

Research article

Exploring the tourism entrepreneurial ecosystem of Kruger National Park: Opportunities, challenges, and strategic solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the Kruger National Park as an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (EE), with the aim of determining the characteristics and dynamics of this ecosystem within which tourism SMEs operate. As such, this study has three main objectives: (1) to identify the opportunities and motivations driving tourism entrepreneurship within the KNP EE; (2) to examine the key challenges constraining the effectiveness of this ecosystem; and (3) to propose recommendations based on both the existing literature and insights gathered from tourism entrepreneurs operating in the KNP area. This study used a qualitative approach, conducting face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews with 14 tourism SME owners and managers around KNP, following ethical guidelines from the University of Johannesburg research committee. Data were collected through purposive and snowball sampling and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that while KNP offers significant entrepreneurial opportunities, the local EE is hindered by challenges such as government regulations, electricity shortages, high commodity prices, bureaucratic delays, COVID-19 impacts, community roadblocks, limited business promotion, and resource constraints. To address these issues, the managerial implications consisted of making recommendations drawn from literature and participants' input for policymakers, local communities near KNP, and entrepreneurs.

KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurial ecosystem; tourism; Kruger National Park; small and medium-sized enterprises

Introduction

The concept of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) has recently gained significant traction as a framework for understanding how various environmental factors can be optimised to support business venture success (Poon et al., 2023). EE is increasingly recognised for its ability to foster the creation, growth, and sustainability of new ventures, particularly those run by micro or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These SMEs play a vital role in national economies through employment generation, poverty alleviation, income creation, and technological advancement (Mugano, 2024). This study focuses on SMEs operating within the national parks tourism sector, specifically the Kruger National Park (KNP) tourism, which is characterised by a high concentration of small enterprises. National parks like KNP are supported by governments, including the South African government, to uphold sustainable development goals such as the preservation of natural and cultural resources for current and future generations, while also promoting economic diversification through tourism-related business ventures (Beyeme et al., 2023; Stojonovic et al., 2024). Despite these positive contributions of the EE (Poon et al., 2023), and the positive impacts that small businesses such as SMEs can have on the economy in terms of employment generation, poverty alleviation, income creation, and technological advancement (Mugano, 2024), and the aim of national parks such as Kruger to promote economic diversification through tourism-related business ventures (Beyeme et al., 2023), it remains that small businesses in South Africa are still facing several challenges, hampering their entrepreneurial activities (Ssekitoleko & Dhlwayo, 2023; Dube, 2024),

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and the those operating around KNP in the account of tourism are not expelled from that (Ngomane, 2023). Therefore, this study assesses KNP as an EE, with the aim of determining the characteristics and dynamics of the ecosystem within which tourism SMEs operate. As such, this study has three main objectives: (1) to identify the opportunities and motivations driving tourism entrepreneurship within the KNP EE; (2) to examine the key challenges constraining the effectiveness of this ecosystem; and (3) to propose recommendations based on both the existing literature and insights gathered from tourism entrepreneurs operating in the KNP area.

Literature review

The literature review for this study focuses on the South African EE in general. It looks at the set of measures put in place to encourage entrepreneurship, the challenges hindering EEs, and recommendations to improve the entrepreneurial environment of the country.

