

The Limits of Rural Tourism in COVID-19 South Africa: Perceptions from ‘Left Behind’ Rural Spaces

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Abstract

Shifting consumer travel preferences in the COVID-19 environment open potential new opportunities for rural tourism. This paper examines the challenges facing the development of rural tourism in a ‘left behind’ peripheral rural space in Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, Eastern Cape. 20 detailed qualitative interviews with key tourism stakeholders, mainly tourism businesses, are analysed. The key findings point to the structural constraints and limits on rural tourism in many parts of South Africa from the shortcomings of local government. The core constraints upon maximising local tourism assets surround the performance of local government, its inadequate provision and maintenance of local infrastructure (especially roads) as well as of service delivery issues.

Keywords: rural tourism; COVID-19; South Africa; left behind spaces; economically distressed regions

Introduction

In recent decades “rural tourism is a field of activity and study that has attracted increasing attention” (Kastenholz et al., 2021: 601). The expansion of scholarship on the niche of rural tourism is a reflection of the international demand for the products of rural tourism. This growth is apparent in several countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Msiko, 2013; Lenao, 2014; Lenao et al., 2014; Rid et al., 2014; Lenao & Saarinen, 2015; Ezeuduji, 2017; Asante & Yirenkyi, 2019; Lwoga, 2019; Mbaiwa & Sakuze, 2019; Lwoga & Maturo, 2020) and not least in the setting of South Africa (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Viljoen & Tlabela, 2007; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014; Mutana & Mukwaba, 2020; Acha-Anyi et al. 2021). Rural tourism can function as an important driver for rural development and upliftment especially in peripheral localities (Lun et al., 2016; Rogerson, 2019a). In particular it offers many entrepreneurship and business opportunities “including accommodation and other service provision, showcasing of local culture and heritage, and active countryside pursuits, the latter of which may be well-placed to capitalise on the move away from mass tourism products and a consumer desire for more niche and tailored offerings” (Dashper, 2014: 1-2).

Arguably, the niche of rural tourism attracts policy interest from national governments as a vehicle for addressing uneven geographical development (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004; Kastenholz et al., 2021; Pilving, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a, 2021b). In addition, it is often a focal point for local economic development programming (Nel & Rogerson, 2016). Over 15 years ago Briedenhann and Butts (2005: 221) observed that “governments, in both developed and less developed nations, promote rural tourism as an instrument of socioeconomic development”. Sharpley (2002: 233) maintained that rural tourism “has long

been considered a means of achieving economic and social development and regeneration” and “widely promoted as an effective source of income and employment, particularly in peripheral rural areas where traditional agrarian industries have declined”. In addition, there was a trend for several established tourism destinations to turn to rural tourism in order to diversify their tourism products and markets as well as to geographically spread tourism benefits (Lane, 1994; Swarbrooke, 1999; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Sharpley, 2002; Hall, 2004; Brouder, 2013; Frisvoll, 2014; Yachin, 2020; Helgadottir & Dashper, 2021). Overall Dashper (2014: 1) avers that rural tourism “offers a potential solution to some of the problems associated with lost economic opportunities and population decline that accompany the waning of agriculture”.

The opportunities for leveraging rural tourism as a vehicle for socio-economic upliftment of economically lagging regions have been recognised in South Africa since democratic transition in 1994 (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). Viljoen and Tlabela (2007: 20) acknowledged that what is “notable is that although rural tourism initiatives are still in their infancy, there is growing recognition in both the private and public sector that the benefits of tourism should be distributed in a spatially even manner”. The growth of national government policy interest around rural tourism as a developmental vehicle has been traced by Rogerson and Rogerson (2021b). Of note is that in several areas of the country rural tourism is targeted for promotion in areas that would be termed in the international literature as ‘left behind’ places. For many years such localities often were neglected in spatial policies – places that ‘do not matter’ - but increasingly they are coming under policy scrutiny (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; Martin, 2021). At least in the context of addressing uneven geographical development in Europe the issues of developing such ‘non-core regions’ are garnering rising academic focus (Kinossian, 2018) and progressively so in the COVID-19 environment (Martin, 2021). Essentially ‘left behind’ spaces represent “a contemporary manifestation of long-standing processes of capitalist uneven development” (MacKinnon et al., 2022: 41). The concept of left behind places refers to localities experiencing economic stagnation or decline and in the Global North both to former industrial areas beset by problems of de-industrialisation as well as marginalised rural areas (Tomaney et al., 2021). Among the key identifiers of such ‘left-behind’ spaces are relative economic under-performance and decline; high levels of poverty and disadvantage as compared to national averages, out-migration, poor health, limited investment in economic infrastructure and reduced service provision (MacKinnon et al., 2022).

