

Safari Tourism in the Post-COVID-19 Environment: The Case of Small Businesses in Mpumalanga

Abstract

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Safari tourism is a type of nature-based travel that most often involves visiting national parks and protected areas to view wildlife. Businesses feeding into the Kruger National Park (KNP) constitute a large share of safari tourism in South Africa and were hard hit by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This study seeks to determine the nature of these impacts on safari tourism using the case of Mpumalanga, within which a large share of the KNP exists. The findings show safari tour operators struggled significantly during the pandemic, losing all business and often unable to make ends meet. Most safari operators in Mpumalanga are small businesses and therefore did not have the capacity to deal with the financial consequences. Findings also show that the government assistance to these businesses was low. Although safari tourists are returning to the area, operators are still dealing with the devastating effects of the pandemic, in some cases unable to cope with incoming tourists due to pandemic era losses.

Keywords: COVID-19, South Africa, safari tourism, SMMEs, wildlife tourism

How to cite this article: Sithole, B., Giddy, J.K. & Nsukwini, S. (2024). Safari Tourism in the Post-COVID-19 Environment: The Case of Small Businesses in Mpumalanga. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 13(4):576. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.576>

Introduction

Safari tourism is a nature-based tourism subsector focused on wildlife-viewing interactions. It typically involves visiting national parks, wildlife reserves, and protected areas (Mariyam et al., 2022). This subsector is important because it offers opportunities for wildlife experiences, allowing visitors to observe animals in their natural environments and provides an opportunity for wildlife education (Bhuiyan et al., 2021, Spring, 2022). Safaris are most often conducted utilizing open-air, four-wheel-drive vehicles known as safari vehicles to observe wildlife while either remaining inside parks and game reserves or traveling between parks (Pathirana et al., 2021). In South Africa, safari tourism is one of the most significant nature-based tourism subsectors, particularly in the provinces within which KNP resides, namely the Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces. Safari tourism in Mpumalanga is world-renowned as the primary form of tourism in the world-famous KNP (Monakhisi, 2008). In Mpumalanga, tourism is one of the largest employment sectors and is a critical component of the region's economy. It not only generates jobs, in a region with concerns over unemployment but also boosts the national economy as well (Mathivha et al., 2017). South Africa is incredibly dependent on tourism, not only for the creation of jobs and development of the local economies but also, in the case of wildlife tourism, for the conservation and protection of wildlife species (Musavengane et al., 2020). In 2020 March, severe national lockdown restrictions were imposed throughout South Africa to halt the spread of the virus (Schmidt et al., 2020). The tourism industry was one of the most hard-hit industries, globally, as it is not only a leisure-based sector but also is dependent on the movement of people. As such, safari businesses were severely affected by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. Since the majority of these businesses are small, medium, and microenterprises (SMMEs), their ability to absorb the loss of revenue for an extended period of time was low (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a). In addition, even as domestic tourism returned, few South Africans utilized safari tour operators due to the tendency amongst local tourists to self-drive (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021). This study, therefore, seeks to highlight the challenges of small-scale safari tour operating businesses in the post-COVID-19 environment, to understand the future prospects of the industry. Due to the significance of safari tourism in the KNP and the important role it plays in local economies, safari operators feeding into the KNP based in the Mpumalanga province were the focus of this study.

