

## Management of Eco-Tourism through Public-Private Partnerships in South Africa

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**How to cite this article:** Litheko, A. (2022). Management of Eco-Tourism through Public-Private Partnerships in South Africa. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 11(6):2103-2127. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.345>

### Abstract

Public protected areas are set aside to legally protect the country's biological and culturally diverse resources. In South Africa, the protected areas have sustainably conserved some of the country's most biologically rich areas and endangered species; these areas also provide the main way in which people can visit relatively undisturbed areas of high natural and cultural value. Considering sustainability while managing protected areas raises new challenges such as how to reach a balance between economic development and conservation. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) serve as an important framework to develop protected areas that will bring along benefits such as: financial benefits for conservation, community empowerment through economic development, and tourist satisfaction. Public and private sector partnership is the best of both systems: as the private sector brings along the management expertise, knowledge, and resources, the public sector formulates policy and protects the interest of the public. The study aimed at examining the practical importance of managing eco-tourism development through PPP by collecting pre-existing textual data. A content analysis of published academic and industry papers that focused on the management of eco-tourism development by means of PPP, within a global and local context was analysed and thematically coded. The stakeholder theory in eco-tourism development highlights the importance of identifying stakeholder interests and influence to assist with the facilitation efforts toward sustainable eco-tourism development and alignment of functional activities in PPA. The results reveal definitive and practical policy response is needed on how best to apply these regulations to optimise PPP transactions to the benefit of all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Public-private partnership; stakeholder theory; protected areas; local economy development; eco-tourism

### Introduction

The public-private partnership (PPP) approach is an ideal framework that can assist the public sector to deliver on its mandate with limited resources in terms of the fiscal budget. The approach benefits both parties as the private sector contributes resources, management skills, and technology, and the public sector implements the necessary regulatory actions and protects the public interest (Cheng et al., 2021; Fourie 2015; Tshehla 2019). Such a balanced approach is especially accommodated for the delivery of public services in South Africa, and therefore so policy makers increasingly use PPPs to increase investment in infrastructure services to improve service delivery, as indicated by National Treasury (2005).

Increased investment in past years, from both the Government and the private sector, can assist to explain the recent growth in South African tourism. Pre-1994 before the new dispensation of the democratic system in South Africa's political system, there were several partnerships between the private and public sectors in tourism development, notably the development of Sun City in 1979, as mentioned by Mashwama et al. (2019). This was a result of a partnership between Sols Kerzner, a private investor, and Bophuthatswana, a 'home-land' (an independent government that existed in the apartheid system of South Africa). Sun City

casino hotel was developed in a rural region of the Pilanesberg, North-West Province of South Africa. Tourism development contributed substantially to the region's economic growth. Traditionally, the private sector and government have invested mostly in urban tourism; however, private-public partnerships have brought significant development in rural areas, such as eco-tourism developments in the Kruger National Park, Mpumalanga province, as provided by Errichiello and Marasco (2017).

Since its inception, ecotourism has consistently grown and is now widely considered the fastest-growing sub-component of the world's largest industry – tourism (Dowling & Fennell, 2003; Fennell, 2003; Hawkins & Lamourex, 2001; World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2004). The proliferation of ecotourism has generated interest from a multitude of stakeholders because it attempts to satisfy seemingly disparate conservation and tourism development ends, as explained by Donohoe and Needham (2006). As a result, Manhas et al. (2016) contend that eco-tourism can become a major economic force for the development of rural regions, and more importantly as a sub-component of the sector that can contribute to the combating of poverty among the rural community through the creation of employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. Policymakers, as recognised by Mdiniso et al. (2017), have to recognise the importance of this sub-component sector within the broader context of tourism development and its prospects of contributing to the socio-economic development of rural regions specifically in South Africa. Recognising the importance of private sector participation in the development of eco-tourism would mean establishing a framework for proper economic valuation of the activities of ecotourism site management. Eco-tourism must be used for sustainable development, particularly in the public protected areas, there is an urgent need for the creation of eco-tourism policies that guide the planning and development thinking and practices in South Africa. It further expounded on the absence of a real national tourism policy and the failure to focus on tourism planning and development as indicators of minimal tourism-related research carried out in the country. The study aimed at examining the practical importance of managing eco-tourism development through PPP by collecting pre-existing textual data. A content analysis of published academic and industry papers that focused on the management of eco-tourism development by means of PPP. The study adopted a documentary analysis methodology where it relied on secondary sources to critically argue on the adoption of PPP strategy in the management of eco-tourism development in public protected areas. We attempt to conceptualise a sustainable development framework for the South African eco-tourism industry which could lay the foundation for the effective and practical adoption of a PPP that can feasibly develop eco-tourism in the coming years. Furthermore, the framework envisages that involving local communities in ecotourism activities could assist in strengthening relationships between public protected areas' authorities and locals while sustaining ecotourism development. The study further expounded on the absence of a real national eco-tourism policy and the failure to focus on eco-tourism planning and development through PPP, and moreover its meaningful contribution to the local economy. Therefore, using the PPPs framework involving the public sector, private sector and local community will create the expected inclusive system of ecotourism site management that will enhance the institutional capacity to develop an eco-tourism system that brings in benefits for all stakeholders (Buhalis, 2000; Thompson & Arowosafe, 2020; Weiermair et al., 2014).