Overview and history of the South African initiatives to foster entrepreneurship

Since the end of Apartheid in 1994, South Africa has implemented various policies and established institutions to support entrepreneurship. One of the first key initiatives was the 1995 White Paper on the National Strategy for the Development and Promotion of Small Business (Adelakun & van der Westhuizen, 2021), which aimed to reduce barriers such as heavy taxes, limited market access, lack of funding, inadequate market information, and an unfavourable regulatory environment (Sibiya & Kele, 2019). Following the 1995 White Paper, South Africa introduced the National Small Business Act in 1996 and the Employment Equity Act in 1998 (Enaifoghe & Ramsuraj, 2023). Still in 1996, the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy was launched to boost economic development, employment, and socio-economic redistribution, leading to further support for small businesses (Lefophane, 2024). Additionally, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), and later Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) in 2003, were introduced to promote greater participation of the black population in the formal economy (Makgoba, 2021). In 2005 and 2006, South Africa launched several key initiatives, including the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA) (Lefophane, 2024; Mathekga et al., 2022), JipSA (Mathekga et al., 2022), and the Introduction Strategy on the Promotion of Entrepreneurship and Small Enterprises (ISPESE) (Ogujiuba et al., 2021), to promote entrepreneurship and skills development. In 2009, the National Development and Planning Commission (NDPC) was established, which led to the National Development Plan in 2012 (DPME/DSBD, 2018). This plan aimed to address major economic challenges such as poverty and high unemployment (Ogujiuba et al., 2021), poor infrastructure, and economic exclusion (Oduwole, 2018). Since 2011, South Africa has taken several steps to strengthen its support for small businesses. That year saw the introduction of preferential procurement regulations, which were gazette by the National Treasury, and were later updated in 2017 (Odendaal, 2018). In 2014–2015, the government launched the Department of Small Business Development (DSBD) to help entrepreneurs navigate the barriers they faced when starting businesses (Botha et al., 2021). More recently, DSBD reviewed the effectiveness of the ISPESE strategy and based on its findings, proposed a shift in approach. This led to the creation of the NISED framework in 2022, which aimed at offering more targeted and practical support, both financial and non-financial to small enterprises (Department of Small Business Development, 2022). Although some policies have been revised or phased out over time, the consistent rollout of new initiatives demonstrates how seriously the South African government views entrepreneurship. However, despite all these initiatives and efforts, it remains that small businesses are still facing several challenges, hampering their entrepreneurial activities (Ssekitoleko & Dhliwayo, 2023; Dube, 2024).

Challenges in the South African entrepreneurial environment

Although the South African government has made efforts to promote entrepreneurship, these initiatives have often been inconsistent and have not fully addressed the challenges faced by entrepreneurs (Ssekitoleko & Dhliwayo, 2023; Dube, 2024). While policies have created a more supportive environment, a notable gap remains between the intended benefits of government interventions and their real impact on the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Mxunyelwa & Vallabh, 2025; Matheka, 2011). Entrepreneurial development in South Africa is hindered by various interrelated factors, including educational, social, economic, political, technological, and cultural barriers (Serumaga-Zake & Van der Poll, 2021). Key obstacles include burdensome bureaucracy and restrictive labour laws (Mxunyelwa & Vallabh, 2025; Herrington & Kew, 2018). The education system also presents significant challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, poor teacher quality, and high dropout rates, despite relatively high public expenditure on education (Lombo & Subban, 2024; Bowmaker-Falconer & Herrington, 2020). Access to finance remains a persistent issue for start-ups, many of which rely on personal or informal sources of capital due to difficulties in securing institutional funding (Ogujiuba et al., 2023; Herrington & Kew, 2018). Additionally, while initiatives to support black economic participation have been prominent, they have sometimes inadvertently excluded white, coloured, and Indian entrepreneurs, contributing to ongoing inequalities in access to opportunities (Vilakazi & Bosiu, 2021; Matheka, 2011; Odendaal, 2018). Corruption and a lack of transparency in the allocation of entrepreneurial funding further undermine trust and self-initiative, often fostering a culture of dependency on government support (Pheiffer & Mhidi, 2024; Matheka, 2011). The lack of visible role models for young entrepreneurs is also cited as a factor that diminishes entrepreneurial ambition and confidence (Madondo &

Tinonetsana, 2024). Additional barriers include limited access to markets and market information, inadequate funding mechanisms, high tax burdens, and financial levies such as the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the Skills Development Levy (Sibiya & Kele, 2019). Furthermore, the broader entrepreneurial climate is negatively impacted by an unfavourable regulatory framework, high crime rates, and increasing labour costs (Sibiya & Kele, 2019; UNCTAD, 2023).

