

A Post-Pandemic Perspective of Domestic Nature-based Tourism in Mpumalanga, South Africa

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Abstract

Nature-based tourism is arguably the most significant subsector within the South African tourism industry. However, the nature-based tourism sector in South Africa has remained largely divided, dependent on white South Africans and international tourists despite the fall of the segregationist apartheid government nearly 30 years ago. Recently however and particularly post the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict lockdown conditions, there has been a noticeable increase in the uptake of nature-based tourism among Black domestic tourists. Much research has noted that in the post-pandemic context domestic tourism is emerging as more significant since international tourism has not recovered to its pre-pandemic levels. Thus, this study researched domestic tourists, visiting nature-based destinations in Mpumalanga, South Africa during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both in-person interviews and an online survey were conducted. Accessibility, affordability and the availability of self-catering accommodation emerge as significant pull factors for domestic tourists. The data analysis for this study was segmented, with adventure tourist activities emerging as significant for the Black South African tourists and Kruger National Park forming the highlight for the white respondents. The results provide important insights into the dynamics of South African nature tourists, their travel patterns, motivations and experiences, which can assist in tourism planning and development.

Keywords: domestic tourism; nature-based tourism; South Africa; motivations; travel patterns

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated the tourism industry, globally. Tourism was one of the most affected industries, due to wide-scale restrictions on travel (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Tung, 2021). Many South African destinations that marketed predominantly to international tourists were impacted negatively as international flights were cancelled and lockdown restrictions began to be enforced globally (Gössling et al., 2021; Visser & Marais, 2021). These impacts of the pandemic highlighted the risk of depending predominantly on an international tourist market. As the pandemic waned, in many places throughout the world, residents were allowed to travel locally, spurring a refocus amongst tourism operators towards the domestic tourism market (Adinolfi et al., 2021). In many places, tourism operators indicated that domestic tourism in the period immediately following the pandemic, in many senses, saved the industry (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). It often allowed residents to develop a renewed appreciation for domestic tourism offerings, highlighting the massive potential for the development of this tourism market. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic assisted in emphasizing the significance of the domestic tourism market which will, in all likelihood, become increasingly important in the context of a number of future potential threats to international travel (Kock et al, 2019). For example, some international tourists are forgoing air travel because of concerns over climate

change and sustainability (Gössling et al., 2021). This phenomenon is even more significant in the case of long-haul travel destinations such as South Africa.

Nature-based tourism has long been at the heart of South African tourism due to its unique and diverse landscapes, flora and fauna (Giddy & Webb, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic increased the significance of this subsector, particularly within the domestic market due to the potential physical and mental wellbeing of engaging in outdoor activities. People sought outdoor experiences after lengthy ‘shelter in place’ legislation, and lockdown restrictions, which precluded the vast majority of outdoor activities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a; Traanman, 2021; Butler et al., 2022). South Africa had particularly stringent lockdown regulations which further exacerbated the drive to seek nature activities, coupled with the vast natural resources of the country, nature-based tourism grew significantly in the post-pandemic period amongst domestic tourists in South Africa (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021).

In particular, there has been a significant increase in rural nature-based tourism to a wide range of tourism destinations in South Africa, which offer significant nature-based tourism opportunities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). One interesting trend, which has been mentioned in some previous research, has been the increased diversity among South Africans visiting nature spaces, particularly a growth in Black South Africans seeking out nature experiences (Giddy et al., 2022). Despite this, little research has actually examined the travel patterns and dynamics of this group, paving the way for important research to help facilitate the growth of leisure tourism amongst the domestic market. It is within this context that this study has emerged. It will be increasingly important for businesses that rely on tourism to target this emerging domestic tourist market going forward (Makoni & Tichaawa, 2021).

