Stakeholder Perceptions of Eco-Cultural Resorts in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

Eco-cultural projects are initiated in host communities to create livelihood opportunities linked to tourism and concurrently supporting conservation efforts. Research tends to focus on the sustainability of the projects after implementation with limited understanding of stakeholder issues during the planning stages. This study focuses on stakeholder perceptions of the proposed Eco-Culture Resort (ECR) in the Chelmsford Nature Reserve (CNR) at Ntshingwayo Dam in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa in relation to tourism potential. The methodological approach adopted entailed interviews with 50 respondents purposively selected from the ranks of three key stakeholder groups - government, business and community members. The main findings reveal that the stakeholders linked ECRs with conservation, sustainable development and tourism-related opportunities. Respondents also viewed the proposed resort as a tourist destination with huge economic development potential. The study reveals that ECRs have stakeholder support and perceived to have the potential to increase tourism opportunities and enhance the level of environmental awareness among both would-be visitors and the broader community. However, challenges arise that foreground the importance of extensive stakeholder engagement to ensure that tourism benefits are realised. There is limited research on examining stakeholder perceptions of tourism-related aspects of ECRs despite the growing recognition that understanding of different views, interests, opinions, expectations and concerns results in greater success of nature-based conservation and tourism projects. This research addresses this gap in the literature and addresses the issue of better understanding stakeholders' perceptions and concerns during the planning stages of ECRs.

Keywords: Stakeholder perceptions, tourism, Eco-Culture Resort, Chelmsford Nature Reserve, South Africa

Introduction

Reisinger (2015) asserts that tourism is an agent of change that can transform not only the physical aspect of any destination but also its economic and socio-cultural structures. Specifically, eco-cultural projects, the focus of this study, are associated with tourism and local consumption as well as concomitantly supporting biodiversity conservation efforts. Perera and Lee (2013) note, however, that although there have been several tourism-related attempts to alleviate poverty in numerous areas, including eco-cultural-based tourism, progress in poverty

reduction has not been satisfactory. Biodiversity conservation, which relates to nature-based tourism, has emerged as an important component for driving economic development (Chung, Dietz & Liu, 2018; Gurney, 2015; Kim, Lee & Kim, 2020; Meilby, Smith-Hall, Byg, Larsen, Nielsen & Puri, 2014). However, existing research tends to focus on the sustainability of the projects after implementation with limited understanding of stakeholder issues during the planning stages. Furthermore, Garidzirai & Pasara (2020: 554) assert that "the tourism sector has a pivotal role to play in alleviating the stagnant economic growth in South Africa", which the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions will worsen.

In rural areas and smaller towns in Africa, such as Newcastle in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, biodiversity conservation has emerged as a potential strategy to address poverty in terms of promoting ecotourism. More generally, van der Schyff, Meyer and Ferreira (2019: 168) state that "overall weak economic and sectoral performance stresses the need for a strong alternative economic sector development", specifically tourism, "to support traditional growth sectors which could potentially increase economic growth and development in South Africa". Many eco-cultural projects are initiated in host communities to create livelihood opportunities by encouraging tourism while supporting conservation efforts (Chung et al., 2018; Gumede & Nzama, 2019; Isaac & Wuleka, 2012; Kim et al., 2020; Meilby et al., 2014). However, according to Agrawal and Redford (2006), Postma, Cavagnaro and Spruyt (2017), Sharron, Lee and Laing (2011) and Wondirad, Tolkach and King (2020), they often fail to achieve the intended socio-economic outcomes as envisioned by the local government agencies who often initiate such projects and these initiatives may undermine the ecological integrity if not managed properly. This is frequently linked to a lack of engagement and consultation with key stakeholders to establish the extent of support for such initiatives as well as understand concerns raised.

This article examines stakeholder perceptions of the proposed Eco-Culture Resort (ECR) in the Chelmsford Nature Reserve (CNR) at Ntshingwayo Dam in Newcastle, KZN. The area consists of the second most-visited dam in KZN within a nature reserve characterised by indigenous biodiversity and cultural attributes that combine to create the potential for unique eco-cultural tourism experiences. The two main research questions that frame the study are:

- What are key stakeholder perceptions and awareness of what constitutes the ECR?
- What are the perceived socio-economic and environmental impacts of the proposed ECR?

The importance of stakeholder engagement and collaboration is highlighted since there is limited research on stakeholder perceptions generally and particularly during project conceptualisation and planning. Specifically, there is limited research on examining stakeholder perceptions of tourism-related aspects of ECRs despite the growing recognition that the understanding of different views, interests, opinions, expectations and concerns results in greater success of nature-based conservation and tourism projects. This research addresses this gap in the literature. The next section undertakes a literature review of relevant studies, which show that there is increasing recognition of the economic and environmental value of nature-based conservation and tourism efforts, including ECRs.