Recommendations to strengthen the South African entrepreneurial environment

Within the South African context, key improvements are needed in areas such as the regulatory framework, access to finance, and the education and training systems to better support entrepreneurship (Ogujiuba et al., 2023; Herrington & Kew, 2018). Scholars have called for targeted policy interventions aimed at enhancing the growth and survival of small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) (Sibiya et al., 2023), especially given the enduring structural challenges in the business environment. To create a more enabling regulatory environment, it is essential to develop and implement effective policies and reduce bureaucratic barriers that inhibit entrepreneurship (UNCTAD, 2023; Sibiya & Kele, 2019; Oduwole, 2018). Although the 2022/23 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report notes some progress, significant regulatory reform is still required (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023). Reforms should include simplifying processes such as business registration and tax compliance, easing restrictive labour laws, particularly regarding retrenchment, and introducing anti-corruption measures with strict penalties (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2025; Herrington & Kew, 2018). Improving access to finance remains a major concern. While the GEM 2022/23 report suggests that this issue is not unique to South Africa (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023), experts still recommend new funding models and mechanisms to prepare small businesses financially and incentivise private investment, including provisions allowing angel investors and venture capitalists to offset investment risks more effectively (Herrington & Kew, 2018). Deputy Minister Zuko Godlimpi has stressed the need for inclusive and efficient funding processes aligned with national transformation objectives (DTIC, 2024). Further recommendations include establishing forums for direct engagement between entrepreneurs and funders and creating a national database and digital platform to connect viable businesses with appropriate financial support; mobile banking systems should also be strengthened to streamline financial transactions (Hornuf et al., 2025). Additionally, a more relaxed regulatory framework for crowdfunding is encouraged, along with the adoption of credit scoring systems to improve SME lending efficiency and profitability (Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, The Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute, and SAB Foundation, 2017).

Regarding education and training, despite some improvements, South Africa continues to rank low globally in entrepreneurial education (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023). Scholars argue for greater efforts to provide practical skills to aspiring entrepreneurs and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from privileged communities to the historically disadvantaged (Oduwole, 2018). Active learning should replace passive approaches to better cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets (Herrington & Kew, 2018). Key educational reforms should involve collaboration between the Department of Small Business Development (DSBD) and the Department of Education, improvements in technical training and apprenticeships, and the integration of entrepreneurship into primary and secondary school curricula. Involvement from educators, government, business experts, and funders is seen as vital (Bowmaker-Falconer & Herrington, 2020; Herrington & Kew, 2018). Moreover, entrepreneurial education must align with the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), promoting digital inclusion, technological empowerment, and digital entrepreneurship (UNCTAD, 2023; Allan Gray Orbis Foundation et al., 2017). The GEM 2022/23 report suggests that enhancing entrepreneurial education at the tertiary level could have a significant medium- to long-term impact. It also emphasises the importance of technology and innovation in driving entrepreneurial success, advocating for increased investment in research and development and its commercialisation (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023).

Study area

This study focuses on Kruger National Park (KNP), one of South Africa's oldest and most iconic national parks, managed by South African National Parks (SANParks) as shown on Figure 1. Established in 1926, the park spans an area of approximately 1,919,430 hectares. Of this, 1,913,327 hectares are officially declared and actively managed, while 3,564 hectares, although declared, remain unmanaged due to the biophysical characteristics of the land. Additionally, 2,538 hectares are yet to be declared, largely because of land swaps or because they encompass areas along the railway line on the park's southwestern boundary, between Matsulu and Numbi Gate (Nkogho-Beyeme, 2025). The park is situated across two South African provinces: Limpopo and Mpumalanga, where the field data for this study were collected, and it shares international borders with Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Nkogho-Beyeme, 2025; Ngomane, 2023). As a key driver of tourism in South Africa, the KNP plays a significant role in promoting economic development in surrounding areas (Ngomane, 2023; SANParks, 2016). In recent years, the park has made deliberate efforts to increase local community participation through initiatives aimed at fostering entrepreneurship, job creation, arts and crafts markets, improved access to the park, and other tourism-related opportunities designed to benefit nearby communities (Ngomane, 2023). Figure 1 below shows the map of KNP and the two areas where the data were collected are highlighted in green.

