spent by visitors in an area is re-circulated in the local economy; thus, expenditure patterns of tourists lead to the multiplier effect concept (Gunn & Var, 2002; Kumar et al., 2015) within the host region, where the money generated from expenditure directly related to tourism developments will be used to purchase certain products and improve services, which will satisfy the tourists' expectations and improve the quality of life for the host community as well (Fletcher et al., 2013).

Tourism's ability to create jobs is one of the main reasons why governments encourage its development (Karanth & Nepal, 2012). The human resource, therefore, plays a huge role in the tourism industry which is service-orientated (Kreag, 2001), hence the high levels of employment opportunities being present, where locals can work in hotel establishments as general workers, managers, chefs and transportation operators, as well as in travel agencies, at tourist attractions, as tour guides, in government departments and as tour operators, as direct form of employment. However, employment by tourism establishments is not the only opportunity present to improve the quality of life for the local people (McNally et al., 2011); some become entrepreneurs in the sense that they can start their own businesses whether it be a small bed and breakfast (B&B) or guesthouse, or even an eatery where indigenous cuisine can be served to tourists, or a game reserve where tourists have the privilege to experience the wildlife in the region. The indirect employment is associated with other sectors such as construction, banking, design, and transport companies, to mention just a few (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). Kumar & Hussain (2014) report that beside generating revenue and creating jobs, tourism development also contributes to infrastructure improvements in destination areas, such as road and rail improvements, airport developments, improvements in telecommunications and utilities such as water and power supply. In this way, local people can benefit from improved facilities that are provided for tourists. It is, therefore, vital to consider the environment that supports this economic activity in a region for optimal economic benefits to be provided.

In the context of this study, it is evident that the two towns within the vicinity of the WHS have greatly benefited economically from the existence of the WHS, due to Parys being considered as a "tourist hub" (Ngwathe Municipality, 2019), where the town experiences a great influx of tourists, leading to the injection of foreign revenue into the local economy. The town has a rich history of architectural design and cultural diversity, dating back to the early 1800s when the Dutch occupied it, to the present day where the town is home to a variety of ethnic groups (Parys, 2019). Over the years, the town has seen great tourism developments from infrastructure such as roads, medical centres, emergency services, and museums, to locally-owned businesses that led to the creation of employment, thus improving the quality of life for the local people. The other town, Vredefort, according to Parys (2019), has also had its fair share of tourism developments such as infrastructure improvements, a museum, roads, emergency services, growth in the farming businesses, and other businesses such as local B&Bs and restaurants (Parys, 2019). It is, therefore, evident that regions neighbouring WHSs will benefit economically, and improve not just the infrastructure of the area but also better the lives of the local people. Moreover, whenever economic benefits take form in the region, the effects also ripple towards the betterment of the environment, which will be discussed below.

Economic impacts of tourism development

Even though the economic impacts of tourism are generally positive, it can have some negative economic effects, which include leakage, labour transfer, seasonal employment, displacement, resource commitment, and increased living costs. Wiranatha & Suryawardani (2017) state that a leakage occurs in tourism when money generated from tourism developments and activities exits the economy of the destination region. This could be because the hotels are owned by investors or companies that operate in other countries, and the profits are transferred to those countries. Furthermore, larger travel and tourism companies buy their goods and services from multiple suppliers in order to get the best, most reasonable prices (Cooper et al., 2008; Mathieson & Wall, 1982). Tourism development can lead to the loss of traditional jobs, when workers move from industries such as farming, forestry, mining, and fishing into service jobs in tourism; this is considered as labour transfer from one industry to another (Kumar et al., 2015). Developing countries that work hard to attract tourists experience similar problems in keeping workers in primary industries, for example, employees shift from mining to travel agencies, seeking new experiences, less levels of risk, and other present benefits (Webster & Ivanov, 2014).