The above are defining characteristics of many economically distressed parts of South Africa in which rural tourism is now a policy focus for local government Integrated Development Plans (Nel & Rogerson, 2016; Rogerson & Nel, 2016). It is against this backdrop that the aim in this paper is to analyse the challenges and limits of rural tourism in one peripheral locality of South Africa. The case study is of Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality in Eastern Cape province. This municipality is situated in an economically distressed part of South Africa and represents an example of a ‘left behind space’. Using the classifications put forward by rural geographers the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality might be viewed also as a case of an “in-between” tourism space or non-tourism space as the overwhelming majority of its tourists are linked to visits from friends and relatives. Indeed, for the past two decades, despite national government’s commitments to promoting rural tourism this particular locality has exhibited a stagnant local tourism economy (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). It is a clear illustration of what Litavniece et al. (2021) style as an ‘under-tourism’ destination. The essential character of ‘in-between’ rural spaces is that they are not attractive enough to establish tourism as a self-contained major sector of the local economy (Carson, 2018; Carson & Koster, 2019). In addition, the asset base and development prospects of ‘in-between’ rural spaces are impacted by limited linkages with and distance from major urban core regions and the

challenges of transport access which impose limitations on tourism development possibilities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b).

In the international context this research represents a contribution to a vibrant literature relating to tourism and change in the Global South (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021) as well as to issues and debates surrounding tourism recovery in the uncertain times of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021d). Specifically, this research contributes to the relatively sparse literature on rural tourism development challenges in South Africa and policy debates for rural development in peripheral localities. Two further major sections of material follow. The next section locates the study within the international context of the evolution of rural tourism and emerging research issues about rural tourism. Attention then turns to unpack the findings from 20 detailed qualitative in-person interviews which were conducted in 2021 with tourism businesses in the Raymond Mhlaba local municipality. The focus in these interviews was stakeholder perceptions concerning the local tourism asset base and critical challenges of rural tourism development. Content thematic analysis was used to dissect the interview material.

Rural tourism and its evolution

The ‘rural’ as a place for consumption within leisure and recreation leads to the definition by Woods (2010: 94) of rural tourism as “tourism activities that are focused on the consumption of rural landscapes, artefacts, cultures and experiences, involving different degrees of engagement and performances”. As Frisvoll (2014) stresses the consumption of rurality within rural tourism can assume a variety of forms. At the centre of consumption are attributes associated with rurality which can be transposed into commodities that can be bought or sold (Woods, 2010). Frisvoll (2014: 39) identifies the following as examples: “walkers’ consumption of tranquillity, nature and ‘fresh air’”, “bird watchers’ consumption of wildlife”, “mountain bikers’ consumption of the terrain against which their endurance and skills are tested”, “shoppers buying rural craft” and “diners consuming ‘local food’”. According to Kastenholz et al. (2018:189) the activity of rural tourism is “driven by the search for unique and memorable experiences in particular settings”. Overall, the commodification of rurality is central to the (re-) resourcing of rural spaces and the making of what has been termed ‘countryside capital’ (Woods, 2010). The repackaging of rural objects and experiences therefore is at the heart of rural tourism (Frisvoll, 2014).

Arguably, however, rural tourism must be understood as a phenomenon that is not static; it has changed “into a series of niche activities within a larger niche activity”, becoming “an umbrella concept, accepting of many forms, rather than tightly defined” and embracing “many specific niche types of tourism” (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015: 1137). Yachin (2021: 320) maintains that rural tourism “especially, is manifested by small enterprises, who deliver tourism experiences that are rooted in local nature and culture”. In understanding the evolution of ‘modern’ rural tourism one starting point is offered by Lane and Kastenholz (2015) who periodise the unfolding of rural tourism in Europe in relation to Butler’s (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle model. The first phase is that of ‘emergence’ and recognizable in parts of Western Europe by the early 1970s. This was viewed at enterprise and national levels as rural tourism being a sustainable alternative to a declining agricultural economy which was unable to guarantee a livelihood to rural populations. Swarbrooke (1999: 162) observed that in northern Europe rural tourism emerged “largely as a result of the desire of urban dwellers for countryside recreation” and subsequently “came to be seen by governments as a potentially valuable tool for rural development in many European countries”. Tourism was viewed a solution to the problems afflicting rural spaces and as a result this first period witnessed the growth of agritourism and farm tourism which were boosted by government support initiatives

(Swarbrooke, 1999; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). These activities involved staying on a working farm or making farm visits. In the industrialized and urbanized economies of Europe the countryside and rural areas were considered “lost worlds where life was simple and idyllic, which now provide playgrounds where urban dwellers can seek an antidote to the ills of modern urban living” (Swarbrooke, 1999: 61). Access to rural areas had been greatly improved by increased levels of car ownership and automobilities. Barke (2004) identified “a significant trend towards the development of ‘active’ leisure pursuits” which are viewed as marking a major shift in the use of the countryside in Spain.