## **Literature review**

### ***Stakeholder theory***

Stakeholder theory has been intimately connected to the idea of strategy from the earliest days. The stakeholder idea was developed at Stanford Research Institute as well as by Eric Rhenman in Sweden as a way of organising information that was increasingly important in strategic

planning (Freeman et al., 2020). Its origin and early development were clearly aimed at making business policy and strategy more effective. In contrast to agency theory where management only serves the shareholders (Rathbone, 2020), stakeholder theory suggests that management in fact has to act in the interest of all stakeholders. Stakeholder theory is therefore more in line with the principle of corporate governance (Barakat & Wada, 2021; Freeman et al., 2021; McGahan, 2021; Rathbone, 2020). Stakeholder theory is very much applicable in Africa and South Africa specifically (Esser & Delpont, 2017; Rathbone, 2020). Since the publication of the King report on corporate governance in South Africa there has been a growing focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business ethics in South Africa, as provided by Rathbone (2020). However, stakeholder theory is not the same as CSR; it is not about promoting charities or looking after the environment, nor a moral theory but rather a business theory that is based on the ethical treatment of all stakeholders (Harrison et al., 2015) From the government perspective, indicated by Ndaguba and Hanyane (2019), the stakeholder processes for engaging communities towards stirring community economic development in South Africa is timely. Recent statistics from Statistics South Africa (2021a) have reported that poverty is on the rise; this might be fuelled by the increase in unemployment, diplomatic corruption, dysfunctional systems, and institutions, and inequality in service delivery to communities that are remotely located. Governments globally have several responsibilities (protection of life and property, security, regulation of market prices, among others) to its citizen, and the improvement in the living standard of their citizens is its utmost (Ndaguba & Hanyane, 2019). More importantly governments in emerging markets, such as South Africa, could use the stakeholder theory as a model for sustainable development, especially in the eco-tourism sector in South Africa. Ecotourism has been brought forward as a form of sustainable tourism that is anticipated to enhance conservation and the improvement of disadvantaged communities (Mnini & Ramoroka, 2020). The foundation of ecotourism is associated with poverty alleviation all over the world (Ma et al., 2019; Ocampo et al., 2018). That is, ecotourism is believed to be significant for income generation, improvement of people's standards of living, sustainability of the environment, political enablement of local societies as well as for educational purposes (Osman et al. 2018). The development, success, and sustainability of ecotourism hinge mainly upon the active participation a variety of stakeholders who play different roles depending on their capacity, type of ecotourism and necessary level of participation. In the context of ecotourism, stakeholders can be understood as all those parties or actors representing similar or divergent interests but working collaboratively toward the success of ecotourism project. Based on their unique roles and level of commitment, stakeholders can influence the success of ecotourism development activities (Suratman, 2021).

There is an array of stakeholders involved in ecotourism development, and they range from the public sector, private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), tourism operators, tourism sites' management, academic researchers, and local communities (Eshun & Tichaawa, 2019; Snyman, 2017). For the purpose of this study, three stakeholders will be discussed namely: the public sector, the private sector and the local community. Government institutions (referred to here as the public sector), as explained by Wynberg (2002), are responsible for administering consultative processes through which the development and enactment of policies and strategies reflecting the aspirations and interests of the public concerning ecotourism development are ensured (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2020; Department of Tourism, 2021; National Treasury, 2005). However, each state adopts and enacts its unique policies and strategies meant to facilitate ecotourism development processes within the boundaries of their countries. The private sector plays a significant role as it provides financial assistance needed by most developing countries in facilitating ecotourism development projects, as explained by Snyman (2017), the private sector's role is to be

elaborated on in the the public-private partnership section. Lastly, the local communities are considered to be one of the key stakeholders in the ecotourism development process. Gumede and Nzama (2021) and Meng et al. (2009) uphold cogently that it could be a mirage to achieve ecotourism overall objectives if community members are excluded from participating in ecotourism development programmes. In South Africa, ecotourism is believed to be flourishing (Mnini & Ramoroka, 2020) and as a result, it is seen as a great strategy towards local economic development.

### ***The importance of eco-tourism for local economic development***

Historically, the term ‘eco-tourism’ was adopted in order to describe the nature of the tourism phenomenon (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Wallace & Pierce, 1996). One of the most widely accepted descriptions of eco-tourism was introduced by Ceballos-Lascurain in the 1980s and states: “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present)” (Anandaraj, 2015; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987; Drumm & Moore, 2005; Fennel, 2015). Rahman et al. (2022) suggest that eco-tourism reflects the local community, culture, economy, and environment. It not only provides a solution for the sustainable development of social, economic, and environmental aspects, but also promotes natural and cultural diversity. Blamey (2001) and Franch et al. (2008) identify three fundamental conditions for eco-tourism: (1) the attractions must be prevalently nature based; (2) the interactions among tourists and the attractions must be educational in nature; (3) the experiences and products must be managed in a way that guarantees ecological, socio-cultural and economic sustainability. The International Eco-tourism Society (2015) describes eco-tourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, involves the local people, and involves interpretation and education”; whereas, Fennell (2015) validates eco-tourism as a low impact nature tourism that constitutes to the maintenance of species and habitats either directly through a contribution to conservation or indirectly providing revenue to the local community sufficient for local people to value, and therefore protect, their wildlife heritage area as a source of income. Likewise, Pasape et al. (2013) refer to ecotourism as a component of sustainable tourism that is made up of cultural, rural and natural tourism aimed to conserve biodiversity and sustain the well-being of local people, which includes learning experience and involves responsible actions on the tourism industry.

Eco-tourism is one of the most rapidly growing tourism markets in the world. Emerging as an “obscure niche product” in the late 1980s, it now occupies a prominent position in the tourism industry (Adeleke, 2015; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017). Akbar et al. (2021), Kiss (2004) and Wondirad (2020) contend that the premise is that eco-tourism depends on maintaining attractive natural landscapes and rich flora and fauna; therefore, helping communities earn money from eco-tourism provides both an incentive for conservation and an economic alternative to destructive activities. Eco-tourism, as explained by Agyeman et al. (2019) has become a sustainable alternative to degrading livelihood systems in and around protected areas, improving rural economies and serving to reduce poverty. Eco-tourism is still being regarded as a sustainable activity, and tool in and around Protected Areas (PAs) capable of balancing the conservation of biodiversity alongside the livelihood of the local community, as mentioned by Forje et al. (2020). Masud et al. (2017) highlight that eco-tourism can create the required revenue for local economies, increase local awareness of the significance of preservation, new incentives for government, and inhabitants in and around attractive protected areas. According to Adeleke (2015), in South Africa, more than elsewhere, ecotourism is defined synonymously with local community involvement, profit sharing and empowerment through tourism projects



and conservation programmes. The total foreign direct spending in South Africa was calculated at about R70 billion, while the tourism contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) was more than R90 billion in 2013 (Strategic Research Unit (SRU), 2014). A portion of the money brought in by ecotourism goes directly to the communities where hotels/lodges are located, which helps to reduce poverty among the locals, as indicated by Pinsof and Sanhaji (2009). Eco-tourism is generally recognised as a key driver of job creation and economic growth, particularly in the poorer rural areas where many protected areas are situated. Ketema (2015) indicates that for many rural and indigenous communities, ecotourism has become a doorway to the global economy. This statement is supported by Fennel (2015) and Musavengane (2018), by mentioning that as local residents’ lodges, hiking trails and interpretive activities for visitors, they are gaining a foothold in capitalist markets and bringing returns directly to their communities.