Nature-based tourism

Nature-based tourism has grown significantly in the past few decades, now encompassing a wide range of experiences (Giddy, 2018). This includes ecotourism, adventure tourism and wildlife tourism among others. This growth is partially a factor of increased urbanization which draws tourists towards leisure experiences in nature spaces (Buckley, 2000). In addition, increased environmental awareness has facilitated a growth in those seeking nature experiences. These trends became even more prominent during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent studies have shown that there has been an increased interest in nature-based tourism due to strict lockdown restrictions and the relative safety of engaging in outdoor spaces, with respect to virus transmission, as a result of the pandemic (Twohig-Bennet & Jones, 2018; Buckley, 2020; Butler et al., 2022). An increase in nature-based tourism can have many benefits including educational and psychological as well as a mechanism for increasing rural tourism development and thus rural livelihoods (Cheer, Milano & Novelli, 2019; Bama & Nyikana, 2021).

Several studies have shown that nature-based tourism experiences can be transformative in a number of ways (Spalding et al., 2021). Firstly, nature-based tourism experiences have shown to be able to increase environmental awareness and environmental stewardship of participants. The idea is that the more time spent in nature, the more aware the individual becomes of environmental concerns and changing environment. In addition, many nature-based tourism experiences, particularly in the past two decades, are increasingly incorporating components of environmental education into their tourism offerings (Buckley, 2000; Abrahams, Bama & Mokoena, 2023). The most prevalent of this is seen in ecotourism, which is fundamentally based on environmental stewardship in tourism experiences, particularly the potential of tourism experiences to teach participants more about natural environments. Increased environmental awareness has shown to influence individual’s environmental behavior and therefore, nature-based tourism experiences can have real and

significant impacts on participants (Mehmetoglu, 2007; Butler et al, 2022). Nature-based tourism experiences also make participants more aware of natural environments and thus can drive the need to protect these spaces. In addition, nature-based tourism can have significant psychological benefits for participants particularly for those who are normally living in highly urbanized environments (Louv, 2008).

There is a long history of nature-based tourism in South Africa. South Africa is known for its vast and diverse landscapes as well as unique iconic wildlife which draws in visitors from throughout the world (Giddy & Webb, 2018). Some of the earliest forms of tourism in South Africa were nature-based and the significance of the sector continues today (Curruthers, 1995; Giddy & Webb, 2018). Research on South African nature-based tourism is varied, though the most common themes relate to tourism management and marketing, specific nature-based tourism subsectors, relationships with local communities as well as the interrelationship between tourism, climate and weather (e.g. Anthony, 2007; Ferreira & Harmse, 2014; Giddy, Fitchett & Hoogendoorn, 2017; Giddy, 2018; Giddy & Webb, 2018). In the case of studies related to travel patterns, motivations and experiences of nature-based tourism, there has been less focus on domestic tourism, with a continued focus on international tourism, due to the perceived economic benefits (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021a). Even less has focused on specific demographic subsectors, most especially those from communities previously disadvantaged by apartheid, who are now the basis of the emerging middle class (Butler & Richardson, 2015).

Domestic tourism in South Africa

Domestic tourism has widely been discussed as an important growth sector in recent years (Lew & Cheer, 2017; Kock et al, 2019; Tung, 2021). The importance of domestic tourism, however, became even more apparent during the widespread COVID-19 pandemic, when international travel was largely prohibited for an extended period of time (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). The pandemic forced both suppliers and consumers to reconsider widely accepted tourism growth patterns as they are clearly unsustainable in the long term (Bama & Nyikana, 2021). In addition, it provided insight into the impact of potential future crises which will disrupt travel including climate change and economic crises (Arbulú et al, 2021). Thus, local tourism industries are likely to be increasingly dependent on domestic tourism. Despite this, there is still a gap in research focusing on the specific dynamics of domestic tourists (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a; Rogerson et al, 2021). In addition, in the Global South domestic tourism has been increasing steadily as many countries have experienced a rise in the number of middle-income earners. This has provided access to the leisure tourism market to a large community which had been previously excluded. Thus, domestic tourism particularly among the emerging middle class can serve as an important growth sector which can be leveraged to enhance tourism generally.