Wildlife tourism

Wildlife tourism involves interacting with wild animals either in captivity or in their natural environment (D'Cruze et al., 2018). Viewing, feeding, photography, hunting (which includes capturing and killing animals) and fishing are activities that form part of wildlife tourism (Ferguson & Litchfield, 2018). According to Ollenburg (2005), this tourism can involve tours, accommodations, and attractions at fixed sites. The key forms of wildlife tourism are: wildlife watching which includes both interacting and viewing the animals; and captive wildlife tourism which is watching the animals in confinement that can be man-made such as wildlife parks, and zoos (Valentine 1992). In addition, fishing and hunting are considered a form of wildlife tourism that are important for land use and they are an important part of the heritage for some communities (Higginbottom & Scott, 2004). Wildlife tourism is increasing rapidly and has evolved to include new species, areas, and interaction techniques with wildlife (Moscardo & Saltzer, 2004). Activities of wildlife tourism are often found in environments that are developed and which have great conservation value (Brown et al., 2013). Wildlife tourism is capable of making positive contributions to the economy and that are important for conservation (Barnes, 2001). Tourism is a source of income that is important for many communities, offers motivation for the protection of species and their places of living, and also provides convincing arguments in contradiction to land uses that are damaging to the natural environment (Ballantyne et al., 2007). Furthermore, according to Powell & Ham (2008), wildlife tourism is likely to affect participants' actions, knowledge, and attitudes toward the activities



with benefits that are unintended for animals and their habitats. However, concerns emerge when wildlife tourism includes species that are rare and endangered. These are interesting to tourists but they are susceptible to disturbance because the potential negative impacts of tourism may also cause a huge impact on the population viability (Green & Higginbottom, 2000). Wildlife tourism is one of the recreational activities that has been recognized to potentially increase the endangerment of species (Green & Giese, 2004). Therefore, monitoring tourist numbers is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of the viewed environment and species as well as the viability of tourism businesses linked to wildlife (Mihalič, 2000). Monitoring is important in the case of wildlife tourism, to be able to regulate an impact that is tolerable for a population of animals, individual animals, and the environment. Strategic plans are needed for wildlife tourism to be ecologically sustainable since the activities of wildlife tourism are becoming rapidly popular (Larm et al., 2018). The collaboration of the authorities of protected areas, the public, community stakeholders, and non-profit sectors is very vital for the conservation of wildlife (Akama et al., 2011).

In Africa and South Africa, safari tourism is one of the most significant wildlife tourism subsectors. It forms an important foundation of tourist revenue due to the unique fauna prevalent throughout the country (Price, 2018). In terms of the potential for economic development, one study in Kenya showed that safari tourism is one way of connecting poor communities to the tourism industry (Maingi, 2021). Integration of communities with the tourism sector is important since the communities show dependence on tourism and thus it encourages conservation efforts (Holland et al., 2021). It also has the potential for high expenditure and thus increasing significance for local communities. Although also utilized by domestic tourists, international tourists account for a significant share of the safari tourism industry in South Africa, particularly in terms of expenditure (Kelso & Giddy, 2023). This is due to the fact that South Africa provides tourists with some of the best opportunities for safari tourism, globally (Maswera et al., 2008). South Africa is particularly attractive to international tourists as it is more developed than other sub-Saharan African countries with similar offerings (Folarin & Adeniyi, 2020). Therefore, wildlife tourism benefits South Africans by attempting to alleviate poverty by creating jobs for those who live near protected areas where job opportunities tend to be scarce (Giddy, 2016; Snyman 2017).

National parks tourism

Much of wildlife tourism throughout the world takes place in national parks and protected areas. National parks are known to be some of the most recognized tourist sites (Markowski et al., 2019). National parks have a wide range of offerings but nearly all involve natural landscapes and the vast majority include some kind of public access and thus a tourism component (Lee & Han, 2002). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) guidelines of 2007 for national parks list tourism and recreation opportunities and the safety of ecosystems' ecological integrity as the main goals of national parks (Mayer et al., 2010). Through tourism and recreation, national parks have the potential and duty to grow sustainable rural development, providing an order of use and protection (Job & Paesler, 2013). National parks that are located in peripheral areas offer unique attractions for tourists and they provide different engines of economic development by attracting tourism spend in peripheral regional economies which are often weak. National parks' main legal obligation is to ensure the conservation of endemic species and ecological integrity (Thuy et al., 2011). National parks are used for environmental education, scientific research, and also for people to experience nature. The economic benefits from tourism of national parks provide an advantage to local communities while also often enabling the mission of conservation by showing the park's value for the livelihoods of local people. (Ezebilo & Mattsson, 2010). In South Africa, a significant portion of wildlife tourism takes place within or adjacent to national parks. They are governed by a national body, South African National Parks (SANParks), which was formed in 1926 (Phophe & Masubelele, 2021). SANParks is in charge of managing 19 national parks in South Africa, which constitute more than 3 million hectares, or more than 3% of the country's total land area (Ferreira, 2019). One of South Africa's first national parks, KNP was founded in 1926 (Brett, 2018). The Sabi and Singwitsi game reserves, which belonged to two provinces, Mpumalanga and Limpopo, were combined to create KNP. They became a national park formally through the law passed by the parliament (Carruthers, 1993). The conversion of the local Sabi and Singwitsi game reserves into a national park began in 1910 when the South African colonies combined to form one nation (Carruthers, 2017). Small parks were established in Eastern Cape and Western Cape during the 1930s. In 1931, Addo Elephant National Park, and Bontebok National Park were created. The establishment of these parks led to some of the first significant forms of wildlife tourism in South Africa, where visitors were able to experience unique South African wildlife in their natural environments (Giddy, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 on tourism in South Africa