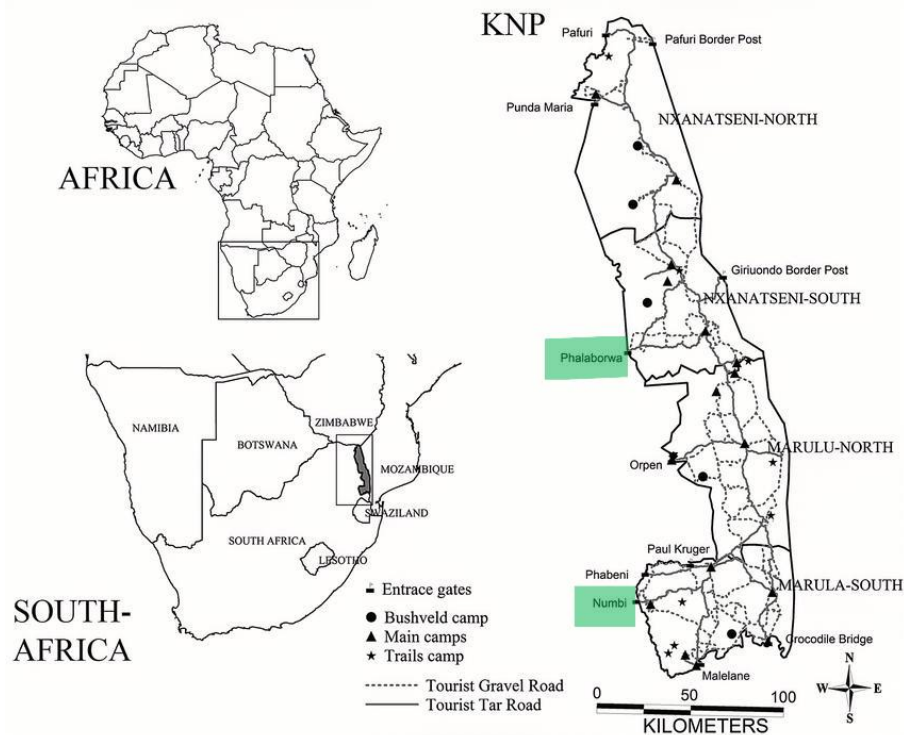


Figure 1: Study area

Source: Ferreira & Van Zyl (2016)

Methodology

This study, qualitative in nature, aims to investigate the perception that tourism entrepreneurs have on the KNP entrepreneurial environment in terms of opportunities, challenges, and ultimate solutions to improve this EE. Therefore, this study applies an interpretative, naturalistic approach to assess KNP in its real-world context alongside key actors within its EE. A qualitative study investigates phenomena in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, interpret, describe, decode, and translate concepts and phenomena rather than recording the frequency of certain phenomena in society (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This study employed interviews as the primary data collection technique, a method widely recognised as one of the most commonly used in qualitative research (Foley et al., 2021). A combination of semi-structured, face-to-face and online interviews was used. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants based in White River town (Mpumalanga province), whose tourism businesses operate around the Numbi Gate of KNP. Online interviews, conducted via WhatsApp calls, involved participants based in Phalaborwa town (Limpopo province), whose businesses are situated near the Phalaborwa Gate of KNP. The usage of both interview formats enabled the researcher to access a broader and more geographically diverse sample while reducing potential bias by providing flexible alternatives when one method was not feasible. Interviews were conducted with the approval of the University of Johannesburg's research committee, under ethical clearance number 23SOMBM11. All ethical standards and guidelines outlined by the university's research ethics procedures were strictly followed during the interview process. This included the distribution of a letter of invitation and a consent form to all participants. These documents explained the purpose and objectives of the study, emphasised the voluntary nature of participation, and clarified participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were also assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity, with a clear statement that their identities would not be disclosed and that their contributions would be used solely for academic purposes. No compensation was provided for participation. Ethical considerations are fundamental in the research process, ensuring that studies adhere to both national and international ethical standards (Mbabe et al., 2021).