In South Africa, domestic tourism is an incredibly important growth sector (Rogerson, 2015). However, the divided history of the country due to segregationist apartheid legislature resulted in the vast majority of the population being largely excluded from tourism experiences, particularly leisure tourism (Grundlingh, 2006; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). There are many consequences to this, which the country is still trying to overcome, including a lack of travel culture among many South Africans, little awareness of leisure travel opportunities and also a significant lack of marketing towards the growing Black South African middle class (Adinolfi et al., 2021; Bama & Nyikana, 2021). This is incredibly problematic for many reasons. Firstly, the tourism industry is missing out on a lucrative growth sector of the leisure tourism market, which will help sustain the country's tourism industry (Sibisi & Abrahams, 2018). Secondly, it demonstrates a lack of effort amongst tourism stakeholders to proactively increase tourism

amongst previously marginalized communities through marketing and specified product development (Dlamini, 2020). Finally, it shows that despite transformations in many economic sectors since the fall of apartheid, very little research has specifically focused on tourism motivations, experiences and travel patterns of Black domestic tourists in order to understand the wants and needs of this important demographic group (Butler & Richardson, 2015).

Previous research on domestic tourism in South Africa has demonstrated the disproportionate share of domestic tourism for the purpose of Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) (Rogerson, 2015). This is partially related to income circumstances but also apartheid spatial planning which saw Black South Africans as migrant labourers whose families primarily resided in designated rural homelands (Rogerson, 2011; 2022). Although political and socioeconomic dynamics have changed since the end of apartheid, VFR still dominates the domestic tourism sector accounting for 48.1% percent of total domestic trips (SA Tourism, 2021). However, some preliminary studies have demonstrated a shift among South Africans from previously disadvantaged groups in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Giddy et al., 2022). There has been a particular uptake of nature-based tourism among, specifically, Black South Africans, which was noted by a number of nature-based tourism operators throughout the country (Giddy et al., 2022). Thus, significant potential exists to enhance this growing market to ensure the sustainability of the South African nature-based tourism industry. This was particularly noticeable, post-pandemic in Mpumalanga on the Panorama Route, evident with a sudden uptake in visitation to nature-based sites and increased interest on social media.

Methodology

Mpumalanga was chosen as the study site for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a historically well-known nature-based tourism destination due to the range of assets including the famed Kruger National Park, South Africa's largest national park, the Blyde River Canyon, the 3rd largest canyon in the world and the Panorama Route which contains a number of nature assets including spectacular views, unique geological features and waterfalls. Mpumalanga is also adjacent to the large economic hub of Gauteng, making it an accessible destination. In addition, local entrepreneurs heavily marketed this region, particularly the Panorama Route, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to different domestic tourist markets. The focus of the research was on profiling the tourists to the Panorama Route and Kruger National Park, identifying demographics, aspects of the nature of their trips and their motivations for visiting nature base spaces after the pandemic.

The research for this paper was conducted using a questionnaire survey method that included both open and fixed-response questions. Some of the questionnaires were conducted in-person, at nature-based tourism sites in Mpumalanga, while the same questionnaire was also made available online. The online questionnaire had two qualifying questions which made sure that it was targeting the same profile of respondents. The qualifying questions confirmed that respondents are South African and had travelled to Mpumalanga for tourism in the last 5 years. With these qualifications, a total 105 responses were received from South African domestic tourists, travelling to Mpumalanga explicitly for nature-based tourism.

In-person questionnaires were conducted at two nature-based tourism destinations on the Panorama Route. The in-person research was conducted over two long weekends in South Africa, one over the period of 27 April till 1 May, this long weekend included two public holidays namely Freedom Day and Worker's Day. Then later in the year the long weekend over Youth Day on the 16th June was also used for in person interviews. Two locations were used for the in-person surveys, namely the Graskop Lift and Swing, which is a private asset and the Bourke's Luck Potholes which is a state owned asset. In total, 24 of the questionnaires were completed in person and the rest were done online. The online link was shared on various

social media platforms and Facebook groups geared towards tourism in Mpumalanga. In addition, during the time that the in-person interviews were conducted, if tourists indicated that they not able to answer the questionnaire in person they were given a slip with the QR code to the survey and asked if they could, to please complete the survey at a later stage.