Seasonal unemployment can be a problem in those tourist destinations that are not active all year round, because extra strain is imposed on the local and national government resources (Jolliffe & Farnsworth, 2003). Cooper et al. (2008) state that an influx of visitors to a holiday area can push up the prices of goods and services, particularly when the demand is high during peak season. This poses a disadvantage to the local people, who may have to pay higher prices for food, drinks, entertainment, transport, events and so forth, because of the relationship of foreign currency to the Rand, for instance. Extra charges may be levied on the local community to finance facilities and services for visitors. Resources play an integral role in the tourism industry and other industries in general. The presence of resources within a destination might not be the main motivation for travel; however, the absence of these will negatively influence the tourist's experience and overall level of satisfaction (Schoeman & Mynhardt, 2012). Thus, it is important to ensure that these resources (financial and human capital) are used and managed in a sustainable manner. However, due to the high numbers of tourists, tourism becomes dependant on those resources; for example, funds that were set out for the use of other industrial developments, are used, as a result of the tourism industry, for expanding accommodation facilities to accommodate a greater number of visitors (Schoeman & Mynhardt, 2012). The



expansion of tourism developments could potentially pose as a threat to the environment concerned, and that is why certain policies and acts, such as Section 5.10 in the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa 1996, the Cluster 2.2 of the Tourism Growth and Supply in the National Tourism Sector Strategy, and the Tourism Act (3 of 2014), ensure that all negative impacts resulting from infrastructural development are minimised and monitored (Tourism White Paper, 1996; National Department of Tourism, 2012).

Impacts from Vredefort World Heritage site

South Africa's best-selling features are its natural beauty and wildlife (Hermann et al., 2016) where a number of tourists visit a particular region in order to appreciate the dynamic ecosystems and geographical landscapes that are on offer. South Africa is home to 10 of the world's official heritage sites, as determined by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee (UNESCO 2019). The country has a total of five cultural, four natural, and one mixed (cultural and natural) heritage sites (UNESCO, 2019). One of the natural heritage sites is the Vredefort Dome that is situated in the Free State Province, and it forms part of the Ngwathe Local Municipality (Ngwathe Municipality, 2019). It is a representative part of a larger meteorite impact structure and was declared South Africa's seventh World Heritage Site in 2005. The title of WHS has led to the increase in tourism in WHSs and PAs, which brings with it potential positive and negative implications (Hermann et al., 2016). This designation bears a number of benefits in terms of social development, economic development, international recognition, and environmental sustainability. However, Leong et al. (2016) suggest that WHSs in less-developed countries face an acute situation of uncontrolled developments, due to the fast growing rate of tourism, where considerate planning needs to be effectively conducted, and consultations should be with all relevant stakeholders, to avoid uncontrolled developments and the degradation of the heritage site.

On the 19 of April 2016, the Provincial Tourism Forum together with the Provincial Tourism Council in Parys came up with a strategy to create an initiative that would improve tourism in the region (Free State Economic, Small Business Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, 2016). The provincial bodies opine that in order to step up tourism initiatives in the Free State, these discussion cannot exclude municipalities and planning, because tourist attractions are situated within these municipalities, and that signage and tourism infrastructure is critical to the improvement of tourism development in the Free State (FSEBDTEA, 2016). The Provincial Council further reiterated that the purpose of the initiative is to create platforms for relevant stakeholders in the tourism value chain to provide systematic and integrated planning, development, promotion, implementation, infrastructural development, evaluation and monitoring of tourism in the province. The pillars of the initiative would be capacity building, adequate resource allocation, and the identification of attractions in the region (FSEBDTEA, 2016). To take full advantage of the possible economic, environmental and socio-cultural positive impacts, the National Development Plan (NDP), from the Revised White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage Third Draft 2017, indicated that providing financial, information and communication support to heritage-orientated activities, such as live arts exhibitions, craft souvenirs, heritage sites and museums, is imperative due to the economic, environmental and socio-cultural benefits they generate in regions with WHSs. Such a region promotes great opportunities for entrepreneurial businesses, employment for the local community, infrastructural developments such as roads, schools, hospitals and shopping centres that will all form part the multiplier effect in the economy of the region, leading to the upgrade of any rundown buildings and protection of fragile areas with significant natural importance.