The second evolutionary phase of rural tourism was one of ‘consolidated growth’ and began to manifest in parts of Europe by the mid-1980s. The consolidated growth phase of rural tourism represents a response “to new market demands, some of which driven by a nostalgic quest for a ‘rural idyll’ as well as the need of actors in rural territories to find new sources of income and development and thus guarantee quality of life” (Kastenholtz et al., 2021: 601). Across much of Europe as a result of post-productivist transformations “rural areas are increasingly perceived as consumption rather than production places” (Eusébio et al., 2017: 197). This transition received support from the European Union and many European governments (Ruiz-Real et al., 2021). Popescu et al. (2014: 69) contend that in Romania “rural space cannot be considered any longer as being destined only for agriculture” and increasingly was becoming an entertainment space for urban residents. Rural tourism seeks “to revitalise rural resources for local socio-economic benefits and environmental sustainability through active local community empowerment and involvement” (Rosalina et al., 2021: 127). It assumes a vital function in maintaining the viability and stability of rural localities (Kataya, 2021). Using the example of Portugal, Cunha et al. (2018) stress tourism can be a vehicle for developing rural spaces which increasingly are impacted by the erosion of employment and livelihood opportunities and consequently burdened with certain social problems such as depopulation and population ageing. Rural tourism is considered a development tool for rural areas with demand for local produce a stimulus for local economies and simultaneously a critical part of the tourism experience (Kastenholtz et al., 2016). In particular, tourism is perceived as highly significant for marginal rural zones where “such developments are thought to appeal to a post-modern market seeking ‘unique’ experiences” which arise out of new locally embedded activities and themes (Kastenholtz et al., 2012: 207).

In respect of the role of rural tourism as a vehicle for local economic regeneration this period is distinguished by the attraction into rural areas of groups of new, often skilled, migrants from cities – lifestyle entrepreneurs – who began to transform rural societies and the character of rural tourism. As rural areas largely are overlooked by major infrastructural investments, rural areas necessarily rely on endogenous strategies which build upon local resources and assets, particularly for the advance of rural tourism. Nevertheless, it is recognised that not all initiatives to promote rural tourism in the Global North have been a success in terms of boosting rural development opportunities (Walmsley, 2003; Sharpley & Roberts, 2004).

Importantly, it is argued by Lane and Kastenholtz (2015) in this second phase there came the diversification of rural tourism activities such that it became a series of niche activities nested within the larger rural tourism niche. Among more specialised niches that appeared were rural volunteer tourism and wellness tourism. Above all, the diversification was marked by a growth in different forms of activity tourism, including walking, climbing and mountain biking. Adventure and sports tourism activities were another dimension of the diversification of rural tourism in many parts of the world with New Zealand the showcase example (Ryan, 1997). Further second phase growth has been driven through cultural and heritage tourism products in rural areas, one aspect of which was enjoyment of rural ways of life. Food and drink tourism

(especially wine tourism) energised rural tourism development in many areas contributing added growth and diversity to the experience of rural tourism. Motor-cycle tourism is another niche in rural tourism to have some attention (Sykes & Kelly, 2016). Tourism business start-ups in forms of activity tourism are driven variously by the imperative for economic diversification from agriculture, lack of local employment opportunities as well as the growth of lifestyle entrepreneurs (Yachin, 2020). Certain common denominators of second phase rural tourism include the importance of the demand and supply sides of the ‘experiences’ which are special to rural tourism, the significance of personal contacts with local people, the relevance of physical activity and the environment, and the capacity of entrepreneurs to invent new products from rural culture and heritage (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

The ramifications of COVID-19 on changing consumer travel preferences boost the prospects for the current and future development of rural tourism (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c). According to Adey et al. (2021) COVID-19 has not only severely interrupted tourism but triggered a change in the entire apparatus of tourism, meaning that the practices of tourism are forced to change. One consequence has been a shift in the demands of urban consumers away from ‘crowdedness’ and instead towards a search for open spaces, nature, and the tourist offerings of rural areas (Laesser et al., 2021). According to Skryl and Gregoric (2022) post-COVID-19 tourism must focus on developing new tourism products in selective forms of tourism that emphasize tourist well-being, health, safety and security issues, and sustainability. Li et al. (2021: 730) argue that “the pandemic has created high tourism demand for health and relaxation... rural tourism that is close to nature has excellent potential for development and will have benefits for human mental health”. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic a paradigm change occurred in tourists’ psyche concerning risk perceptions around safety, health and travel which triggered an upturn in consumer demand for open spaces and for the niche tourism offerings of many rural destinations (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021e). Rural tourism therefore offers a major opportunity to satisfy the demands of post-pandemic tourists who seek stress-relief and rejuvenation within a nature-based environment or engagement with physical and psychological well-being activities (Buckley, 2020; Cooper & Buckley, 2021). In the Global North as a result of shifting risk perceptions it is anticipated remote and rural destinations will become more attractive to domestic tourists. From Australian research it is shown rural tourism is dominated by car travel and that the pandemic has accelerated the growth of automobiles and drive tourism (Butler & Szili, 2020; Butler et al. 2021a; Butler et al. 2021b).