This study employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify suitable participants. Purposive sampling, a widely used approach in qualitative research, involves selecting participants based on their knowledge and relevance to the specific phenomenon under investigation (Andrade, 2021; Palinkas et al., 2015). However, due to challenges in locating or accessing potential participants, snowball sampling was also utilised. In this method, initial participants (referred to as "index individuals") are asked to recommend others who meet the study criteria and may be appropriate for inclusion. Snowball sampling is a recognised and effective strategy in qualitative research, particularly when studying hard-to-reach populations (Tie et al., 2019; Kennedy-Shaffer et al., 2021). The combination of these two sampling techniques led to a final sample of 14 participants, all of whom are either owners or managers of tourism SMEs operating around the Kruger National Park (KNP).

As noted by Barreto et al. (2021), qualitative research does not focus on sample size for the purpose of statistical generalisation. Instead, it values the variability within the sample to identify behavioural patterns and attitudes that contribute to testing, refining, and developing emerging findings. An inductive thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyse the findings, guided by themes that emerged from the literature review. These themes focused on the opportunities presented by the KNP as a tourism entrepreneurial hub, the challenges impacting the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE), and recommendations for enhancing the EE for small businesses operating within it. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method that involves systematic coding of data to identify patterns, generate insights, and construct meaning (Ozuem et al., 2022). This approach allowed for a flexible and in-depth exploration of participants’ perspectives, aligning well with the exploratory nature of the study.

Findings

Table 1 presents a summary of the 14 participants involved in this study, comprising an equal gender distribution of seven females and seven males. Of these, 13 were SME owners, while one was a manager representing the owner. The participants operated businesses in sectors such as tour operations, safari services, accommodation, restaurants and catering, souvenir and product boutiques, and event planning. These businesses are based in White River (Mpumalanga) and Phalaborwa (Limpopo). The duration of operation varied, with businesses ranging from 2 years to over 30 years in existence. Employee numbers ranged from 11 to 23, with some businesses employing seasonal or temporary staff depending on demand and tourism seasons. For ethical purposes, participants were coded under participant with an assigned number. For example, P1, P2 or P3 referred to participant one, two, or three. Each number was assigned based on the numerical order of participation.

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

Participants	Position	Gender	Tourism business	Years in operation	Number of employees	Location
P1	Owner	Female	Safari	9	4 + 7 seasonal	Phalaborwa
P2	Owner	Female	Tour operator/restaurant and catering	3	4 + 8 seasonal	Phalaborwa
P3	Owner	Male	Restaurant and catering/event planning	9	5 + 7, depending on the event	Phalaborwa
P4	Owner	Male	Tour operator	4	3 + 9 temporary	Phalaborwa
P5	Manager	Female	Accommodation, Restaurant, safari and wilderness	More than 30	5 + 6 seasonal	Phalaborwa
P6	Owner	Male	Catering	11	16	Phalaborwa
P7	Owner	Female	Other: Consulting	7	1 + 10 seasonal	Phalaborwa
P8		Female	Laundry	7	23	Phalaborwa
P9	Co-owner	Female	Souvenir and product boutique	13	4 + 10 in high season	White River
P10	Owner	Male	Souvenir and product boutique	25	2 + 11 when the demand is high	White River
P11	Co-owner	Male	Souvenir and product boutique	14	6 + 5 seasonal	White River
P12	Owner	Male	Accommodation	15	3 + 10 seasonal	White River
P13	Owner	Female	Car services	2	2 + 10 temporary	White River
P14	Owner	Male	Tour operator/safari	17	1 + 11 seasonal	White River