Research methodology

A questionnaire, as the method of data collection was used in this study. This study was conducted in two towns that are adjacent to the Vredefort Dome WHS, namely Parys and Vredefort. The sampling frame comprised five categories, which are the local communities (landowners, and township and suburban residents), tourism businesses (tour operators, travel agencies, etc.), Vredefort Dome manager/s, government officials (municipality employees – conservation/ environmental/ tourism officers) and, lastly, tourists (educational tourists and general tourists, either domestic or international). The first phase consisted of the non-probability convenience sampling whereby the tourists and local communities were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study. During the second phase, purposive sampling was used, as questionnaires were distributed to the tourism business owners, governmental officials and Vredefort Dome managers (municipality employees, conservation/environmental/tourism officers) at Ngwathe Local Municipality. The study population was 490, which was justified by Census South Africa, according to Statistics South Africa (STATSSA, 2018). Appointments with the representative bodies were arranged personally through the municipality tourism manager at Ngwathe Local Municipality for the distribution of the questionnaire to the relevant members within the municipality. The questionnaire was designed to collect data from all relevant stakeholders for this study.

There are two types of research paradigms that form part of the research design, namely qualitative and quantitative. For the purpose of this study, a quantitative approach was employed. The main advantage of using this approach is that a wide range of statistical tests could potentially be available for analysing data (Bordens & Abbott, 2011). The research design for this study was descriptive in nature. The advantage of a descriptive statistic design, as set out by Mustafa (2010), is that it provides a numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions, of a population. The analysis of the coded data from the structured questionnaire was conducted with the use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique was utilised to examine the economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts against the different perceptions of visitors towards the WHS. To analyse the results of stakeholders' perceptions regarding positive and negative impacts, a factor analysis was considered. Factorial ANOVA is a descriptive tool that will help the researcher analyse



any difference that could have occurred regarding the perceptions of stakeholders (Tolmie et al., 2011:258). To estimate the effects of WHSs’ impacts, the researcher used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The data were then presented in the form of frequency tables and histograms to interpret the results obtained.

Results

Factor analysis of ecotourism impacts in Vredefort WHS

Section B of the questionnaire investigated perceptions of the economic impact of tourism on WHSs, such as the one in Vredefort in the Free State province of South Africa. The analysis of the items addressed the fulfillment of objective one, which is based on the examination of stakeholders’ perceptions on the economic impacts regarding the Vredefort Dome WHS. Before the data analysis proceeded, the data were first scrutinised for any possible outliers; none of the participants’ data were removed. There were 10 statements provided and respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions on a five-point interval scale, where 1 was for strongly disagree and 5 was for strongly agree. To cluster the items into fewer variables the factor analysis was utilised, and more specifically, used generalised least squares (GLS) with Oblimin rotation. Items B5 and B7 had communalities less than 0.20 and were removed from the procedure. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) of 0.652 and Bartlett’s sphericity ($p < .000$) indicated that such a procedure was plausible, but this was only so after inverting the scales of B5 and B7 and then removing them when communalities remained low for these items. The first-order factors were again subjected to a second-order procedure, which resulted in two factors. Two first-order factors resulted, with the first explaining 27.67% of the variance while the second one explained 20.45% of the variance. Together, they explained 48.12% of the variance present. The factors and the items are represented in Table 1

Table 1: Mean scores and factor loadings of the items in relation to the economic benefits of tourism (FB1.1)

FB 1.1 – Economic benefits of tourism ($\alpha=0.658$)			
Item	Description	Mean	Loading
B6	Entrepreneurship is encouraged amongst local communities (opening of B&B’s, restaurants etc.).	.701	2.77
B4	The infrastructure (such as roads, health facilities etc.) of the region has improved due to tourism economic activity.	.524	2.23
B2	The local communities are employed within the tourism industry.	.500	2.33
B9	Tourism is considered as a source of income in the region.	.495	2.75
B8	The municipality specifically allocates funds to tourism in its annual budget.	.460	2.62
Average		.536	2.54

The data in Table 1 clearly indicates that the majority of respondents disagreed with the economic benefit of tourism. This could be as a result of very minimal entrepreneurship encouragement among the locals, and minimal to no employment within the tourism industry, due to the seasonal employment prevalent in the tourism industry. B4 suggests that the infrastructure of the region should have been improved due to economic activities; however, this is not the case, as it seems that the municipality does not allocate funds towards tourism in the annual budget. To show the disengagement between government officials and other stakeholders, most of the local community were not aware of any annual budgets being allocate towards the tourism industry. The data distribution in the two factors is given in Figures 1 and 2