Ecotourism has become one of the strategies adopted by the government of South Africa to draw financial resources and help improve the local economic development among societies previously destitute within the grounds of tourist places (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2018; Mnini & Ramoroka, 2020; Mthembu, 2012). However, communities that practice ecotourism and try to protect natural resources have remained underdeveloped (Mbaiwa, 2018; Mnini & Ramoroka, 2020). Their socio-economic status does not complement the goals of sustainable community development such as alleviating poverty, ensuring skills development, gender equity, good quality education, good health and reducing hunger, among others. That is, beneficiary communities do not benefit from ecotourism and their socio-economic status has been adversely affected. This has left sustainable development in communities isolated and difficult to achieve, as indicated by Litheko and Potgieter (2020). Ecotourism became a strategy for many large and private companies to improve their image and generate income for themselves whereas it failed to make sure that local communities are involved in experiences and that they are the beneficiaries of economic growth (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). Likewise, the recent introduction of a comprehensive programme introduced by the Department of Environmental Affairs as constructed by Matsila (2018), is geared towards the transformation of the eco-tourism economy to encourage more participation among previously disadvantaged individuals who own business enterprises in the sector. The sector faces several obstacles that prevent the transformation from happening at full-scale, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Challenges preventing growth and transformation in the eco-tourism sector

Barriers to transformation	Risk of future growth stagnation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient access, ownership, and inefficient utilisation of land</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient government endorsement for hunting as a tourism activity</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of infrastructure development support for entrepreneurs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Untapped black consumer potential</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of access to ‘start-up’ game</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient societal value is given to wildlife resources and understanding of the sustainable use concept</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of organised governance among the community and emerging entrepreneurs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient awareness and capitalisation of the value of mixed wildlife/livestock interfaces</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of technical skills, oversight, business support and effective business and partnership models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient mechanism addressing and containing risks and threats to the ecological resource base in further growing the biodiversity economy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of access to finance and incentives for transformation</li> </ul>	

The identification of barriers and constraints could enable policymakers to formulate and implement strategies that can assist small businesses to enter and grow their businesses in the eco-tourism sector. Socio-economic and socio-cultural well-being of local communities is crucial ingredients for maintaining rapport among stakeholders and sustaining ecotourism

development. Despite being promulgated as a central pillar of ecotourism development, literature reveals that local communities have not been actively participating in planning and decision-making processes regarding ecotourism development (Gumede & Nzama, 2021). Therefore, Suratman (2021) suggest that eco-tourism destinations, in particular public protected areas, need to adopt and implement participatory approaches that suit their specific contexts and promote bottom-up eco-tourism development procedures that will facilitate the active participation of local communities. An inclusive strategy formulation and implementation to eco-tourism development and management plan could foster the achievement of sustainable development goal, particularly in the public protected areas. The public sector, private sector and local community are essential to the sustainable development of eco-tourism as they bring different sets of skills, resources and responsibilities in a collaborative partnership (Cheng et al., 2021; Forje et al., 2021).

### ***Public-private partnerships (PPPs)***

The concept of public-private partnership (PPPs) originated in the USA, initially relating to joint public and private sector funding for educational programmes, and then, in the 1950s, it referred to similar funding for utilities, but has come into use since the 1960s as it is referred to as public-private joint ventures for urban renewal, according to LaRocque (2008) and Maksanova (2020). It is also referred to as the public-funded provision of social services by non-public sector bodies, often from the voluntary (non-for-profit) sector, as well as public funding of private sector research and development in fields such as technology, as explained by Ekpenyong and Mmom (2015). In general, PPP refers to an agreement and an institutional arrangement that involves sharing of risk between the private entity and the public authority (statutory body), for the provision and delivery of public services through investments undertaken by the private players for a specific length of time (concession time period) (Kusio, 2021; Mouraviev & Kakabadse, 2016; Wang & Gao, 2020; Zhang & Chen, 2013). The emergence of PPPs, according to Solana (2014), is primarily attributed to the continued budgetary limitations faced by the governments of developing economies in particular. In general, a partnership is an agreement to do something together that will benefit all involved; bringing results that could not be achieved by a single partner operating alone, and a reduction in the duplication of efforts. A successful partnership enhances the impact and effectiveness of action through combined and more efficient use of resources; promotes innovation; and is distinguished by a strong commitment from each other (Calabro & Spina, 2019; Ferenc et al., 2017; Forje et al., 2021; Palmer, 1996). To achieve sustained success, it is essential that basic local parameters be created and agreed upon; however, equally essential are political will, resourcing, and the appropriation of results, as explained by Brandstetter et al. (2006) and Maksanova (2020). A PPP, as described by Tshehla (2019), is a contract between a public-sector institution and a private party, where the private party performs a function that is usually provided by the public sector and uses state property in terms of the PPP agreement. PPPs are collaborations in which the public and private sectors both bring their complementary skills to a project, with different levels of involvement and responsibility, for the sake of providing public services more efficiently (Cheung & Chan, 2011; Ferenc et al., 2017; Kusio, 2021). The PPP option in terms of development is interesting but sometimes the only possible way for government authorities to make necessary changes for society. The general rule for every economy is that the primary task of public authority is to serve and act for the public benefit, not to generate pure financial profits (Takmazyan et al., 2020). Additionally, from the public administration perspective, reducing budget pressure, achieving social targets or productive efficiency are listed as some of PPP projects' advantages, as mentioned by Kusio (2021). The R800 million investment pledged by Corobrik at the 2019 South Africa investment conference.