For various reasons the evolution of rural tourism in the Global South diverges from that occurring in the Global North (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021f; Rogerson, 2022). Several scholars argue the need for the separate treatment and research issues of rural tourism in the context of the Global South. Karali et al. (2021: 2) aver that “rural tourism of the developed and developing countries is required to be researched differently due to their unlike development and growth contexts”. The literature and debates about ‘rural tourism’ in sub-Saharan Africa underline the problematic nature of the concept (Lenao & Saarinen, 2015). Generally it is seen as often “a replacement activity for threatened and possibly disappearing traditional rural economies or as an additional activity to be used for the diversification of rural economies and sustaining rural communities and ways of living” (Saarinen & Lenao, 2014: 365).

In many African countries the most lucrative contribution from tourism in rural areas derives from the operations of wildlife tourism or nature safari tourism in protected areas which could be either a replacement or diversification activity in parts of rural sub-Saharan Africa. Among others Mbaiwa (2021) argues that wildlife-based tourism is a key economic sector that assists rural and community development in many African countries, including Uganda, Ghana, Rwanda, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. It sustains and generates benefits for

the welfare of people living adjacent to such tourist destinations with rich biodiversity, many of which are in remote and peripheral areas. This critical form of tourism occurring in many rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa would not be categorised, however, under the umbrella term of rural tourism. As is shown by work conducted in Botswana the term is more conventionally applied in African studies to forms of rural tourism which are based on “local culture and heritage resources as well as local communities and their participation” (Lenao & Saarinen, 2015: 203). In addition, at least in the case of South Africa, it would extend to include agritourism and farm-based tourism activities as well as activity-based forms of rural tourism which are a parallel to the emergent and second phase forms of rural tourism observed in the Global North (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014). For Saarinen and Lenao (2014: 365) rural tourism within the context of the Global South might be best viewed “as an ideological and development-oriented concept”. Arguably, the most distinguishing feature of rural tourism in the Global South is that it takes place in a “resource-scarce context” (Ngoasong, 2018; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019; Dayour et al. 2020). This is certainly the situation for the COVID-19 environment of rural South Africa in the local municipality case study under scrutiny.

Rural tourism in the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality

The Raymond Mhlaba municipality is a local municipality within the Amathole District Municipality in Eastern Cape province and is organized around ten towns and villages, namely Fort Beaufort, Adelaide, Alice, Balfour, Bedford, Healdtown, Hogsback, Katberg, Middeldrift and Seymour (Fig. 1).