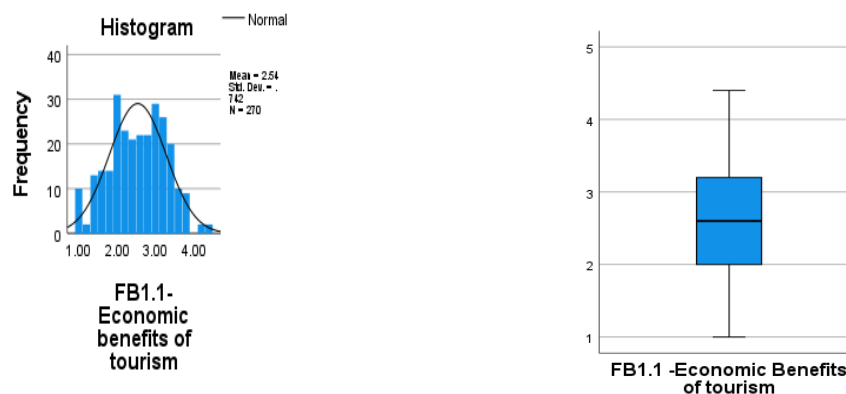


Figure 1: Histogram and boxplot showing the data distribution in the factor Economic Benefits of Tourism (FB1.1)

The histogram indicates that most respondents disagreed or at least partially disagreed (2.54) with the items contained in the factor Economic Benefits of Tourism in the WHS, Vredefort. The median was 2.60, showing that half of the respondents scored less than 2.60. The item with the highest factor loading was B6 (Entrepreneurship is encouraged among local communities (opening B&Bs, restaurants etc.)). Item B6 was thus most representative of what the factor represents (Field 2018: 784).

Table 2: The mean scores and factor loading of the items in terms of the economic aspects impeding tourism (FB1.2)

Item	Description	Mean	Loading
B1	There is minimal tourism monetary support for the local community from the government.	.760	3.22
B3	The municipality does not offer support for tourism businesses in region.	.537	3.09
B10	Locals are not the main suppliers and distributors of tourism goods and services.	.451	3.11
Average		.583	3.12

The data in Table 2 indicates that the minimal monetary support from the government acts as a factor in hindering the economic benefits of tourism in the region. Based on the above results, respondents agreed that they are not the main suppliers and distributors of tourism goods and services in the region. It is clear that even though entrepreneurship could be encouraged, adequate funding, financial support structures and the involvement of the local community being the main suppliers and/or distributors of tourism services need to be considered and implemented to minimise the impeding factors.

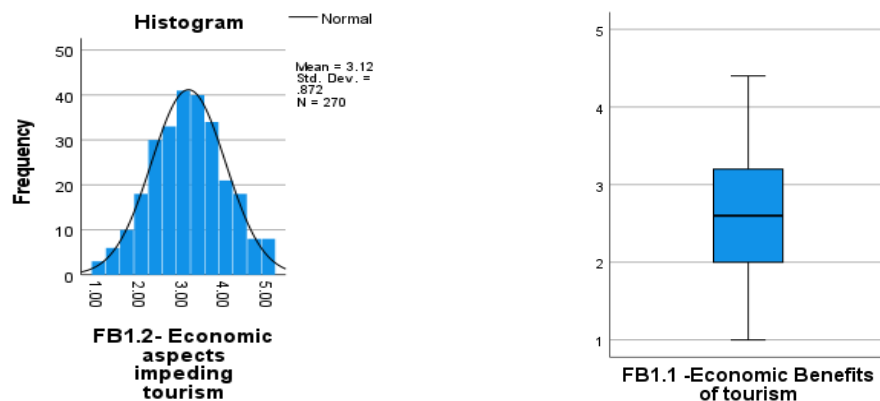


Figure 2: Histogram and boxplot showing the data distribution in the factor Economic Aspects Impeding Tourism (FB1.2)

The histogram shows a factor mean of 3.12, showing that most respondents were neutral in their perceptions regarding economic aspects impeding perceptions of the impact of tourism on WHS.