The investment was an example of the productive partnerships between business and government to grow the South African economy and create jobs (SA news, 2022). The President Ramaphosa highlighted that “the fact that the private partner was a local business supporting government efforts to empower and support local enterprises was good for an inclusive economic development that will benefit all stakeholders” (SA news, 2022).

Operationally, a PPP model can improve the efficiency and innovation of the PPP project, as provided by Heeley (2011). The private sector will maintain profit-taking or value creation of the PPP project and the public sector will also benefit from the buy-in of the private sector into stated public sector objectives (Cheuk et al., 2010). Therefore, PPP, if planned and managed properly, will probably benefit both parties in terms of achieving their respective objectives. PPP projects can be implemented through various funding models, including the following: Buy-Build-Operate (BBO), Build-Own-Operate (BOO), Build-Own-Operate-Transfer (BOOT), Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT), Build-Lease-Operate-Transfer (BLOT), Design-Build-Finance-Operate (DBFO), Finance Only, Operation & Maintenance Contract (O&M), Design-Build (DB) and Operational License, as shown in Table 2. The table is a summary of the characteristics of each PPP model.

It is clear from the definition of each of the models that the risk profile of each project should be determined during the planning stage of the PPP project, as explained by Tshehla (2019). It is at this stage whereby a decision should be made on which of the models is appropriate for the implementation of a PPP project.

Table 2: Characteristics of PPP models

PPP Type	Characteristics of PPP Type
Buy-Build-Operate (BBO) Buy-Conserve-Operate (BCO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Private sector buys the tourism assets outright.</li> <li>Strict requirements of maintenance and conservation standards.</li> </ul>
Build-Own-Operate-Transfer (BOOT) Build-Lease-Operate-Transfer (BLOT) Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The agreement empowers the concessionaire to use public assets for building projects, empowers it to levy and collect user charges.</li> <li>When the terms of the lease are fulfilled, ownership is transferred back to the public sector.</li> <li>Government always remains responsible and accountable for delivery of service to the users</li> </ul>
Design-Build-Finance-Operate (DBFO) Conserve-Build-Finance-Operate	Applicable to large-scale projects where the private sector is responsible for the construction or addition of new structures and the financing and operation of both.
Finance Only	Projects funded directly by the private sector or using long-term leases or bonds.
Operational License	A private or third party operates a service under contract or license for a fixed term, but the asset remains in government ownership.

Source: Tshehla (2019)

The choice of each model depends on the risk profile for each project (Das & Ghosh, 2014; Singh & Khan, 2014; Tshehla, 2019). However, PPP initiatives often face many challenges related to conflict relations between partners and users of projects, non-commitment of one of the partners, as analysed by Ghanem et al. (2021) and Mwesigwa et al. (2019) and stakeholder opposition. There are factors noted to contribute to the failure of many PPP projects (Amadi et al., 2018; Ghanem et al., 2021; Mwesigwa et al., 2019; Tshehla, 2019). It is at this stage whereby a decision should be made on which of the models is appropriate for the implementation of a PPP project (Tshehla, 2019). It is imperative that all parties involved in the PPP transaction should be involved and participate not only in the implementation phase, but more importantly, also in the planning phase. However, one of the major constraints

identified in the literature is a lack of skilled labour in the decision-making and implementation of PPP projects (Kusio, 2021; Pasape et al., 2013; Tshehla, 2019).

### *Public-private partnerships (PPPs) in South Africa*

The South African government has realised that its limited tax base alone cannot fund the large demand and need for infrastructure, particularly because in South Africa where there is a need to rehabilitate and upgrade existing infrastructure, much of which was built decades ago (Farlam, 2005). According to the World Bank's (2012) public-private partnership (PPP) reference guide, there is no single, internationally accepted definition of a PPP and therefore suggests a broad description of a PPP, as a "long-term contract between a private party and a government agency, for providing a public asset or service, in which the private party bears significant risk and management responsibility." Hurst and Reeves (2004) and Maksanova (2020) concur as they describe a PPP as an agreement between the public and private sector organisations to provide an asset of public service, which would traditionally be provided by the public sector, but as part of a PPP project by the private sector or jointly. From a South African perspective, a PPP arrangement involves the private sector doing one or more of the following:

- Provide private finance to fund the project;
- Enter into long-term (20-30 years) service contracts;
- Undertake the design and construction of an asset on the basis of an output specification prepared by the public and designed to meet broad performance targets; and
- Enter into a joint venture arrangement with the public sector to provide a service or asset.

PPPs, as explained by Spenceley (2008), are good vehicles for state institutions to utilise to increase a country's global position in the tourism market. PPPs allow South Africa to increase its tourism infrastructure to gain a competitive edge over other tourism destinations. In addition to attracting capital, PPPs allow state institutions to leverage private sector business skills, transfer business risks to the private sector, create employment and also enhance the state institution's image by putting its resources to good use. The public and private partnership framework act as an effective agent for planning, management, problem-solving and change, and therefore enhance rather than reduces the competitive advantage of a tourism destination, according to De Lacy et al. (2002) and Eccles and Costa (1996). Table 3 exemplifies the benefits associated with the PPP framework for both parties. According to Kim et al. (2005), PPPs, by their nature, imply the share of risks and decision-making between partners. The longer the contract period, the higher the chances that major changes may creep in, as established by Zou et al. (2014). Therefore, a greater reliance on the established relationships is needed to be maintained prior to and in the establishment of contractual bonds in PPP projects. Relationship marketing can therefore be expected to be even more valuable within the PPP context. Moreover, the PPP framework can play a significant role in the development of the eco-tourism sector that will lead to an improved supply of tourism products and services, improved cost of recovery, increased capital investment, provision of jobs for the unemployed, as well as an increased rate of sustainable economic growth, as provided by Ekpenyong and Mmom (2015).

According to Franco and Esteveao (2010) and Maksanova (2020), eco-tourism is characterised as being a sector that stands out as one of the business activities that has the greatest potential for regional development, specifically rural regions whereby there are high volumes of unemployment rate due to low economic growth. Within this context, public-private partnership plays an important role in regional development. In addition, this form of



tourism contributes to the protection of the environment and brings equitable benefits to the local community to improve their well-being, and protected areas, as reviewed by Selkani (2020), and offers those secure frameworks for the conservation of the natural resources with prohibited access, while others allow controlled access and others that are designed for tourism and discovery. In South Africa, there are abundant eco-tourism business opportunities in the protected areas as they are many and diverse. As reported by StatsSA (2021b), 9.2% of South Africa’s total land area is protected and managed for biodiversity conservation.