Participants’ motivation to invest in KNP tourism

The findings highlight diverse motivations behind participants’ decisions to establish and grow their businesses in the KNP tourism industry. A recurring theme was a deep passion for nature, culture, animals, tourism, or KNP itself. P5 stated, “*I am passionate about ecotourism, sustainability, and hospitality*”, while P4, P7, and P8 were similarly driven by their love for tourism, often rooted in past work experiences. P14 explained, “*I was motivated to create this company based on my previous work experience as guide, I fell in love with Kruger and I wanted respond to some insufficiencies I picked up while working as a guide*”. P2, who once aspired to be a vet, found her path through wildlife photography, and P11 shared a similar love for animals and nature. P9 added that, although entrepreneurship ran in his family, he was personally inspired by African nature and culture. Beyond passion, some participants saw clear business potential. P6 noted, “*tourism is an industry that grows fast, there are a lot of tourists, they need to eat and smile everyday*” while P13 founded her business to meet daily needs. Others, like P1 and P12, sought change from previous careers. P1 left the corporate world, inspired by her hometown’s proximity (Phalaborwa) to KNP, and P12 desired something “more relaxing and enjoyable.” Lastly, participants such as P10 and P3 were motivated by existing skills and a commitment to further develop them.

Participants’ perception of their entrepreneurial ecosystem

The findings indicate that participants viewed KNP tourism as a valuable entrepreneurial hub offering both economic and social opportunities. P12 described it as “*a big market in South Africa*”, while P2 noted its accessibility. P13 stated, “*Kruger makes it possible to do business*”, and P1 emphasized that it “*gives opportunities to local population and new businesses*”. Similar views were shared by P3 (“*it brings opportunities to a lot of us*”), P8 (who linked it to reducing unemployment), and P7, who noted that “*Kruger offers public participation engagement, it gives employment to community members*.” P14 added that many companies benefit from operating within the park. However, some participants pointed out the difficulty of sustaining a business. P6 stipulated that “*some open businesses but quickly shut down*”. P11 mentioned restrictions, stating they were not allowed to sell products within the park. Safety concerns were also raised, P9 warned against stopping on certain roads due to criminal activity targeting tourists, saying, “*I do not encourage people to stop there because of criminals*”. Similarly, P10 noted, “*there is criminality, law enforcement is needed, tourists are getting killed*.”

Participants' challenges and adapted solutions

Participants indicated to face several challenges ranging from the impact of COVID-19 to government laws and taxes, the electricity crisis (load shedding), increased prices of commodities, the processes to obtain papers, roads blocked by communities, business promotions and the problem of resource availability. In order to make their businesses survive these challenges, they have indicated to apply certain measures to face address challenges. Table 2 below consolidates the challenges of all the KNP tourism entrepreneurs and portrays how each challenge was dealt with or addressed by each participant. However, not all the challenges were addressed, as indicated by "nothing was mentioned".

Table 2: KNP participants' difficulties/challenges and adapted solutions for KNP tourism EE