Literature review
Conceptualisation of nature-based tourism
Chung et al. (2018), Kim, Kim, Lee, Lee and Andrada (2019), Kim et al. (2020) and Picazo (2015) assert that nature-based tourism entails visitation to and consumption of natural destinations that facilitate human-ecosystem experiences and interactions, and contribute to nature appreciation and preservation/ conservation. Kim et al. (2020: 1) state that "nature-based tourism contributes to the conservation of biodiversity by offering financial stability and

enhancing visitors' interest in nature, and thus has become an increasingly important issue in managing protected areas". Goodwin and Roe (2001) define ecotourism by emphasising its low impact on nature and as the type of contribution through the generation of revenues benefiting the local community sufficiently to inspire it to protect nature as a business. Picazo (2015) suggests that ecotourism involves touring responsibly to nature-based areas that conserve the environmental assets, thereby improving the lives of local people, especially their well-being. This definition suggests that ecotourism should contribute to social development by uplifting the livelihoods of people and communities in localities where ecotourism activities take place. As a concept, eco-cultural tourism combines ecology and culture to create tourist experiences and generate revenues from the public who visit such designated sites (Sinha, 2014). This definition suggests that this form of tourism has the capacity to create employment opportunities in localities where it is situated and thereby improve the economic livelihoods of the local communities, while at the same time preserving both the natural and cultural resources in these localities. In addition, it will offer new opportunities for multicultural cooperation (Khoshtaria & Chachava, 2017).

Chung et al. (2018) indicate the connectedness between biodiversity conservation and nature-based tourism as part of cultural ecosystem service provision. They note that nature-based tourism is more prevalent in protected areas that have higher biodiversity, are established, and are more accessible from urban areas/ areas with high population densities. An important assertion by Chung et al. (2018: 11) is that "protected areas managed mainly for biodiversity conservation have nearly 35% more visitors than those managed for mixed use". This is important in relation to the CNR which has as its main objective biodiversity conservation and therefore this bodes well for successes associated with tourism initiatives linked to the project. However, as Agrawal and Redford (2006) caution, there are conditions under which poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation may be incompatible goals which need adequate attention. They note, importantly, that understanding context particularities and variations provide insights into potential conflicts and contestations which stakeholders often express. Stakeholder perceptions is a focus of this study that is elaborated on later in this section.

Benefits and challenges associated with nature-based tourism

Postma et al. (2017) emphasise that tourism represents an interesting challenge for sustainability because it directly impacts on and is impacted by both the socio-economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Over time, protected areas have become sites for tourist attractions and recreation, contributing to economic development (Sharron et al., 2011; Wondirad et al., 2020). However, since tourism and recreation involve a range of activities that include geographical reconstruction of spaces that may negatively influence habitats and species, the challenge is to find a balance between economic benefits accruing from tourism activities and the protection of these areas as conservation sites (Sharron et al., 2011). Ecotourism projects such as the CNR as an ECR are part of efforts to promote local economic development which, according to Rogerson and Rogerson (2019), is a critical focus within the growing scholarship around tourism development and planning. Rogerson and Rogerson (2019: 293) further assert that "South Africa provides fertile territory for exploring this relationship because of the national importance of tourism for the economy as a whole and of a policy commitment by national government to the support of sub-national development planning". Furthermore, Gumede and Nzama's (2019) research reveals that ecotourism in the Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve (also in KwaZulu-Natal) contributes to local economic development through employment creation and capacity building

Meilby et al. (2014) reinforce the notion that the sustainable use of natural resources can contribute towards poverty alleviation without undermining conservation efforts and goals. One of the sustainable uses of natural resources is ecotourism. Isaac and Wuleka (2012: 1) emphasise that ecotourism conserves the environment and "represents local cultures and contributes to the economic well-being of host communities as well as the stakeholders involved". Ecotourism, therefore, raises important questions on the utilisation of environmentally-sensitive areas, commonly referred to as protected areas. These protected areas have become critical areas of interest as nodes for economic development, mainly because they possess an intrinsic economic value that can be exploited to spur economic growth in countries and areas where they are located (Duff, 2006; Powell & Ham, 2008). Although ecotourism holds the potential for economic development and, by extension, poverty reduction, many local communities in South Africa, and also globally, are yet to gain full awareness of the potential it holds for improving their livelihoods and do not adequately exploit this potential. "Ecotourism activities and facilities undertaken for promoting an area as an ecotourism destination are: nature camps (camping sites in natural surroundings); eco-friendly accommodation; trekking; nature and wildlife viewing; river cruises; adventure sports; angling; herbal ecotourism; urban ecotourism through eco-parks; conservation education," among many other pursuits (Ghodeswar, 2013: 14).