Table 3: Benefits of a PPP framework in eco-tourism

Public sector	Private sector
<b>Improve service delivery by allowing both sectors to focus on their field of speciality</b> – government’s core business is to set policy and serve the public (tourism development, community empowerment and preservation of the environment and private sector) to focus on non-core functions such as operating and maintaining tourism.	<b>PPPs give the private sector access to secure, long-term investment opportunities</b> – private partners can generate business with relative certainty and security for an extended timeframe, and the revenue stream may be secured for as long as 30 years or more.
<b>Improve cost-effectiveness</b> – taking advantage of private sector innovation, experience and flexibility.	<b>Private sector partners can profit from PPPs by achieving efficiencies, based on their managerial, technical financial and innovation capabilities</b> – they can also expand their PPPs capacity and expertise in the eco-tourism sector.
<b>Increased investment in tourism infrastructure</b> – investment in tourism infrastructure such as game lodges, tented camps, picnic facilities, etc., which have been funded by the state, in many cases, have added to levels of overall debt.	<b>Social investment</b> – private partner has an opportunity to contribute to the social development of a region through skills transfer to local business enterprises, creating employment, scholarships, etc.
<b>Reduce public sector risk</b> – transferring risks to the private partner that can be better managed by the private partner.	
<b>Deliver capital projects faster</b> – making use of the private sector’s increased flexibility and access to resources.	
<b>Improve budget certainty</b> – transferring risk to the private sector can reduce the potential for government cost overruns from unforeseen circumstances during project development or service delivery.	
<b>Make better use of assets</b> – private sector partners are motivated to use facilities fully, and to make the most of commercial opportunities to maximise returns on their investments.	
<b>PPP encourages a ‘lifecycle’ approach to planning and budgeting, through the use of long-term contracts</b> – for example, a company that agrees to operate and maintain an infrastructure facility for 20-30 years will have to ensure that the asset remains in a certain condition and, therefore, must include maintenance costs in its budget for the life of the agreement.	

Source: Adapted from Ekpenyong and Mmom (2015)

### *Management of protected areas in South Africa*

In recent years, globally, the management of protected areas has evolved from mostly caring about biodiversity conservation to a wider concept, considering the social and economic aspects of local communities as a means to guarantee long-term conservation, by incorporating the concept of sustainable development, as identified by Cruz et al. (2014). Historically, the creation of protected areas was intended to prohibit land and other resources’ use with a defining feature on the conservation paradigm and this method was embraced by most governments globally, as indicated by Adams and Hutton (2007), Reindrawati et al. (2022) and Xu et al. (2014). Protected areas, as explained by Fennell (2015), are broadly mandated with the dual purpose of protecting representative natural areas of significance, and encouraging public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment. Historically, the preservation ideal within

parks was not fully developed or emphasised. However, as the system of protected areas continues to evolve (Fennel, 2015), park management philosophies have become better integrated, recognising that parks do not exist as ecological islands, but must be managed according to environmental conditions both inside and outside their boundaries.

Protecting nature in designated areas has become humanity's most pivotal response to worldwide ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss (Roux et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2014). At 14.7% of the world's terrestrial extent, the global protected area estate represents the second largest land use after agriculture, as analysed by Palomo et al. (2014). As such, protected areas are increasingly expected to contribute to human well-being, in addition to conserving biodiversity (Sayer et al., 2013). The first state-owned protected area in South Africa appearing in the government gazettes was a nature reserve and was established in 1903 (De Vos et al., 2019). The first state-owned national park that was established in 1926, directly after the promulgation of the national park. By 2017, there were 19 state-owned national parks and 510 state-owned nature reserves (collectively referred to as "public protected areas"). The first private protected area in South Africa was a contract national park declared in 1935 (Rissman et al., 2017). As reported by De Vos et al. (2019) and Rissman et al. (2017), it took until 1950 before the first private nature reserve was declared. By 2017, there was private land in 10 national parks, as well as 888 private nature reserves, 16 mountain catchment areas, and 24 protected environments (collectively referred to as "private protected areas") (Biggs et al., 2014; Van Ameron, 2006). Prior to the year 2000, unfortunately, the planning was wholly inadequate within South Africa's conservation sector and the country's protected areas network, in particular, the public protected areas, as reported by Paterson (2009). Consequently, the network of protected areas did not optimally incorporate a representative sample of all ecosystems and certain hot spots of natural and cultural significance (Paterson, 2009). Likewise, Mann-Lang et al. (2021) formulated those protected areas were not simply a conservation tool, as they had the potential to contribute to the local community's needs through eco-tourism activities and address wider societal issues and provide opportunities for future generations. Eco-tourism remains a promising alternative development to improve the wellbeing of local communities in developing countries (Agyeman et al., 2019; Regmi & Walter, 2017). In such areas, eco-tourism development fosters the conservation of biodiversity and provides alternative livelihoods to sustain community wellbeing, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship between those communities and protected areas (Boley & Green, 2016; Strongza & Gordillo, 2008; Wardle et al., 2018).

However, Fletcher (2019) and Wondirad et al. (2020) are of the view that in the last two decades of eco-tourism growth, the conservation of wildlife has become a matter of serious concern with issues such as poaching, in particular species that are victims of poaching are greatly threatened by extinction. Likewise, with increased wildlife conservation efforts, communities living nearby protected areas may be subject to elevated, novel, and intense interactions with livestock predation or attacks by wildlife (Distefano, 2005; Giamiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020; Gusset et al., 2009). As reported by the Pilanesberg National Park management a lion escaped from the park and managed to kill several livestock in the nearby community villages of Ledig and Mohobieskraal in South Africa (Mahikeng Mail, 2022). Human-wildlife conflict, as indicated by Birenda et al. (2021), is not only a concern for South Africa but also a global concern and is described as some negative interactions between humans and wildlife or between humans concerning wildlife and is exacerbated in and around protected areas. Balancing the needs of humans and the wellbeing of wildlife can pose unique challenges to protected area tourism development because these are inherently contradictory goals, as assessed by Birenda et al. (2021). However, good governance and management of the protected

areas through the PPP framework will facilitate not only the preservation of biodiversity resources but also the development of the local economy.