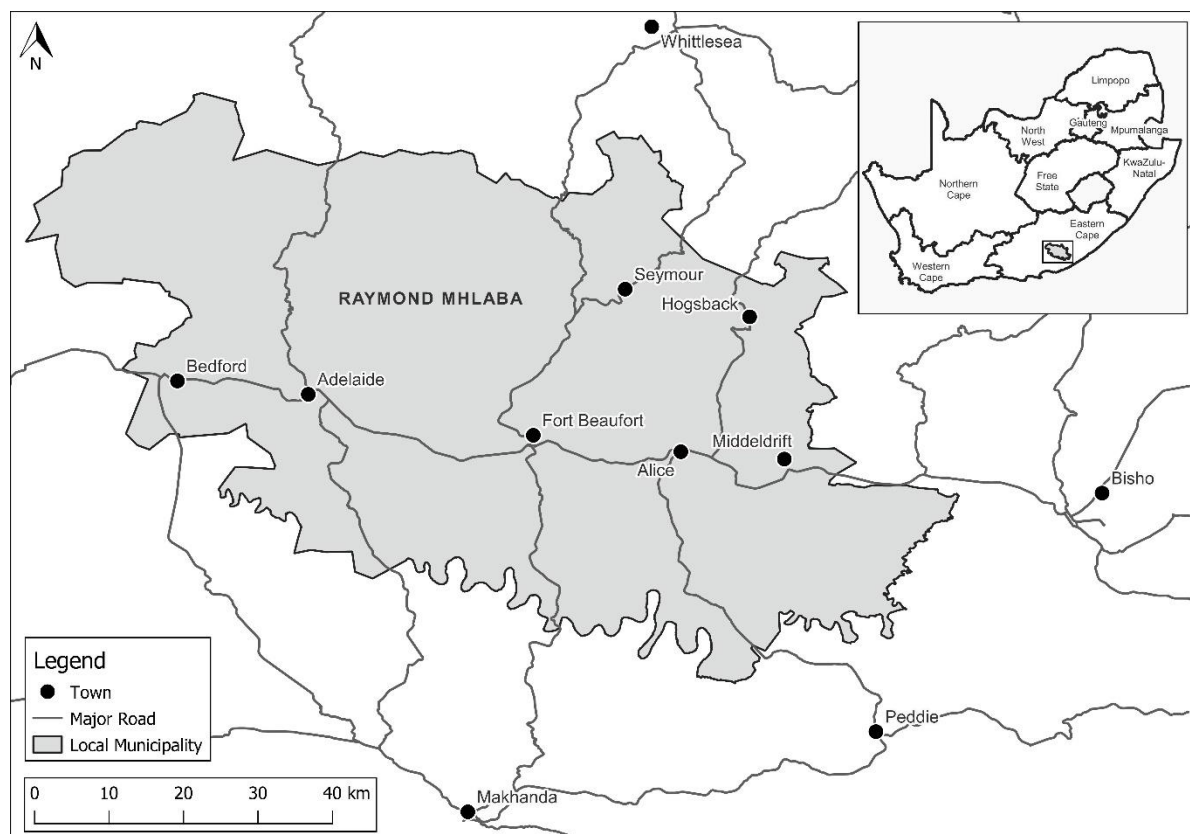


Figure 1: Location of the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality

Source: Authors

The area covered by the local municipality is mainly rural, albeit with an important asset of historical towns that played a part in the development of the South African heritage, political and academic landscape. Situated in one of South Africa’s economically distressed regions, the municipality exhibits high indicators of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment with agriculture and community services traditionally the major economic sectors (Rogerson & Nel, 2016). Raymond Mhlaba is one of South Africa’s ‘least visited’ tourism spaces (Rogerson, 2017) and one of the country’s least tourism-dependent localities in the pre-COVID-19 era (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021g). The research explored issues surrounding local stakeholder perceptions concerning rural tourism potential and the challenges facing rural tourism enterprises in this municipality.

In this section three sets of material and discussion are given. These focus on (1) the characteristics of sample respondents, (2) stakeholder perceptions about local assets and the potential for rural tourism potential, and (3) the challenges facing rural tourism enterprises in this local municipality.

The interview respondents

A total number of 20 interviews were conducted mainly in Hogsback, Bedford, Alice, Healdtown, Elundini (Hogsback) and Fort Beaufort. Most interviews were conducted with tourism business owners engaged in the provision of accommodation services, the operation of restaurants, the running of hiking and adventure trails or hosting events. In addition, representatives of several local historical attractions were interviewed (mostly these were government employees) as well as of a local tourism information centre. Table 1 presents a summary of the respondents in the Raymond Mhlaba research.

Table 1: Overview of surveyed Raymond Mhlaba tourism businesses

Code	Location	Type of Establishment	Number of Employees	Primary income?	Operates all year?
RM1	Hogsback	Accommodation	36	Yes	Yes
RM2	Bedford	Farm Stall	20	Yes	Yes
RM3	Bedford	Accommodation & Restaurant	50	Yes	Yes
RM4	Bedford	Attraction	N/A	No.	No.
RM5	Healdtown	Attraction	N/A	N/A	Yes
RM6	Healdtown	Attraction	N/A	N/A	Yes
RM7	Fort Beaufort	Museum	4	N/A	Yes
RM8	Alice	Information Centre	2	N/A	Yes
RM9	Elundini	Backpackers	4	Yes	Yes
RM10	Hogsback	Horse Riding and accommodation	–	Yes	Yes
RM11	Hogsback	Accommodation, hiking trail, wellness centre; entertainment	–	Yes	Closed in winter.
RM12	Hogsback	Restaurant	4	Yes	Yes
RM13	Hogsback	Tour guide	0	No.	Part-time
RM14	Hogsback	Accommodation	8	Yes	Full-time
RM15	Fort Beaufort	Accommodation	7	Yes	Full-time
RM16	Alice	Tour guide	0	Yes.	Full-time
RM17	Hogsback	Brewery	5	Yes	Full-time
RM18	Fort Beaufort	Tour guide	0	Yes, before covid.	Part-time
RM19	Hogsback	Accommodation, events, catering	13	Yes	Full-time
RM20	Hogsback	Adventure company	1	Yes	Full-time

Source: Authors

Within the sample of tourism businesses most were owner-managed and operate on a full-time basis, the only exceptions being tour guides and one enterprise that operates seasonally. For

the vast majority of business owners the tourism business represented the main source of household income. As is typical for the international record of rural tourism enterprises all the businesses would be classed as small firms and the majority as micro-enterprises with less than 10 employees (cf. Yachin, 2020). The pandemic lockdowns resulted in certain businesses reducing their staff: for one accommodation provider: *“We now have four. There were initially ten but due to no business during lockdown”* (RM9). Some enterprises responded to the pandemic with strategies to retain their employees: *“We did not lay off, we just had shifts. They are all back full term now”* (RM15). Reasons for business start-up were given as mostly the result of identifying market opportunities. Other motivations were disclosed in terms of the entrepreneurs desire to fulfil a personal passion (RM9).