The questionnaires included questions relating to the nature of the trip that the respondents were taking. This included questions on the duration of the trip in days, the type of transport being used, the destinations being visited. A number of day visitors and tourists responded to the survey, but of those who were staying overnight, additional questions included the type of accommodation selected, the towns that visited and whether they were participating in any organized tours during their trip. Basic demographic detail was collected including gender, race, home language, hometown and province, age and income bracket. The categories selected for the income brackets question that were included in the survey are those used by the South African Revenue Service.

The focus of the study was specifically on domestic nature-based tourism and it formed an explorative study aiming to find out what destinations on the Panorama route tourists were choosing to visit, what facilities they were making use of and what activities they were participating in. Finally, questions were asked relating to the most important aspects involved in planning a tourism trip to Mpumalanga and the most important aspects of the tourism experience for the respondents themselves. This was done using a push and pull factor approach to tourism motivations (Giddy, 2018). Some open-ended questions relating to favourite destination, favourite experiences and to possible improvements to tourism in the region were included.

The data was analysed primarily using basic descriptive statistics and frequency distributions as the majority of questions were fixed-response. Many questions included nominal and ordinal data for which basic frequencies were calculated and are the basis of much of the findings discussed below. There were a few 5-point Likert-scale questions included, primarily for data relation to motivation, satisfaction and future behavioural intentions. For this data, in addition to range and frequency distributions, means were also calculated. Finally, data was also segmented based on racial identity, as this will provide important information on transformations in travel patterns, motivations and experiences amongst emerging demographic groups of nature-based tourists.

Results and discussion

The qualifying questions guaranteed that all respondents had to be South African, because the focus was domestic tourists. This was done in order to focus specifically on the travel patterns of domestic tourists in the post-pandemic context. Of the respondents to the survey 84.5% had visited Mpumalanga for tourism before the trip that they were answering the survey about, whereas for 15.5% of the respondents this was their first trip. 61% of the respondents were female and 39% were male, although many of the respondents were answering questions based on their full group who were travelling which were often mixed male and female groups. All respondents were over the age of 18 with a clustering of 53% of the respondents being between the ages of 26 and 45 years of age. First language of the participants spanned all 11 of South Africa's official languages. The most dominant first language of the respondents was English at 30,5%, followed by Northern Sotho at 14%, the third was Afrikaans at 11,5%; followed by Zulu at 10,5% followed by Swati and Tswana making up 8,6% of respondents each. The other five South African languages were represented by one to 3 participants each including Xhosa, Southern Sotho, Tsonga, Venda and Ndebele.

Racially, 55,2% of respondents identified as Black, 37,1% as White while 1% identified each as Coloured, Mixed Race and Indian respectively. The remaining percentage chose not

to identify by race. Not all respondents chose to answer the question related to their income bracket, but of those that did the biggest cluster (41%) fell into the two categories between R15 001 and R25 000. Interestingly 20% of the respondents fell into the lowest income bracket of under R7000 per month. This demonstrates increasing access to leisure tourism amongst lower/middle-income earners. Correlations were not possible to see if these participants were selecting a particular type of mode of travel, but this could be interesting for future research on accessibility more specifically.