### Conceptual framework

Local community participation in development endeavours including eco-tourism has been very limited, if not lacking, in many parts of South Africa. Against this backdrop, a conceptual framework was developed aimed at facilitating the inclusive and active participation of all stakeholders in ecotourism development processes, as shown in Figure 1, in particular the public (government), private (businesses) and local community (residents, entrepreneurs, etc.). Furthermore, a conceptual framework was developed accentuating the need for the active participation of the local community in the PPC framework, as depicted in Figure 1, mainly in public protected areas. Development, success, and sustainability of ecotourism in public protected areas hinge not only on the public and private sectors but mainly upon the active participation of local communities. The involvement and participation of the local community directly affected by planning proposals should begin in the initial phase. Byrd and Gustke (2011) and Gumede and Nzama (2021) outlined the benefits linked to introducing the local community in the planning process:

- Assists in the formulation of goals and objectives.
- Ensures that community issues and concerns are considered.
- Generates a feeling of ownership of the plan among members of the community.
- Enables communities to express their needs, aspiration, priorities and preferences.
- Facilitates formulation of planning proposals and implementation programmes that are supported by the community.
- Creates a better understanding of the development process and encourages the community to meet challenges and use opportunities for active involvement in local initiatives.
- Achieves consensus on priorities regarding projects and development programmes.

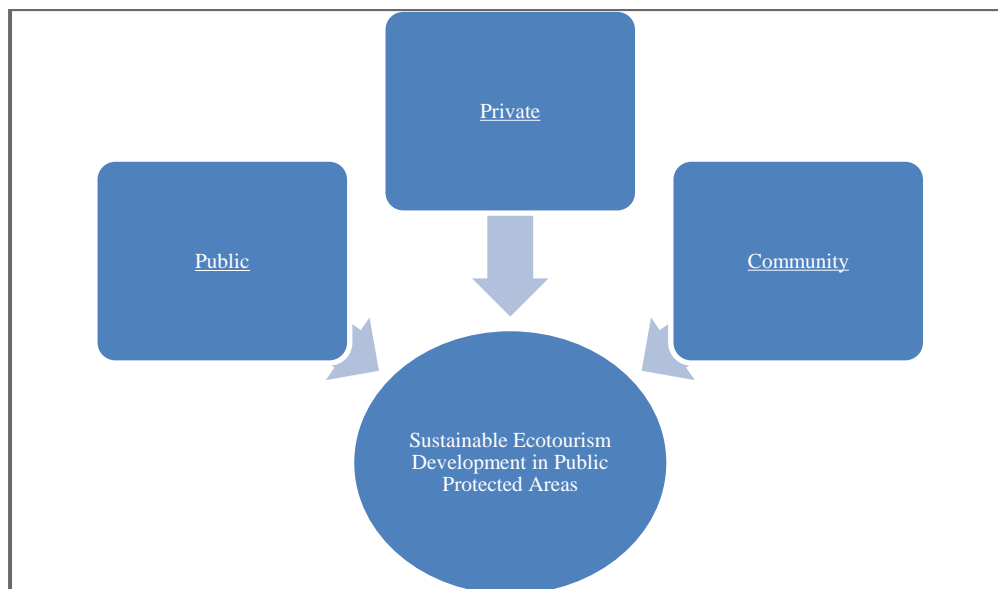


Figure 1: Public Private Community Partnership – Sustainable Eco-tourism Development in Public Protected Areas

The local community tend to understand more clearly how they would benefit from eco-tourism development when they are involved in the planning. Azizan et al. (2012), Kia (2021) and Nilzam et al. (2021) explained that communities should be involved in planning, ensuring that

all issues concerning communities are considered during the development process. It had been envisaged that involving local communities in ecotourism activities could assist in strengthening relationships between public protected areas authorities and locals while sustaining ecotourism development, as suggested by Gumede and Nzama (2021). Likewise, Acha-Anyi et al. (2021) and Pearce et al. (1996) said that ‘resident responsive tourism’ is the watch-forward of tomorrow that could lead to the local community being ambassadors for the preservation of natural resources through their participation in decision-making of developments. Equally important, local communities are expected to provide quality products and services to both travellers and locals, with the former demanding authentic (Paulauskaite et al., 2017), experientially oriented opportunities with more meaningful interactions with locals. Eco-tourism brings entrepreneurship opportunities, creates employment, and has the potential to alleviate poverty in a community. The public-private partnership framework should take into consideration the full range of benefits (employment, entrepreneurial opportunities, and shareholding/equity) across the project lifecycle (planning, construction, and operations) for locals:

- Planning phase – local communities to be included in the decision-making process of the project.
- Construction phase – identify locals that already have building skills and ensure these are used during the construction phase and undertake some training programmes for locals.
- Operational phase – operation of the project would create numerous opportunities for small business enterprises including:
  - Tour guiding
  - Tour operator (transportation)
  - Restaurant (local food cuisine)
  - Accommodation (bed and breakfast and homestays)
  - Trade (curios and crafts; supplies such as soaps/shampoo)

The community could be represented by a trust and the trust should make decisions as to how any income from the project (concession, shareholding, or management fees) will be used within the community. The strategic development and management of eco-tourism as a developmental sector can assist the public protected areas to capitalise on the benefits tourism has to offer and more importantly, contribute towards the socio-economic development of communities, in particular communities that are situated nearby public protected areas.