In South Africa, tourism has long been utilized for the development of communities and the alleviation of poverty (Kirsten & Rogerson, 2002). There are four key areas in which the potential of tourism to make the net benefits for the poor people lies. First, tourism is an industry that can afford the chance for high participation among a range of stakeholders and enterprises, including those in peripheral areas (Ashley et al., 2007). Second, due to its nature, which draws customers to different spaces, tourism can offer opportunities for developing entrepreneurs and SMMEs in a range of contexts and locales. Third, tourism often depends on culture and wildlife which allow a range of people potential access to enter the industry even if they do not have significant financial resources, particularly in rural areas (Goodwin, 2002). Lastly, tourism can require a larger workforce than other industries allowing entry amongst a range of people (Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007). The tourism was hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic since it depends on people traveling. This resulted in significant job loss within the tourism industry (Bama & Nyikana, 2021). South Africa was hit particularly hard due to its dependence on tourism, both in terms of the national economy, but also especially due to the significance of the sector for widespread employment, particularly among people from disadvantaged backgrounds and in remote areas (Adinolfi et al, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Tourism

businesses struggled to adapt due to the large portion of SMMEs prevalent within the South African tourism sector and the minimal support or relief provided by the South African government support (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021). Local communities in which tourism attractions are based were especially affected by these impacts as alternative income opportunities are scarce. The financial pressure put on tourism businesses, particularly SMMEs, during the pandemic, created significant strain on business and local communities alike (Estrada et al., 2020).

Wildlife tourism was particularly hard hit by the pandemic. The government regulations to combat the pandemic closed down the provincial parks and national parks, in South Africa including KNP (Smith et al., 2021). This led to the cancellation of bookings and also shut down of the safari lodges and safari excursions throughout the country (Scholtz & De Ridder, 2021). People running safari lodge businesses and who offer safari experiences were severely affected by these closures. These impacts are due to put strain on safari businesses for several years, particularly SMMEs who did not have the capital to cope with the pandemic (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Spenceley et al., 2021). This affected the economy and the people of South Africa as many people living in rural areas lost jobs in the wildlife tourism industry (Clements et al., 2022). Loss of jobs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also exposed wildlife to impacts such as poaching, the killing of animals for meat consumption, and trafficking of wildlife further exacerbating the issues (Newsome, 2020). In addition, it negatively affected biodiversity conservation in South Africa, since South Africa's wildlife tourism industry is responsible for a huge percentage of the conservation budgets (Lindsey et al., 2020).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used for this study. This approach is useful because it is exploratory and there is no current research on the perspective of safari tour operators in the post-COVID-19 environment (Parker & Tritter, 2006). When using a qualitative approach, you can also observe the behaviours of the interviewees during the interviews. The advantages of this research approach are that there is a greater understanding of assessment design, administration, and interpretation. The study area for this project was the KNP which is located in two provinces, Mpumalanga and Limpopo, however, the focus of this study was on operators based within the Mpumalanga province.