Type of challenge	Participants' experience	Participants' adapted solutions	Participants
Government policies, laws and regulations	"I have been affected by the government laws and taxes"	Nothing was mentioned	P5
	"Sometimes we do not understand the government policies, they make our job hard"	Nothing was mentioned	P1
	"Government policies are complex to understand and are a burden"	Nothing was mentioned	P2
	"Mbombela municipality chasing us away"	"Instead of selling the stuff on the road, I now rent an open yard"	P9
	"At the beginning I had no issues, but at some points the government's laws and taxes were too much, the government does not realise the impact of Covid. There was no funding to help tourism after covid"	Nothing was mentioned	P5
Electricity crisis and commodities prices	"I am affected by electricity high cost and load shedding"	Nothing was mentioned	P5
	"Electricity is expensive and load shedding is a struggle"	Nothing was mentioned	P13
	"Electricity is a big problem, it delays productivity"	"I start early in the morning to do what I need that uses power"	P10
	"Load shedding is a major problem"	"With load shedding we are using gas stoves"	P6
	"The increased price of petrol"	Nothing was mentioned	P6
The process to obtain required papers	"During covid we still had to pay electricity although I was not using it"	"As we needed customers to recover our bills after covid, we opened door to community travellers, we were dropping prices for South African market"	P5
	"The process of obtaining papers is long. It took me a lot of years and a lot of required papers"	"Positivity, I ended up finding two mentors, I started joining groups such as SATSA"	P2
	"The long bureaucracy to obtain the permit. We struggle to obtain the NCT permit. The department of transport makes it difficult. There is a long delay to obtain these permits needed as we transport paying customers"	Nothing was mentioned	P1
COVID-19 impact	"Covid 19 was the major blow to my business. This led to the rising prices of commodities"	"I always have to renovate my ideas"	P3
Roadblocks by local communities	"Covid was really tough"	"During Covid we only worked with deliveries"	P6
	"Some angry communities sometimes block the roads and it makes us lose customers. I recently lost four clients"	"We call customers and try to explain what is happening and try to calm them down. We ask to postpone for the following day. We have to give a good communication"	P1
	"Communities that sometimes block the roads to protest against the government"	"If one road is blocked, I contact other people. We use social medias to find out which roads are open"	P14
	"Community uprising, protests in the area, road closure"	"I improvise. Or I hire other third party companies to help. If I can't move I call them to take my clients"	P4
Business promotion	"People do not understand what my business proposes. They are not aware of it"	"I am fighting, I am writing blogs on social medias about my services"	P7
	"Convince tourists to book for my place"	"I look at the review, I speak to our guests and hear from them. We did more investment on Wi-Fi, tv, and etc"	P12
Resource availability	"No sufficient resources. I am struggling to take my staff to work as I am only using one car which is not even mine"	"I sometimes rent a bakkie although it costs me more"	P8
	"I am facing the problem of space where to sell and the storage of my products"	"We go around, we pay money for certain spaces"	P11
	"Sometimes I do not have enough stock"	"I wait and remain positive"	P13

Participants' recommendations to improve KNP tourism EE

Participants made several recommendations to strengthen the KNP tourism EE, directed both at the government and fellow entrepreneurs. Regarding government support, P6 urged increased funding to boost job creation, while P5 called for easier access to finance. P10 emphasized broader support for local businesses, including training. P8 said that: "government should notice us as we are creating jobs without assistance". P2 suggested simplified support tools, such as a website for forms submissions. P7 recommended support for tourism associations, and P5 highlighted the role of municipalities in promoting local entrepreneurs. Participants also urged government action on external factors. P13 and P12 called for improved safety and security. P12 further stressed the need for better roads, public transport, and more affordable electricity. Entrepreneurs also offered peer advice. P9 and P3 emphasised patience and resilience, while P1 advised, "never give up, networking is key". P14 stressed professionalism in service delivery, and P11 noted the importance of accuracy. P6 highlighted saving, consistency, and customer service. P3 advised current entrepreneurs to adapt to change and form partnerships. For aspiring entrepreneurs, P10 recommends learning from storytellers in the tourism sector. P3 added the importance of sound financial planning to ensure sustainability.