Travel patterns

Travel patterns and characteristics formed an important part of these results due to the changing profile of nature-based tourists discussed above. In terms of length of stay, the mean across all the entire data set was an average stay of approximately 6 days. The longest stay was 30 days and there some day visitors (9%). Just over half of all respondents (51%) were visiting for between 3 and 5 days. When segmenting the data, it was evident that the White respondents tended to be staying for longer periods of time, with a mean of just over 8 days, while Black visitors were much more likely to be day visitors (all but 1 of the day visitors were Black), with a mean of just under 4 days. Of the visitors who were on overnight trips the most prominent type of accommodation selected was self-catering accommodation by 37% of the respondents. Other popular choices were bed and breakfast (10%) and staying with family or friends (10%) followed by hotels (8%) and then camping with own tent (7%). When segmenting the data, there was a significantly larger proportion of White tourists staying who were staying in self-catering accommodation (51%) and camping (18%) while only 2% of Black respondents were camping and 38% self-catering. A larger share of the Black respondents were staying in hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs and all-inclusive accommodation (48%). This can be useful data for accommodation offerings wanting to target a growing domestic market of tourist. Interestingly there was an even split amongst those staying with friends and family, with 50% White respondents and 50% Black respondents. This demonstrates significantly different findings as previous research has emphasized the importance of VFR tourism amongst the Black population. Decisions about planning where to stay where predominately made using online sources with 37,1% of respondents saying they planned their trips online.

The majority of stated that the main purpose of their travel was a holiday (64%), with an additional 13% who said the main purpose was a celebration of some sort and only 4% who said that the main purpose was to visit friends or family. Again, this is a significant shift away from the importance of VRF among Black South African tourists, which accounted for only 3% of the primary purpose of travel amongst these Black respondents. The majority were travelling for leisure (78%), of which 20% were travelling specifically for a celebration. This demonstrates a significant growth in leisure tourism travel within this group which demands a revised strategy for tourism marketing. The majority of the tourists travelled with their families, with 34% with just their spouse or partner, 30% with their immediate family and 7% with their extended family. Another 25% were traveling in groups of friends and 2% each on tours and on business. However, significant differences emerged when the data was segmented by racial identity, with nearly all White respondents travelling with their families, a large proportion (56%) of whom were travelling with their immediate family. Of the Black respondents, only 19% were travelling with their immediate family, with a significant share travelling with their partner or spouse (38%). Interestingly, there were a number of Black tourists travelling in groups of friends, which accounted for another 38% of these respondents while it only accounted for 14% of White respondents.

A total 77% of respondents were travelling in their own private cars with another 6% who rented cars. This demonstrates that personal accessibility is very important for tourism in

this region, specifically since the expectation of a route-type tourist experience involves travel to multiple different destinations in the region. Not having one's own vehicle has been seen historically as a barrier to tourist experiences for a number of South African's this predominance of access to these sites by people who are travelling in their own vehicles shows this to be a significant factor in the opportunity to engage in nature-based tourism in these spaces. However, these dynamics appear to be changing with a growing Black middle class. Another 5,8% were travelling in a taxi, all of whom were Black, and which accounted for 12% of all Black respondents. A number of groups indicated that they had hired a taxi and a driver specifically to do this tourist route. In some cases this was done for day trips. The towns most frequently visited in descending order of importance were Graskop, Hazyview and Sabie, with others such as Mbombela, Lydenburg and Pilgrim's Rest also being mentioned.

A total of 26% of participants were taking a guided tour for some (15%) or all (11%) of their trip with tour group sizes ranging from 76 people to 2 people. The largest group of 76 was made up of school learners from Limpopo Province on a geomorphology tour, accompanied by 4 teachers. Of those who did take tours 70% were on private tours for their group only and 27% joined advertised tours with other people on the same tour. Some of the groups indicated that they had constituted their own trips doing the planning on social media and hiring a taxi and a driver for a day. Others were booked onto official trips in which a range of things were included some including activities, accommodation and entrance fees and a few indicating food was also included; others just included the transport and the entrance fees.