The interviews were undertaken during late 2021 amid the continuing problems of the COVID-environment. When owners were asked to describe their business before COVID some revealed the business was doing relatively well *“When I said in my business slogan ‘Come walk with us’ people were coming and we had good feedback. Business was good”* (RM13). Other respondents, however, indicated that their businesses were experiencing problems prior to the pandemic. For example an accommodation provider in Hogsback stated that their business was *“struggling”* (RM11) and another that business was *“adequate and not exciting”* (RM19). Many enterprises indicated the negative effects of the pandemic in relation to their business and the challenges they faced since COVID-19 particularly with the loss of clientele: *“We lost a lot of close customers”* (RM1). Likewise, another owner shared the same sentiment: *“They do not come anymore, it is difficult”* (RM4). The banning of events had a major impact on local rural tourism (RM4). Adaptive responses were critical for the survival of rural tourism businesses in the COVID-19 environment. One Bedford enterprise highlighted its coping strategy: *“We tried to be very creative. In the beginning of COVID-19 we planted vegetables to keep people busy and support the salaries and income”* (RM2). Other accommodation service establishments added offerings: *“Increase in self-catering apartments, introduced food delivery into the rooms, expanded the outdoor area, and expanded the capacity indoor area”* (RM19). A common adaptive response was to diversify operations into other business areas. For example, confronted by the ban on alcohol sales introduced by national government, the owners of the local brewery responded by learning to bake and selling cupcakes and brownies at the local Saturday market (RM 17). Other business owners renovated their properties during the lockdown period (RM 11) and several turned to the adoption of new technologies (RM 13). Some businesses could not cope with the impact of the pandemic with one owner of a local attraction observing: *“It has just a struggle for us, now we are just faced with poverty”* (RM4).

Perceptions of the local municipal tourism assets

The tourism assets of the Raymond Mhlaba municipality were reviewed by the interview respondents. A range of leisure tourism assets within the municipality were pinpointed with the majority of responses focused on tourism products related to the area’s history and heritage, nature-based tourism and events. In terms of history and heritage the municipality has several attractions such as graves, forts, monuments and memorials mostly concentrated in the southern section of the district. Nature-based tourism, which relies on assets such as mountain scenery and waterfalls, occurs mostly in the northern part of the Hogsback district, which is also the location for several events. Many of these attractions are situated along the Amathole Mountain Escape, a route that crosses from Bedford to Hogsback village. The respondent from the local information centre provided an overview of the tourism assets of Raymond Mhlaba municipality:

“Our area is known for its history. It has produced world leaders. It is unique in terms of attractions that you not going to experience anywhere else in the world for example the

Martello Tower in Fort Beaufort. We have the institutions such as University of Fort Hare, Healdtown and Lovedale which produced the first black nurse Cecilia Makiwane. We have natural attractions in Hogsback such as the 33 steps, and the Madonna and child waterfalls. The heritage routes - the Maqoma route - encompass all the heritage sites within Raymond Mhlaba Municipality - some of them are the Garden of Remembrance, James Steward, Maqoma caves, Chief Tyali Memorial, Dutch reformed churches, John Knox Bokwe grave, and local dams” (RM8).

Within the municipality, Hogsback village and Bedford are the two main tourism foci. Hogsback is a nature and adventure-based destination with attractions including local waterfalls and opportunities for nature walks. Other assets are a local brewery, chocolate shop and hiking trails, most importantly the Amathole trail. Activities such as birdwatching and horse riding also are packaged by local business operators. Bedford is an old English settler town known for garden tourism and for the hosting of an annual garden festival: *“When people think of Bedford they link it to the Garden Festival. Or they link to the settlers and the beautiful farms where somebody's family who lived here back then - so they would come back” (RM2).* Attractions include a locally-owned furniture factory and Hope Street with its locally-owned shops and art galleries. Bedford is noteworthy also for its Township Open Garden Project initiated in 2007 which aims to bring township gardeners into the mainstream of the Garden Festival. The importance of the Garden Festival for local accommodation providers in Bedford as well as nearby Adelaide is well-established (Keal, 2008).

Events were flagged as significant assets for the local (leisure) tourism economy. Several respondents highlighted the importance of events in boosting local tourism, most notably the Christmas in July event at Hogsback as well as the Bedford Garden Festival. Another local event was the annual Ngumbela Cricket Tournament which plays a role in the local economy of Healdtown village near Fort Beaufort: *“There are a lot of people who come for that tournament and are accommodated by local people” (RM 5).* Other activities that were identified include tourists visiting the Healdtown College, which was one of the influential schools that produced prominent African political leaders such as Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela and Robert Mugabe. Further, the town of Alice is a historical town known for its education institutions of Lovedale College and Fort Hare University. One respondent indicated *“University of Fort Hare - which is a national heritage site and also Lovedale - these institutions bring in a lot of traffic with their events, especially during graduation” (RM 8).* The limited interest of black South Africans in heritage attractions was observed by the government respondent at the local Tourism Information Centre: *“It is so unfortunate that I have worked in the museum field for 11 years and would say museums are still predominantly known by the white communities. We still have a long way of reaching out to the black community in terms of museums, simply because they do not see the significance of the museum within the society which they live in and also they do not invest their time in the museum.” (RM7).*