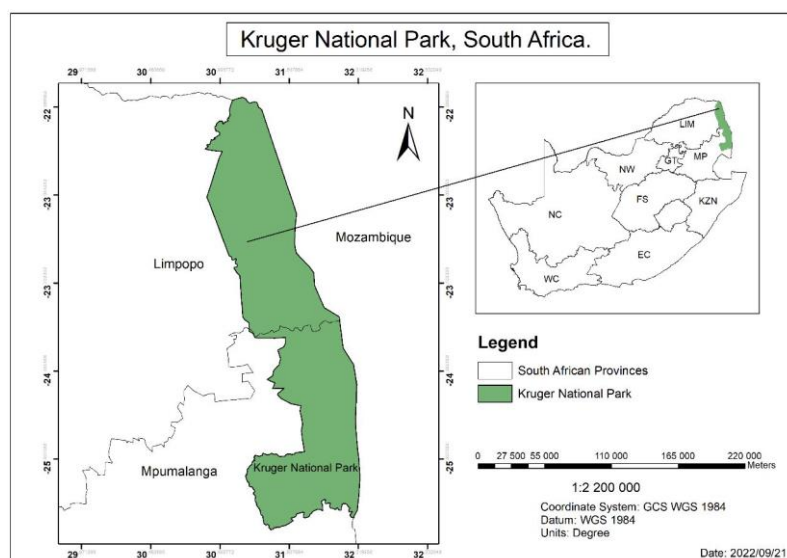


Figure 1: Map of the study area, KNP

Source: Authors

KNP was established in 1926 (Reindrawati et al., 2022), and it has 10 entrances, namely; Numbi, Paul Kruger, Phabeni, Malelane, Crocodile Bridge, and Orpen (based in Mpumalanga province), Phalaborwa, Punda Maria, Giriyondo and Pafuri (based in Limpopo province). It is one of the most visited national parks in South Africa (Ferreira & Harmse, 2014; Saayman & Slaabert, 2004;). The activities found within this park include game drives (safaris), guided walks, wilderness trails as well as others (Van Der Merwe & Saayman, 2008). The research method used was in-depth semi-structured interviews to ask specific questions and obtain specific information, while still allowing the respondents to expand on their responses and provide additional input sometimes not included in the interview guide. At the start of each interview, each interviewee was told what the study is about and its objectives. They were all required to provide informed consent to participate in the study. All data collection was conducted in accordance with the University of Mpumalanga research ethics guidelines. Ethics approval was obtained by the human research ethics committee at the University of Mpumalanga. Interview guides were utilized in this study and included questions that focused on the challenges that the safari tour operators faced due to COVID-19, their views on the COVID-19 situation, and government assistance. The latter has been an important discussion in literature in South Africa due to the failures of the government to assist local tourism businesses throughout the pandemic (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b). To get detailed information, interview questions were open-ended and thus allowed respondents to speak freely and obtain



additional information not always included in the interview guide. It also allowed the researcher to use follow-up questions to elicit additional information where necessary.

Data were collected from the safari tour operators operating in KNP, based in two towns located on the periphery of the park, Hazyview and Marloth Park. The focus was on small businesses and local entrepreneurs. Only private operators were interviewed, not those employed by SANParks or large private reserves, due to the focus on SMMEs. Both purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used in this study. Purposive sampling helps to collect responses from specific and relevant respondents while the nature of the population also necessitated snowball sampling to obtain contact information of additional respondents. In total, fifteen interviews were conducted as data became saturated for this relatively small population. Recordings were taken where consent was provided in addition to extensive field notes which were taken. Data were collected predominately through in-person interviews but reverted to telephonic interviews where in-person interviews were impossible. The recordings and notes of the interviews were transcribed. Thematic content analysis was used in this study whereby specific themes were extracted from the data based on the study's objectives and the interview guides. Data were categorized based on significant similarities and differences. This method was selected as it allowed the extraction of specific data based on relevant themes which were included in the interview guide. The responses from various interviewees were recorded in a spreadsheet containing the relevant themes. The data was coded and identifiers were given to the various interviewees to eliminate any issue of anonymity in the analysis and write-up. Data were quantified where appropriate and the relevant quotations were extracted.