### **Research study**

This study is a conceptual article that adopts a narrative literature review, which evaluates extant literature that focused on the development and management of eco-tourism through PPP; and conceptualises a PPP framework that can be used by stakeholders of the South African ecotourism sector for a sustainable development of eco-tourism that contributes to the protection of the environment and bring equitable benefits to the local economy and public protected areas. The first step of the methodology involved the selection of the research database/s for the literature review. In order to carry out an exhaustive review of the research literature related to the public private partnerships and their influence on the tourism sector, the study chose to select multiple databases for comprehensive coverage. Accordingly, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost and Google Scholar were selected as the databases in which the search for research literature would be carried out. As the study envisaged the examination of secondary data in order to understand the effects of PPP on South African tourism industry, especially eco-tourism, the authors scanned the internet for relevant industry reports,



government department reports such as National Treasury, Department of Tourism, Department of Environmental Affairs, etc., and other online articles relevant to the topic at hand. Further, data was collected from 2015 to 2022. To obtain relevant research papers relating to PPP and the eco-tourism industry, a detailed search on all the databases, mentioned in the step selection of database/s for literature search, was carried out using a set of keywords. The keyword string used for the search was ‘stakeholder theory’ or ‘PPP in eco-tourism development’ or ‘sustainable eco-tourism frameworks and public protected areas. The use of multiple keywords ensured that a maximum number of research articles were targeted. Based on the keyword search, a total of 552 research papers were downloaded. The abstracts were perused in order to shortlist research papers relevant to the study. The perusal of the abstracts led to the selection of 141 research papers, inclusive of newspapers and industry papers.

A thematic analysis was applied to analyse the data, it was an appropriate method to be used as the study was seeking to understand a set of experiences across the dataset – public-private partnerships and their influence on the tourism sector, especially eco-tourism. Furthermore, a deductive approach to theme identification was utilised with the use of pre-existing theory or other driven researcher-driven to identify themes of interest (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Xu & Zammit, 2020). The study was interested in aspects that dealt with the practical importance of managing eco-tourism development through the PPP framework. The researcher focused in the most important aspect of each theme and which aspects of the dataset it covers, creating a coherent narrative of how and why the coded data within each theme provide unique insights, contribute to the overall understanding of larger questions, and interact with other themes, as explained by Kiger and Varpio (2020). A list of codes was developed through the analysis and clustered into three broader themes that are of the most relevance to this paper. The list of themes and codes is set out in Table 4.

Table 4: Themes and codes

Themes	Codes
Stakeholder theory in eco-tourism development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good governance</li> <li>• Collaboration and partnership</li> <li>• Sustainable eco-tourism development</li> <li>• Bottom-up approach</li> </ul>
Eco-tourism important to local economic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eco-tourism awareness and campaigns</li> <li>• Economic opportunities in the sector</li> <li>• Transformation in eco-tourism sector</li> <li>• Active participation in the decision-making process.</li> </ul>
Development and management of eco-tourism through PPP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased eco-tourism destination competitiveness.</li> <li>• Local Community through PPP</li> <li>• Improve efficiency of public protected areas.</li> <li>• Practical policy response</li> </ul>

Adapted from: Hemmonsbey et al. (2021)

## Results and discussion

This section combines the findings from the pre-existing textual data that were clustered into broader themes and discussed in a manner that addresses the research questions.

### *Stakeholder theory in eco-tourism development*

The analysis revealed that a stakeholder approach is in line with the principles of corporate governance and that the key pillar of economic development and a clear indication of a healthy economy are corporate governance. Equally, if not more important, it is a business theory that is based on the ethical treatment of all stakeholders. The stakeholder theory suggests that an

organisation must keep the interest of all stakeholders in mind to be sustainable and successful in the eco-tourism sector. Diamantis (2018) mirrors this idea by emphasising the need for ecotourism to be developed, planned, and managed in a sustainable way while integrating all stakeholders throughout the entire process. From a government perspective, a well-operated public sector, delivering quality services consistent with the community preferences that foster market growth while managing fiscal resources prudently, is considered imperative. While private sector ability to invest capital and resources into the sector, as well as to promote the destination overall and also help to up-skill staff in the local community. Therefore, it's important to note that for the South African government to use the stakeholder theory as a model for sustainable development, they need to facilitate the involvement and participation of the local community in the development process. Local community participation, as stated by Gumede and Nzama (2021) is considered to be an important pillar of ecotourism development as local communities are capable of influencing the success or failure of ecotourism development projects. Ecotourism has been brought forward as a form of sustainable tourism that is anticipated to enhance conservation and the improvement of the lives of communities, particularly in rural areas, where public protected areas are located. In such areas, eco-tourism development fosters the conservation of biodiversity and provides alternative livelihoods to sustain community wellbeing, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship between those communities and protected areas. As Garrod (2003) and Makwindi and Ndlovu (2022) stated besides stakeholders' multifaceted definition and structures the stakeholder theory has proved to be an efficient ecotourism management tool as it allows for the identification of key players and emphasises the need for involvement. Yet, the issue presented is that while stakeholder involvement is vital for ecotourism development, decisions are made "top-down" by superiors/experts and locals view this as not reflecting the opinions, and interests of their local community. However, from the eco-tourism industry, there are concerns that the interests of the local community are not incorporated in the PPP framework that is designed to develop sustainable eco-tourism. The bottom-up approach that includes the consultation, involvement, and participation of not only the private businesses but also the local community are also needed, especially when strategic decisions are being made about eco-tourism development in a specific region.

### ***Eco-tourism important to local economic development***

The analysis further revealed that local communities play an important role in the development of eco-tourism and their involvement is critical to the success of sustainable eco-tourism development. As a result, eco-tourism awareness campaigns and educational programmes are key to providing local communities with an understanding of the benefits associated with the sector. Educational programmes will most certainly provide the knowledge and insight into the importance of preservation of the biodiversity resources, and economic opportunity associated with the sector, moreover this will encourage more involvement and support from local communities. Eco-tourism awareness and education, as remarked by Van Niekerk and Saayman (2013), play a very important role in a developing country such as South Africa and can be used to stimulate job opportunities for its residents. Awareness equips the local community with an understanding of the economic, social, and environmental benefits of eco-tourism development, and in particular the importance of sustainable eco-tourism development. Government business management support programmes will be key to the involvement and participation of small business enterprises in the ecotourism sector. As reported by the Department of Environmental Affairs (2018) it adopted a vision and aspiration to create an inclusive, sustainable, and responsive wildlife economy that grows at 10% per annum in support of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, while providing a foundation for the

social well-being and maintaining of the ecological resource base. One of the department's strategic objectives is the transformation of the ecotourism and wildlife sector by targeting 4,000 previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) existing Small Business Enterprises to be trained and supported to facilitate their participation in this sector. Relevant government departments and other strategic partners should educate SBEs in local communities about the economic opportunities associated with the sector. Building knowledge among SBEs will enable them to make an informed decision when entering and participating in the sector. Furthermore, the consultation and involvement of SBEs in the decision-making process regarding ecotourism development and policy setting is essential. The bottom-up approach will assist the government to incorporate the needs and desires of not only SBEs but of other stakeholders in the local community with the purpose of developing a sustainable ecotourism sector, specifically in the public protected areas.