The three most popular sites were Kruger National Park, the Gorge Lift and Swing and God's Window. Following the top three destinations mentioned, the next most frequently visited were the various Waterfalls on the Panorama route (11,6%), then Bourke's Luck Potholes and the Three Rondavels at 11,1% each. Some of the least popular destinations and activities included hiking, the elephant encounter, horse riding and visits to cultural sites and museums. Of those visiting Kruger National Park 70% were self-driving and the other 30% were doing guided safaris for either part or the whole of the trip. There was a notable segmentation in the numbers of respondents visiting Kruger National Park as part of their trip. Eighty percent of the White respondents self-drove in Kruger National Park and 15% went on guided safaris. Of the Black respondents, only 22% self-drove in Kruger and 24% went on guided safaris. These are drastically different trip compositions and interesting the relatively small share of Black tourists visiting Kruger National Park given how iconic it is as a tourism attraction in the region. The most common activities frequented by Black respondents were along the Panorama Route with God's Window, Bourke's Luck Potholes, the Three Rondavals, the Waterfalls and the Graskop Lift all visited by the majority of these tourists, the most visited of which was God's Window (70%). Furthermore, there was a noticeably larger share of Black tourists engaging in adventure activities including 48% who went bungee jumping as well as other activities such as quad biking, ziplining and visiting caves. This demonstrates the relative division in the types of nature-based tourism spaces frequented by these different demographic groups as well as the types of activities in which they engage with a significant emphasis amongst Black South Africans towards adventure tourism. It is clear that the tours were individually curated with a large variety of combinations of destinations and activities for different groups.

Motivations and experiences

Tourists were motivated to come to Mpumalanga for a variety of factors. In terms of pull factors, the one factor that emerged the most frequently from the responses was the importance of the natural landscape. Next in order of importance was accommodation, followed by attractions and affordability being rated the same and then activities. Factors that emerged as



less important included availability of a guided tour and food. Food is possibly low because a lot of the respondents were self-catering. When segmenting the data, Black respondents appeared to take a number of different aspects into consideration, while White respondents really favoured the importance of the natural environment over other factors with a mean of 4.7, with accommodation ranking 4.13, affordability 4.0 and all other below 4.0. The most significant factors amongst Black respondents, all with a mean of 4.8, were attractions, activities and the natural landscape, demonstrating the importance of different types of tourism assets. Interestingly, affordability was ranked 6th with a mean of 4.5, which is relatively high but much less so than other factors.

In order to ascertain the internal motivations, or push factors, of tourists travelling to these destinations a number of factors were presented with Likert scale response options from least to most important. Interestingly the two that emerged as most important were ‘appreciating nature’s beauty,’ ‘being closer to nature’ followed by ‘relaxing’. The factors that emerged as least important were ‘exercise’, ‘meeting new people’ and ‘challenging myself physically’, seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Internal motivation factors segmented.

Item	Black Tourists				White Tourists				Overall Results			
	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
<i>Appreciating nature’s beauty</i>	4	5	4,97	0,164	1	5	4,68	0,775	1	5	4,83	0,559
<i>Being able to tell my friends that I can do something unique.</i>	1	5	4,06	1,464	1	5	1,94	1,434	1	5	3,10	1,792
<i>Being closer to nature.</i>	1	5	4,84	0,688	1	5	4,49	0,914	1	5	4,68	0,794
<i>Challenging myself physically.</i>	1	5	3,74	1,639	1	5	2,14	1,264	1	5	2,96	1,672
<i>Discovering new things about nature.</i>	3	5	4,81	0,471	1	5	4,17	1,207	1	5	4,50	0,959
<i>Doing something I don’t normally do.</i>	1	5	4,44	0,982	1	5	3,21	1,244	1	5	3,79	1,343
<i>Doing something new.</i>	1	5	4,6	1,009	1	5	3,06	1,533	1	5	3,80	1,577
<i>Escaping my normal routine.</i>	1	5	4,46	1,199	1	5	4,17	1,082	1	5	4,33	1,177
<i>Experiencing a different environment.</i>	2	5	4,86	0,495	1	5	4,19	1,266	1	5	4,49	1,071
<i>Experiencing nature in a different way.</i>	4	5	4,97	0,177	1	5	4,29	1,063	1	5	4,58	0,919
<i>Gaining a better understanding of nature.</i>	1	5	4,63	0,914	1	5	4,21	1,069	1	5	4,40	1,040
<i>Getting away from crowds and be with just a few people.</i>	1	5	4,17	1,419	1	5	4	1,352	1	5	4,13	1,360
<i>Getting exercise.</i>	1	5	3,38	1,649	1	5	2,8	1,451	1	5	3,13	1,588
<i>Having a good time with friends.</i>	1	5	4,38	1,374	1	5	3,84	1,444	1	5	4,11	1,450
<i>Learning more about nature.</i>	1	5	4,34	1,26	1	5	3,75	1,461	1	5	3,99	1,447
<i>Meeting new people.</i>	1	5	3,5	1,627	1	5	1,86	1,192	1	5	2,69	1,670
<i>Posting pictures on social media.</i>	1	5	3,98	1,465	1	5	1,74	1,039	1	5	2,97	1,700
<i>Relaxing.</i>	1	5	4,55	1,154	1	5	4,65	0,753	1	5	4,58	