Results and discussion

The results below provide insight into the perspectives and experiences of safari tourism operators in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focused on the small-scale safari tourism businesses operating in the Southern part of KNP and based in Mpumalanga. It includes a basic profile of the respondents, the impact the pandemic had on their businesses, their adaptation strategies, their view on government assistance as well as their future prospects. The profiles of the interviewed safari tour operators based in Marloth Park and Hazyview, Mpumalanga are outlined in Table 1 below. Most of these safari tour operators are based in Hazyview with only a few in Marloth Park.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Identifier	Location	Years in Operation	Other activities	Number of employees
Interviewee 1 (S1)	Hazyview	15	Transfers	6
Interviewee 2 (S2)	Marloth Park	30	Panorama tours and transfers	6 (previously 13)
Interviewee 3 (S3)	Hazyview	1	Panorama tours and transfers	3
Interviewee 4 (S4)	Marloth Park	7	No other activity	4
Interviewee 5 (S5)	Hazyview	23	Accommodation	4
Interviewee 6 (S6)	Marloth Park	10	No other activity	1
Interviewee 7 (S7)	Hazyview	18	Panorama tours and transfers	1
Interviewee 8 (S8)	Hazyview	4	Elephant interactions	1 (previously 3)
Interviewee 9 (S9)	Marloth Park	14	Panorama tours	6 (previously 30) freelancers
Interviewee 10 (S10)	Hazyview	5	No activity	1 freelancer
Interviewee 11 (S11)	Hazyview	3	Panorama tours and transfers	1 (previously 3 freelancers)
Interviewee 12 (S12)	Hazyview	11	Panorama tours	5
Interviewee 13 (S13)	Marloth Park	6	Bush walks	2 freelancers
Interviewee 14 (S14)	Hazyview	17	Safari accommodation and sightseeing	5
Interviewee 15 (S15)	Hazyview	18	Panorama tours	2 (previously 25)

Source: Authors

These businesses have been in operation for a range of years, from relatively new entrants to some with several decades of experience with an overall average of 12 years in operation. All companies have relatively small numbers of employees, with as few as one additional employee and the largest number of current employees being six. However, of significance is the noted decrease in the number of employees in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although all of these companies had challenges with retrenchment of staff during the pandemic, even in the post-pandemic period, five had been unable to recuperate their original number of employees. Several of the companies offer activities other than safari tours in KNP including transfers, elephant interactions, bush walks, accommodation, and sightseeing tours. About half of these respondents also offered tours on the famed Panorama Route, which is adjacent to the KNP, and includes a range of nature-based tourism experiences (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021). Most of the respondents operate mainly in the southern part of the park (Phabeni, Numbi, Crocodile bridge, and Paul Kruger), only one of them operates in the middle and southern part of the park (Orpen and Phalaborwa), and two operate throughout the entire KNP. One of the most significant findings in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic was that businesses lost most of their clientele which put significant financial pressure on the businesses. Several stated that they struggled just to make payments on aspects of their businesses such as instalments, insurance, tax, and employee salaries, resulting in low or no income to employees for a period of time. These businesses stated that they were unable to make ends meet for over a year as a result of the pandemic, first due to lockdowns and which then persisted due to low visitation in the waning period of the pandemic. An interviewee was quoted raising a point on how the lockdown affected their business. "When the lockdown regulations were reduced, safari tourism business was the second last business to open in the tourism industry and that made us to resume late" (S11). Safari businesses are often dependent largely on international visitors as local South African visitors tend to self-drive (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021). Therefore, even though tourism began to reemerge in the latter half of 2020, safari operators were some of the last to truly reemerge, and only when international travel began to resume in the second half of 2021.