The municipal centre of Fort Beaufort records minimal leisure tourism activity. The Martello Tower formerly was a place of heritage tourism interest as it served as a fort for the British army during colonial wars. However, the tower is no longer an attraction due to vandalism and lack of maintenance. The deterioration of this local tourism asset was detailed by one Fort Beaufort accommodation provider: *“The Martello Tower has not been maintained in years. You used to be able to go walk up and to view from the top of the tower. Now you can't – it has been so vandalised. The museum had all the history of the Martello before they made it the traffic department. I think its horrifying that they took over a historic building to make a traffic department” (RM15).* Overall, the significance of business tourism for local accommodation providers was evident in Fort Beaufort: *“It's mostly professionals that come*

stay with, but you get one or two that come for historical purposes, the one or two that go to Hogsback for the snow. Most of the time it is business-related people that come stay here because of the citrus farms we have here and auditors come here for the small businesses” (RM15).

Local missed opportunities for rural tourism within the area surround the utilisation of natural resources and point to issues of infrastructural shortcomings. *“There are so many opportunities, but the rural set-up is abandoned. There is no proper infrastructure I mean it has been 25 years of democracy but the situation it is still like this. Here there is a beautiful forest you can even set up a reserve - but there has been no proper development” (RM9).* The introduction of farm tours was flagged as another potential product. From the perspective of a local guide the issues around developing local tourism assets and the problematic role of local government were pinpointed: *“There are many opportunities within the area for example we have fishing dams (Kat River) and we have the Tyume River for canoeing. And opportunity for abseiling at Fort Dyce. We can have horse riding along the villages to Hogsback. We have the Tyali grave - Xhosa prince - but no development is taking place around the area. We even have the Mgumbela Cricket Tournament which could be an opportunity for sports tours. Even if you have an idea the government would not assist you. They will ignore your proposal” (RM18).*

Perceptions of local government and business challenges

International research confirms the importance of local government and of ‘place leadership’ for the success of many rural tourism destinations of the Global North (Dimitrovski et al., 2012; Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012). In the setting of the Global South the vital role that can be assumed by local government in successful place-based development has been emphasized (Rodriguez-Pose & Palavicini-Corona, 2013; Rogerson, 2019b).

This research disclosed significant findings related to local government many of which confirm those from other recent research which investigates the challenges of rural tourism development in South Africa. Overwhelmingly, the cohort of Raymond Mhlaba respondents stressed issues around the poor quality of local infrastructure. Issues concerning the deterioration of local roads and lack of maintenance were widely aired as well as poor service delivery. For example one accommodation provider stated: *“Roads are very bad, if you go on our websites you will see people complain. Neglecting things like water and electricity is very bad for us” (RM1).* Another Hogsback respondent argued: *“Fixing up the roads would be a lot of help to us - and would be a lot easier getting up and down this mountain - wider roads as well - there are a lot of bendy roads and people generally don't do a speed limit and its very dangerous” (RM12).* Poor service delivery has been another failure of the local municipality with respondents pointing to inadequate electricity provision which hindered business as the powerlines that are not well-maintained impacting business communication: *“Electricity is a major problem we have a lot of illegal connections. Our internet signal is very on-and-off, and when the power is off there would be no signal at all and would be difficult to communicate with each other like if there is a rain storm then my staff can't call me” (RM12).* As a result of local government inaction concerning services business owners have resorted not to rely on government and instead to construct their own signal towers.

Lack of local government support for tourism was raised as a specific matter of concern in particular the lack of marketing initiatives and the lack of funding programmes. One of the comments made indicated the need for marketing support *“I suppose more marketing, just getting out there, more brochures and maps” (RM14).* The lack of funding support from government institutions was also a hindrance in terms of business development (RM16). In this municipality where nature is an attraction the inaction by local government in relation to poaching was flagged as a threat to local tourism assets. Local government was not taking a

stand on poachers or establishing anti-poaching programmes: *“The problems with the poaching - people hunting so now we will lose these baboons, monkeys. We have a Amathole toad which is very special to Hogsback but at the moment you'll be lucky if you find it and also our Cape Parrots - If these are not there they'll be no tourists”* (RM13). A significant local issue in Hogsback was conflict around use of land relating to forestry and tourism enterprises (RM 19). Red tape within government was another identified issue with respondents complaining that the turnaround time in terms of government application processes was slow *“Limit red tape. The process take too long - sometimes things can be done over 24hrs and yet takes a week”* (RM8). It was evident that government bureaucracy also is an impediment to the formation of strategic partnerships with the private sector for local community development. A government official revealed, however, that local government had provided some assistance to local women for establishing homestays (RM8).