When segmented, again the motivations show some interesting findings. As was the case with the pull factors, there were many items which had very high means amongst the Black respondents when compared with other demographic groups. A range of aspects of the natural environment and interacting with the natural environment were highly ranked. This includes the aesthetic value of the natural environment in terms of ‘appreciating nature’s beauty’ as was seen with the overall findings, though ‘experiencing nature in a new way’ also ranked top in terms of push factors. In fact, the first 6 most significant motivation factors found amongst this group were all related to aspects of the natural environment. This demonstrates that Black South Africans are actively seeking out nature-based experiences, a phenomenon which has not been significantly recorded in previous research. In contrast, factors relating to relaxation and getting away from crowds were more significant with White respondents. These results are significant as the types of nature-based tourism experiences which attract these different demographic groups will likely be inherently different. Thus, product development needs to incorporate these findings in order to attract more diverse visitors.

Some general open-ended questions were included in the survey to allow the respondents to give more in-depth opinions about their travel experience as a whole. These included questions relating to favourite experiences, future travel plans and potential improvements to tourism in Mpumalanga. 94 respondents took the time to answer the open-

ended question relating to what can be done to improve tourism in Mpumalanga. The answers to these questions were post-coded to see whether there are issues which were raised by numerous respondents. Overwhelmingly, the tourists responded that the roads and other infrastructure in Mpumalanga needed to be improved. 52% of respondents mentioned issues relating roads and infrastructure. The second most frequently raised issue was around safety and security with 18% of people mentioning safety in one form or another. Particular respondents emphasised the safety problems on the road to the Numbi gate of KNP. These two main issues were followed with more infrequent responses relating to improved advertising of tourism in the region, improvements in signage and the provision of more facilities such as restaurants, accommodation and shops closer to the attractions. There were complaints about costs of the attractions and one person indicated that these costs are new: “charges levied to view waterfalls and other natural sites, it’s wrong to charge so much, it used to be free.” Other people suggested more affordable transport to the attractions and flights to the region. Minor issues raised the least frequently included more tourism monitors, clearing litter on roadsides, uplifting of cultural tourism facilities.