As travel was restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic, these businesses had to come up with strategies for adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic scenario within which they found themselves, without much space for preparation. When the interviewees were asked about the adaptation strategies that they used to cope with pandemic lockdowns and travel restrictions, 12 of them mentioned that at the beginning of the lockdown they had to retrench most of their employees. Although most saw this as a last resort, it became necessary for the survival of the business as they had to continue to pay many expenses including vehicle, equipment, and facilities installments as well as insurance. Several respondents indicated that they ended up having to sell some of their vehicles as they could not keep up with payments. This is significant as safari tourism is largely based on provided open-air guided drives for tourists. When the lockdown regulations were reduced and people were allowed to travel, some of these businesses reduced their prices to accommodate the local tourism market. One interviewee was quoted when asked how much they had to reduce during the pandemic for their services. “We had to reduce our prices by 40% to accommodate the local tourism market because we had no clients at all” (S6). Businesses had to reorient their product offerings for local tourists because international tourists were not allowed to come to South Africa until the end of 2020, though, as mentioned above, many did not return to the country until much later because of concerns over COVID-19 regulations and reluctance to engage in long-haul travel. This study also sought to determine the role played by the government in assisting businesses during the pandemic. Government relief for tourism operators was slow and minimal. One respondent discussed that they were only offered a once-off relief payment of R20,000 for the entirety of the lockdown period. Others indicated that they did not qualify for even that relief fund. Several mentioned that they knew many businesses that shut down entirely and were unable to reopen as a result of these constraints. Only five of the interviewees mentioned that their employees received UIF (Unemployment Insurance Fund) benefits during this period. Employees from other businesses did not receive any financial support. Some of the interviewees indicated that they felt they did not receive assistance due to racial discrimination. One interviewee explained the reason why they did not receive assistance. “According to tourism BEE criteria if the business makes R5 million or more per annum it does not qualify to get assistance” (S3). In addition, some of the interviewees applied for assistance but could not get it and they were not told the reasons for not getting assistance. All in all, the assistance from the government to these businesses was low and thus they endured significant strain over a long period of time. Some requested additional support from the government with one stating “The government should look after the tourism industry by offering us subsidies and help our businesses with the permits that we pay to operate in KNP” (S10). They also mentioned losing faith in the ability of the government to assist in any crisis situations.

There have been notable changes in the safari tourism industry in the Mpumalanga province as the result of the pandemic. Safari tour operators were asked about their experiences of these changes, and the main observation was that they received fewer international tourists and more local tourists during the pandemic, which is not surprising. However, in response to this, operators saw it as a major concern because the international tourists pay more than the local tourists and thus this business model was not seen as sustainable. It brings to question the overall safari tourism supply in the area and its dependence on long-haul international visitors. Respondents also noted that their current clientele tended to travel in smaller groups and avoided the spread of the virus and other tourists were suspicious of each other which they found challenging in terms of operational costs. Furthermore, an interviewee was quoted. “Yes, there were changes because people started traveling in small groups mainly because they were afraid of COVID-19, however, now the business is picking up internationals are coming back” (S8). Furthermore, in addition to the challenges brought by COVID-19 pandemic, these businesses discussed other challenges they are faced with which continue to persist in the post-pandemic period. All respondents mentioned that the quality of the local roads into and out of the KNP are problematic and causing serious issues in terms of accidents as well as vehicle damage. Six of the interviewees complained about the cost of fuel which takes additional tolls on their business’ finances and ability to cope. The persistent inflation, climbing interest rates, and overall increases in the cost of living have not only created additional costs to businesses but have also resulted in a reduction of those engaging in leisure tourism. Despite these challenges, respondents indicated that there is a need for safari tourism to grow in Mpumalanga. Six of the interviewees suggested that South African safari tourism needs to improve marketing, overall. One mentioned that there should be more cohesiveness between different operators within the sector. Some respondents felt that South Africans should also be more aware of the uniqueness and benefits of guided safari tourism within the KNP and be encouraged to partake in these activities. At this stage, however, they appear to continue to be dependent on the international market returning to pre-COVID-19 visitor numbers and are not confident in their ability to depend on the domestic market. They see international visitors having higher expenditure when they are in South Africa which is understandable but is worrying for future sustainability. Interviewees then were asked about their perceptions of the future prospects of their businesses. There was a sense of uncertainty in their responses. One interviewee was quoted commenting on the future prospects of their business. “Our future prospect is to work on getting more clients and offer the best service we always do” (S1). This safari tour operator emphasized the need to offer quality service for their business to survive and thrive. For these businesses, the aim in the post-COVID-19 environment is to try to grow their client base, buy vehicles that were sold by some of these businesses, and be able to employ more people.