Discussion

The findings reveal that participants had an overall positive perception of their EE, as they perceive KNP as a tourism entrepreneurial hub or a market that is easily accessible for some, and difficult to access for others, and that offers a range of opportunities that contribute to the economic and social development of the surrounded areas. Some of the participants were motivated by that to invest in KNP. However, despite the tourism opportunities that KNP offers for entrepreneurship, it remains that it is an EE that is facing several challenges that hamper entrepreneurship. Therefore, the findings from this study confirm the argument in the literature review that stipulated that these initiatives have often been inconsistent and have not fully addressed the challenges faced

by entrepreneurs (Ssekitoleko & Dhliwayo, 2023; Dube, 2024). These challenges include slow, long and complicated administrative procedures; therefore, strengthening the argument that burdensome bureaucracy and restrictive labour laws are among the key challenges of South African EEs (Mxunyelwa & Vallabh, 2025; Herrington & Kew, 2018). Sibiyi & Kele (2019) believe that entrepreneurs are demotivated by the unfavourable regulatory environment and the government laws and regulations in terms of policies, laws and taxes. Moreover, KNP has been presented as an area that has sometimes been dangerous for tourists, especially international tourists. In 2019 South Africa as a whole had the worst regional TFCI score when it comes to safety and security. It is believed that the high crime rate in South Africa has been considered one of the obstacles to entrepreneurship (Lloyd, 2018). Companies around KNP are also affected by the electricity crisis. In 2020, South Africa was ranked 114th in the world in terms of electricity supply (World Bank, 2020). Electricity generation is one of the factors that makes a destination competitive (Adeola & Evans, 2020). Other factors affecting the KNP as a tourism EE are commodities prices, COVID-19, roadblocks, business promotions and resource availability.

To mitigate the negative impact of these challenges, participants apply different strategies to face these challenges on a daily basis. However, the following recommendations, in the context of KNP as a tourism EE, are believed to be practical and would help to improve that EE. These include the introduction or encouragement of a zero-crime policy at all levels (Herrington & Kew, 2018) and the adoption of a policy that strengthens safety and security (Sibiyi & Kele, 2019; UNCTAD, 2023); the need to create a favourable regulatory environment through policies and regulations by investigating, reviewing and reducing the regulatory constraints to entrepreneurship (UNCTAD, 2023; Sibiyi & Kele, 2019), the funding mechanism (UNCTAD, 2023; Herrington & Kew, 2018); the implementation of training and learning programmes (Ogujuba et al., 2023) on entrepreneurship and tourism. The literature also proposes a shift from passive learning to active learning with regard to the South African EE (Oduwole, 2018), as well as the inclusion of entrepreneurial education focusing on the 4IR (UNCTAD, 2023; Bowmaker-Falconer & Herrington, 2020). Additionally, there is a need to improve electricity supply. In 2020 South Africa was ranked 114th in the world in terms of electricity supply (World Bank, 2020). Lastly, local community participation is also considered colossal, especially around national park tourism related business, as they are considered as cornerstone of ecotourism related activity (Beyeme et al., 2023), this will help to avoid roadblocks by populations, which negatively affect tourism businesses.

Conclusion

This study assessed the KNP as a tourism EE. KNP is one of South Africa's most renowned national parks, known for its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and high volumes of tourist traffic. The surrounding tourism activity presents various business opportunities, leading to the emergence and attempted growth of numerous micro and small enterprises. However, the tourism EE of KNP faces several challenges that hinder entrepreneurial development in the region. Therefore, this study assesses KNP as an EE, with the aim of determining the characteristics and dynamics of the ecosystem within which tourism SMEs operate. As such, this study has three main objectives: (1) to identify the opportunities and motivations driving tourism entrepreneurship within the KNP EE; (2) to examine the key challenges constraining the effectiveness of this ecosystem; and (3) to propose recommendations based on both the existing literature and insights gathered from tourism entrepreneurs operating in the KNP area. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to gather insights from participants who are key stakeholders within the KNP tourism EE. The findings provided a detailed profile of KNP as a tourism EE, highlighting common obstacles and offering managerial recommendations derived from both the literature and participants' perspectives to policymakers, KNP local communities and entrepreneurs. Future research could explore the broader impact of all EE components within the context of KNP to further inform policy and practice.

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