### ***Development and management of eco-tourism through PPP***

The data analysis has revealed that the PPP concept is based on the idea that all players within an eco-tourism destination should work together to enhance a destination's competitiveness. Likewise, the public and private partnership framework can act as an effective agent for planning, management, problem-solving and change, and therefore enhances rather than reduces the competitive advantage of eco-tourism destinations, especially in public protected areas. South Africa, according to Fennel (2015), has long been a global leader in biodiversity conservation and wildlife management, and has in place a first-rate network of protected areas, making it an international ecotourism destination of choice. Furthermore, the Department of Environmental Affairs (2018) reported that at least 11.4% of the land in the country is under conservation or protection, with South Africa being home to a number of world-renowned national and provincial parks and nature reserves. While many wildlife and ecotourism businesses in South Africa are well established and profitable, there is a considerable number of PDI-owned small businesses and communities that are not benefitting from this sector. Local communities, particularly those living nearby the protected areas, should have an active role in participating in the PPP framework, for this reason they need to be involved from the conceptual phase of the project and not only after the concept is finalised and agreed on by other stakeholders. This provides numerous opportunities for local communities to provide their input during the project conceptual phase, as it is important as the project changes in its concept, size, budget, location, etc., which is common for most development projects. This collaborative framework between public sector organisations, private sector organisation, and local communities, as explained by Gumede and Nzama (2019), play a prominent role in harnessing the enormous potential of eco-tourism in public protected areas. Equally, if not more important, the support and commitment of the local communities, especially those residing in and around the public protected areas, is critical for the sustainable development of eco-tourism.

Therefore, the government will have to adopt a community-inclusive approach to making decisions, the approach will permit the incorporation of communities' desires and preferences in the formulation of practical policy setting (Gumede & Nzama, 2019). The PPP framework will allow for the government to focus on its core mandate of policy setting policy and creating a favourable environment for eco-tourism development, community empowerment, preservation of biodiversity resources, and private partner participation; and not focus on non-core functions such as operation and maintaining of eco-tourism in public protected areas. Further, the partnership will enable for the transferring of risks to the private partner that can be better managed by the private partner. Private sector partners can yield profits from PPPs by achieving efficiencies, based on their managerial, technical financial and

innovation capabilities. Not only will private sector partners be motivated to use facilities fully, and to make the most of commercial opportunities to maximise returns on their investments but also private partner has the opportunity to contribute to the social development of a region through skills transfer to local business enterprises, create employment, and support other social investment projects. In general, a partnership is an agreement to do something together that will benefit all involved; bringing results that could not be achieved by a single partner operating alone and optimise the functioning of public assets. Likewise, Mann-Lang et al. (2021) formulated those public protected areas were not simply a conservation tool, as they had the potential to contribute to the local community's needs through eco-tourism activities and address wider societal issues and provide opportunities for future generations. This collaborative framework between public sector organisations, private sector organisation, and local communities plays a prominent role in harnessing the enormous potential of eco-tourism in public protected areas. Equally, if not more important, the support and commitment of the local communities, especially those residing in and around the public protected areas, is critical for the sustainable development of eco-tourism. Therefore, the government will have to adopt a community-inclusive approach to making decisions, the approach will permit the incorporation of communities' desires and preferences in the formulation of practical policy setting.

## Conclusion

Evidence from reviews suggests the importance of PPP in the development and management of eco-tourism in public protected areas, and furthermore, the reviews have emphasised the significance of the sector to the local economy. Ecotourism is generally recognised as a key driver of job creation and economic growth, particularly in rural areas where many protected areas are located. In rural areas, eco-tourism development fosters the conservation of biodiversity and provides alternative livelihoods to sustain community wellbeing, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship between those communities and public protected areas. Further findings reveal that in emerging economies such as South Africa, the PPP framework is now accepted as an effective and novel instrument to stimulate economic growth (SA news, 2022), and a mechanism to accelerate socio-economic development.

The PPP concept is closely associated with the stakeholder theory as it is based on the idea that all players within an eco-tourism destination should work together in order to enhance a destination's competitiveness. Tourism experts, the provincial destination management organisation (PDMO), academia, and a whole variety of private and public sector stakeholders share a common role in the promotion and preservation of the eco-tourism sector in the public protected areas, a sector which boasts of a definite contribution to the socio-economic development of the rural destination. The benefits of the PPP arrangements for private businesses are that they gain access to the eco-tourism sites and are able to get a competitive return on its investment. Similarly, the benefits derived by the government institution are that it gets revenue, asset upgrades, and funds that can be channelled towards the conservation and preservation of biodiversity resources. Lastly, but arguably the most important aspect of the transaction is that it facilitates for the growth of the local economy through (1) the creation of business opportunities for small business enterprises, (2) job creation and skills transfer to local communities and encourages growth in the eco-tourism industry. The opportunities can be realised through public-private partnership agreements; however, the paper established the need for government to have a definitive and practical policy response on how best to apply these regulations to optimise PPP transactions to benefit all stakeholders. An inclusive strategy formulation and implementation of an eco-tourism development and management plan could foster the achievement of sustainable development goals and equally importantly promote



bottom-up eco-tourism development procedures that will facilitate the active participation of local communities in the PPP. The researcher was limited to studying developments and changes within the evolution phases and implications over a specific time. There is a need for future research to conduct empirical data analysis on the significance of PPP on the sustainable development of eco-tourism in South Africa.

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