Respondents were also asked about their favourite experience overall on their trip. The answers were very varied with the most frequent answer being general comments about appreciating nature or being in nature or nature’s beauty. Variations on this were mentioned by 25% of the respondents. The next most popular response was 20% of respondents stating that participating in the various adventure activities was their favourite with specific mention of the mentioning adventure activities in general and 13.5% mentioning the Graskop lift, swing and Gorge specifically. Other activities specified included quad biking, rafting, the dam cruise at the three rondavels and hiking. One particular respondent mentioned how the big swing was a particularly transformative adventure experience “Doing the Big Swing and Zipline for the first time in my life even though I was nervous but I conquered my fear. The waterfalls of Sabie and Sabie river camp made my holiday extra special.” Kruger National Park was the highlight of the trip for 18% of the respondents with one respondent commenting on their best experience as follows: “the Panorama Route and Kruger National Park: I could travel that route and do all activities a 100 times over. I never get enough of it. I love it.” Overall, the majority of respondents were very satisfied with their experiences with 94% indicating that their tourism experience in Mpumalanga had been good or excellent. In terms of future behavioural intentions, 86.6% of the respondents said they were extremely likely to visit Mpumalanga for tourism again in the future. Many respondents specifically stated that they are looking to returning in order to bring their families and friends, particularly those wanting to bring their children. Although there was a high percentage of respondents who intended to visit again, many also stated that they are hoping to visit other parts of South Africa in the future, again demonstrating a growth in domestic leisure travel across the range of demographic groups.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the potential risk of relying mainly on an international tourist market. The opening up after the lockdowns, initially to tourist destinations within one’s own province and then nationally encouraged an increase in domestic tourism to nature-based locations specifically. In future, other drivers such as concerns over climate change and sustainability as well as other unanticipated events may also depress the international tourist market for South Africa (Gössling et al., 2021). In this context the domestic market is an extremely important sector for nature-based tourism. Nature based tourism has the potential to be a transformative experience for the tourists themselves (Spalding et al., 2021). People engage with nature-based spaces for numerous reasons. This paper explored a detailed data set detailing the demographics and travel patterns of over 100 tourists or tour groups to the

Panorama Route in Mpumalanga. The participants of this study cited the beauty and appreciation of nature itself as their most important reason for visiting the Panorama route in Mpumalanga. The opportunity for adventure and exploration was also important for these nature-based tourists. The history of nature-based tourism in South Africa has paralleled the rest of South African history by being largely divided along racial lines. Subsequent to the end of apartheid in 1994 none of these divisions were legislated, but nevertheless there are nature-based destinations and activities that have continued to attract mainly international visitors and white South Africans. Recently and noticeably post the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been increase in outdoor activity and nature-based leisure tourism. This research, on the Panorama Route in Mpumalanga, showed changing demographics of South African tourists engaging in nature-based experiences, in particular a growth in Black nature tourists. This data supports assertions made in early research on the area as the pandemic waned, where tourism operators asserted that the domestic market, spurred on by an uptake by Black South Africans, really assisted in sustaining the tourism industry in the region (Giddy et al., 2022).

Key to travel in this region, as a route-style leisure tourism space, was the ability to travel between multiple different towns and attractions. Thus, many study participants made use of their own private vehicles to travel indicating that accessibility is a vitally important factor enabling participation in this type of tourism. There were also groups who organized tours or taxis for the duration of their trips, but this was a smaller representation. The growth in domestic tourism in this region was largely within the middle class. All respondents visited multiple different destinations and attractions, the responses were largely positive about the benefits of engaging with nature tourism. The study also segmented the data between Black and White South African tourists. 55% of the respondents were Black South Africans. Distinctive preferences emerged among this group. Black South Africans were more likely to stay in hotels, were more likely to engage in the adventure activities on offer and although a large number were travelling with their families, a significant proportion were travelling with groups of friends. For this group more respondents were treating the Panorama Route and its attractions as the destination, with a much lower percentage including the Kruger National Park in their trip. They were also very highly motivated by natural and environmental aspects of the destination, which demonstrates the drive of Black South Africans towards nature-based experiences. This is in contrast to the White respondents nearly all of whom travelled in small family groups. These findings will be interesting to tailor future nature-based tourist offerings and is incredibly important for the sustainability of South Africa's vast nature-based tourism industry.

South Africa has a diversity of nature-based tourist destinations ranging from the scenic beauty of the Mpumalanga escarpment, through wildlife protected spaces to beaches and mountain destinations. This sector has the ability to contribute to the local economy of particular areas without being extractive. Growth in this sector has potential to benefit the tourists through their experiences in nature and to benefit the secondary businesses and services associated with this sector. This in turn could have implications for the sustainability and conservation of the South African natural environment. However, this work is only preliminary and much more work is needed to fully understand this crucial emerging tourism market as their spending power continues to grow.

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