Discussion

Based on the findings provided by the statistical analysis, several outcomes were drawn in relation to the objectives of the study. The synthesis includes the discussion of the influence of economic impacts on stakeholders. Tourism has proven to be an effective sector for economic growth, allowing for the diversification of a local economy, attracting foreign exchange investment, which could lead to the improvement of the balance of payments, regional development, creation of employment and income, and the stimulation of domestic travel (Meyer & Meyer, 2015). It is evident that when tourism has been planned and implemented efficiently, the economic spin-offs are present. However, based on the statistical output provided by the respondents, such economic benefits are not fully evident. Respondents (mainly local communities) disagreed with any presence of economic benefits, and suggested that the municipality does not provide financial aid or support, even though such information might be included in their annual budget document. The locals are not aware of the budget's allocation and how the funds are utilised. Furthermore, most respondents stated that they were not the main suppliers of tourism services and products. This could account for the large percentage of unemployed residents within the tourism industry, thus making the multiplier effect ineffective in this region. Due to the aforementioned statements, it is possible to understand the respondents' reluctance to acknowledge and participate in tourism activities. The level of reluctance, therefore, creates a negative perception of economic impacts, as the locals do not experience any positive benefits.

Research was undertaken to examine the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the economic impacts of the Vredefort Dome WHS. Issues pertaining to sustainable tourism development and tourism planning were discussed in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions regarding the economic tourism impacts associated with the Vredefort Dome WHS, and its overall impacts on the region and its residents. The quantitative analysis reflected the local community's general desire for inclusion in the decision-making, planning and management process associated with the tourism activities. Local community respondents stated that they were not included in decisions taken regarding their region of residence about tourism activities and the possible entrepreneurial opportunities present. The items involved with the resident's perceptions of the WHS were founded on two factors, namely one that observed the items that enhance the stakeholder's perceptions, and one that observed the items that impede the stakeholder's perceptions regarding the economic impacts of the Vredefort WHS. The participants disagreed or partially disagreed with the items that contained the factor of economic benefits of tourism in the WHS; however, they were neutral with the items in the impeding factor. Ideally, the management of the WHS should attempt to maximise the aspects enhancing the perceptions of the benefits from tourism and also communicate to the tourism business owners, tourists, and local community members on how they can be represented and involved in the decision-making process for sustainable tourism development in the region. This is necessary, because tourism business owners and local resident respondents seemed not to have benefited from any form of monetary support from the government, even though entrepreneurship was encouraged. The tourism economic spin-offs appeared to have a minimal existence; this could be due to the fact that tourism business owners and local residents were not considered as the main suppliers of tourism products and services, this being the impeding factor, therefore, not receiving any form of long-term employment from the tourism industry. In the light of the economic impacts of tourism, it could be said that the level of involvement of the locals in tourism activities influenced the attitudes of the locals negatively, due to unimproved livelihoods based on those who have extensive financial resources versus those who do not have



adequate financial resources as the cross-tabulation of 96.0% unemployed and 4.0% employed stipulated in the analysed results. It appears as if the local community is either unaware of, or has not been party to the possible benefits occurring from tourism activities.

According to Kumar & Hussain (2014) and Lekaota (2018), the literature suggests that stakeholders would be able to experience maximum benefits if the area carries the status of being a WHS, or the location of a WHS is identified as a tourist destination. However, that was not the case with Vredefort Dome WHS, as the destination seemed to have very minimal economic activities taking place based on tourism, and could not yield evident economic benefits as a result of having a WHS in the region, thus affecting the attitudes and perceptions of the stakeholders, mostly the local residents.

Conclusion

The current study examined the perceptions of the stakeholders regarding the impacts of tourism pertaining to a WHS, the significance of stakeholder participation and involvement in tourism planning and management, and the benefits that could be harvested from the existence of a WHS in the region. Government officials from the Ngwathe Local Municipality, tourism business owners, tourists and the local community, were requested to complete a questionnaire survey. The stakeholders from Parys and Vredefort shared the same views related to perceptions regarding the impacts of tourism, knowledge about the significance of the Vredefort Dome WHS and the awareness and degree of involvement pertaining to the decision-making process and tourism developments in the region. The study concludes that continuous workshops and awareness drives regarding tourism development should be provided by the Ngwathe Local Municipality in partnership with the business owners and the local community. In nurturing this strategy, the positive perceptions and attitudes towards tourism development could be enhanced. A government or municipality with conservation areas and tourism destinations in its area should educate and involve the business owners and local communities in the various levels of planning and management. The government officials hired in the Department of Tourism in the municipality should have the relevant qualifications and experience in carrying out operational activities that will bring a great improvement in the planning and management of sustainable tourism development in the region, in order to maximise tourism activities, and so reap tourism benefits for the improvement of the region.

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