For expanding visitor numbers respondents viewed as imperative that local government address issues of accessible roads, better infrastructure and improved service delivery. A typical response from an accommodation provider was as follows: *“Government needs to improve on their responsibilities in terms of municipal obligations, in other words roads, infrastructure, cleanliness, awareness amongst the people about the environment about not polluting”* (RM10). Another tourism business owner made a similar comment about the lack of infrastructure around tourism facilities: *“I don't think our municipality does anything for tourism in Hogsback. They used to do a little bit. I don't think our municipality cares enough to stimulate tourism in the area. The roads are really bad. We don't have a decent tourism information centre in town”* (RM14). Improving the level of skill and education amongst tourism government officials within the area was raised: *“When we go to the government offices the officials they have no idea what is tourism. Even the mayor, managers and councillors they do not know the impact of tourism”* (RM16). Some respondents mentioned creating tourism awareness campaigns amongst local people and marketing campaigns to promote the area. One respondent affirmed *“Maybe more awareness on what Hogsback has to offer and marketing of Hogsback. A lot of people have never heard of it. Because some people who come here for the hike have heard of the Amatola trail and they always ask me but why have we never heard of Hogsback”* (RM 11).

Overall, in respect of the key constraints that businesses currently face, different challenges were raised by the respondents. The majority highlighted issues around infrastructural development, others mentioned concerns over the impact of COVID-19 on their business, others cited conflicts within different organisations versus government, and issues of land ownership, and some indicated challenges around lack of resources within the area. The shortcomings around infrastructural development within the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality were the dominant concern for the majority of the respondents in the study, and confirmed as the major business challenge for rural tourism enterprises. Typically, a Bedford respondent reiterated the challenge of road infrastructure: *“Infrastructure. The road to Grahamstown is actually deadly. People have written off their cars, people have died. The pot holes are huge. In the twelve years I have been living here there has been no effort to fix that road. I would imagine if the roads weren't as bad people would come here for Sunday lunch, but they actually do not like that road at all”* (RM3). Likewise, for the Hogsback area one local respondent flagged the infrastructural challenge for business development: *“Since we are on a mountain it is so hard to get stock up here. We used have a butchery and bakery, but getting things here is very financially challenging – it is just too difficult to come here. The roads play a big part - there are pot holes everywhere. There are no roads ”* (RM12).

Many respondents raised issues also about mismanagement, the incompetence of the local government and lack of professionalism: *“Fix the municipality first, because that is where*

the root of your town starts and things will go better from there. If you have the right infrastructure, waterworks, and electricity and if you have stable roads more places can open. There is a very big lack of work ethic” (RM15). Several respondents mentioned the need for marketing support: “Assist with the marketing, to be included in government's tourism websites. I would like to see government supporting small businesses, especially the black-owned businesses” (RM13). Others mentioned the need for support regarding skills and training: “Give access to skill and training development, the important thing is the skill - if you do not have the skill there is nothing that you can do. (RM16). Among other identified support interventions was the need of a local information centre in the northern Hogsback area; the information centre formerly operated by local government closed down, albeit later it reopened but managed and funded by local businesses. Further local issues related to conflicts around Hogsback between tourism and the forestry sector: “The conflict between tourism and forestry is the biggest constraint. Government needs to play a mediating role for developing tourism in the area” (RM19). Beyond the above, the COVID-19 pandemic caused instability for business financial operations and as a result generating income was a major constraint making it difficult for some businesses owners to retain employees. One of the owners captured this problem as follows: “At the moment we are not generating any income, that is the biggest challenge” (RM9).

Conclusion

Changing consumer travel preferences in the COVID-19 environment point to potential new opportunities for the evolution of rural tourism (Helgadottir & Dashper, 2021; Laesser et al., 2021). In the Global North the pandemic’s impacts offer a launchpad for boosting rural tourism destinations as urban consumers pivot away from ‘crowdedness’ and seek out open spaces, nature, and the tourist offerings of rural areas (Buckley, 2020; Butler et al., 2021b). With evidence for such changes occurring in consumer travel preferences in South Africa similar opportunities potentially emerge.

The results of this study indicate the existence of a basket of leisure tourism assets in the rural local municipality of Raymond Mhlaba in Eastern Cape province. Nevertheless, the analysis points to the limits placed upon the realization of this potential for rural tourism in this ‘left behind space’ in one of South Africa’s peripheral economically distressed regions. Arguably, the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality has certain rural tourism development opportunities. Severe structural constraints must be addressed, however, to unleash the recovery potential and opportunities for business development for rural tourism. The overwhelming constraints upon maximising the tourism assets surround local government and its inadequate provision and maintenance of local infrastructure – especially roads – and service delivery. The issue of inadequate roads is a critical matter in an environment wherein opportunities are growing for drive tourism to support rural tourism destinations. The research discloses a lack of trust and confidence in local government on the behalf of local businesses which necessitates them to become self-reliant and fund their own local initiatives for tourism development. The absence of government support was evident as the majority of the respondents commented on their dissatisfaction with the local municipality. Overall, the findings of this investigation offer a caution on the limits posed for rural tourism development in certain parts of South Africa by the unsatisfactory performance of local government.

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