Conclusion

COVID-19 shut down all travel within South Africa from March 2020, with international travel only resuming intermittently from mid-2021 (Burnett, 2022). Safari tourism is one of the most significant industries, in terms of job creation, in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa. The safari tourism industry was hard-hit by the pandemic. This echoes Snyman (2017), who demonstrated that wildlife tourism is an incredibly important source of livelihood for those who live near protected areas. The findings of this study on safari tourism in the post-COVID-19 environment give the perspective of safari tour operators in



Mpumalanga on how they have been affected by the pandemic, how they have tried to adapt to the COVID-19 situation, and what they are looking to do in the future for their businesses can return to their original states. Since most of the safari tourism industry in this area consists of small businesses, they were particularly vulnerable in the context of the national lockdown. Findings show that safari tour operators in Mpumalanga depend largely on the international market which has resulted in persistent difficulties in terms of recovery in the post-pandemic period. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected safari tour businesses in Mpumalanga, particularly financially, causing some to completely shut down. What made this situation particularly devastating were some of the unique contexts associated with this type of operation. First, the fact that safari tourism businesses are relatively small-scale and thus were unprepared for this type of disruption meant that they were unable to continue to manage their businesses throughout the pandemic, particularly in terms of facilities and staff retention. The issue of staff has incredibly dire consequences, as the majority of staff are local residents from poor areas who depend significantly on their income and thus the losses had major consequences for local residents and local economies. In addition, the vast majority of tourists who utilized safari tour operators prior to COVID-19 were international and businesses were structured around the international market. Once this market disappeared, these businesses were unable to cope with the financial losses. The structure of these businesses does not allow for long-term adaptation to the domestic market.

As discussed above, safari tour operators did try to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic but this was often by means of retrenching employees, reducing the prices of their services, using their savings, and other drastic measures which are not sustainable. However, in many cases, this only prolonged the issues. Findings overall show that these businesses did not receive sufficient (if any) assistance from the government during the COVID-19 pandemic which perpetuated the challenges they faced. As a result of inadequate government interventions, these businesses have lost faith in the government's ability or, possibly their desire, to assist tourism businesses in times of crisis. This despite the fact that tourism accounts for a significant portion of the South African Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Giddy et al., 2022). Safari tourism in Mpumalanga will only be capable of overcoming future crises if businesses are getting enough support from the government and that there is an understanding of the need for future support structures. If the suggestions of the interviewees on the development of safari tourism in Mpumalanga can be implemented, safari tourism in Mpumalanga will be able to recover and develop further. The interviewees suggested that safari tourism in Mpumalanga needs revised marketing strategies and more cohesiveness within the industry. In addition, they also suggested that the roads should be maintained to minimize accidents and avoid vehicle damage. It is going to take several years for safari tourism in Mpumalanga to recover to the state it was in before COVID-19, as suggested by some of the interviewees. According to Estrada et al., (2020), the global economy will be affected by the pandemic for many years and the tourism sector and hospitality sector are the ones that are most affected and have to tolerate the COVID-19 difficulties, as has been evident in the case of safari tourism in Mpumalanga. In conclusion, safari tourism operators need to possibly diversify and make arrangements for future potential disasters that may disrupt tourism in the future.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Sue Rose for her valuable input in this paper.

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