As a sector, tourism provides more employment opportunities compared to other sectors and uses extra unskilled labour compared to other sectors (National Tourism Sector Strategy, 2011). As a developing country with relatively high unemployment rates, tourism is promoted as one of the national economic drivers (Booyens, 2020; van der Schyff et al., 2019). Booyens (2020) specifically highlights the potential of tourism to contribute to youth employment, which is a major challenge in South Africa. The ECR concept helps to realise economic outcomes for all stakeholders. This embraces the focus on tourism as a driver for the green economy, which includes the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation. However, Novelli (2015) observes that if left unabated, the potential threats associated with climate change could undo or undermine many of the positive advances made by the country's tourism industry since the transition to democracy. Significantly, Hsu (2019) asserts that for large investment infrastructure, it is necessary for tourism planners to estimate the economic impact of public spending on the local or regional economy.

Importance of stakeholder engagement and collaboration

Effective stakeholder engagement is recognised as essential for good cooperate governance. Transparency and effective communication are especially vital for building trust and confidence in relation to governing stakeholder relationships (Muswaka, 2014). McCabe, Minnaert and Diekmann (2012: 169) state that "planning and implementing sustainability measures at the destination level are often in the hands of or coordinated by local government". In this study, stakeholders refer to all persons, communities and organisations who are affected in one way or another by a proposed development action. Specifically, they include the local governments of Newcastle Municipality, Dannhauser Municipality and eMadlangeni Municipality under the Amajuba District Municipality, as well as conservation groups and non-governmental environmental organisations, local communities, the business community (formal and informal as well as landowners), schools, churches, and traditional leadership. Moeti (2013: 47) emphasises that "it is the duty of the legislature to interface with various interests groups as vital stakeholders in the democratic process". In this study, perceptions of the stakeholders identified that are likely to have interests in relation to proposed ECR will affect the long-term success of the project after it is implemented. Furthermore, it is imperative that whatever perceptions may exist among key stakeholders towards the proposed ECR find

shared interpretation and understanding, and that agreed management orientations are developed. To manage perceptions, Halkos, Matsiori and Dritsas (2019: 1) state that "one of the important factors of success is to involve the local population in the decision making process". This connectedness and management orientation ensures that stakeholder perceptions and engagement inform project success.

Wondirad et al. (2020) state that stakeholder collaboration is a major factor for sustainable ecotourism development in developing countries. They further note that of the many factors identified in the literature as obstructing the success of ecotourism, the most prominent is the lack of effective stakeholder collaboration. The connectedness for "stakeholder responsibilities create a situation of mutual engagement and responsibility" (Andriof & Waddock, 2017: 19). It is recognised that collaborative management or co-management of protected areas involves a partnership between key stakeholders, especially protected area authorities and local communities (Cronkleton, Pulhin & Saigal, 2012; Trimble, 2014). In summary, stakeholders are more like shareholders in behaviour and expectations. In particular, ecotourism embraces conservation and socio-economic objectives through the establishment of feasible links and collaboration between the government sector, local communities, tourism industries/ businesses and protected areas. Reddy and Wilkes (2015) emphasise the critical role of a collaborative approach for stakeholder engagement for the success of projects like the ECR. Forsyth (2018: 45) states that "researchers who watch groups and ask group members questions can develop a detailed description of a group, but they must go beyond description if they are to explain groups". Additionally, most identified opportunities in local government tourism strategies remain unexplored, which leads Reddy and Wilkes (2015: 290) to assert in their research:

> Thus, the main premise of this study is that the *worldview* (expectations, beliefs, norms) of tourism stakeholders (individuals and groups from the public, private and voluntary sectors) - including community members, government bodies, tourism businesses, experts, volunteers, media and pressure groups – and their relation networks determine the conception, formation, growth and maturity phase of (un)sustainable tourism clusters.

Therefore, this study adopts the separation of stakeholders into three groups and further designed the key informant questionnaires to accommodate each stakeholder's interests to ensure maximum participation and contribution.

Methodology
Study setting: The proposed ECR in the CNR
The study setting is the proposed ECR in Newcastle's Ntshingwayo Dam area, which is interchangeably referred to as the CNR. Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW) manages this public facility as one of their nature and biodiversity locations in KZN. However, contrary to the CNR's attributes, the current status of facilities limits the potential scope of this resource to high commercial, nature and tourism enthusiasts. Figure 1 shows the study area in relation to its location in South Africa, within KZN and in the Amajuba District where Newcastle is located. The study area is bordered by two Local Municipalities, Newcastle and Dannhauser, both of which are located in northern KZN, and which also form part of Amajuba District Municipality. Interchangeably, the area is referred to as either CNR or Ntshingwayo Dam. CNR provides a unique combination of aquatic and terrestrial environments with important natural attributes in an area of natural beauty which could be marketed to Gauteng visitors (Newcastle Municipality, 2014). The City of Newcastle has significant natural environmental

landmasses, characterised by a large expanse of natural grassland with isolated thickets, natural forests, agriculture and forestry (Newcastle Municipality, 2014). The Ntshingwayo Dam is a tourist attraction site with two camping sites, Leokop and Sandford, with stretches of water that is suitable for numerous water sporting activities which include skiing, fishing, canoeing and kite surfing. These activities attract tourists to the city, thereby contributing significantly to its economic development.
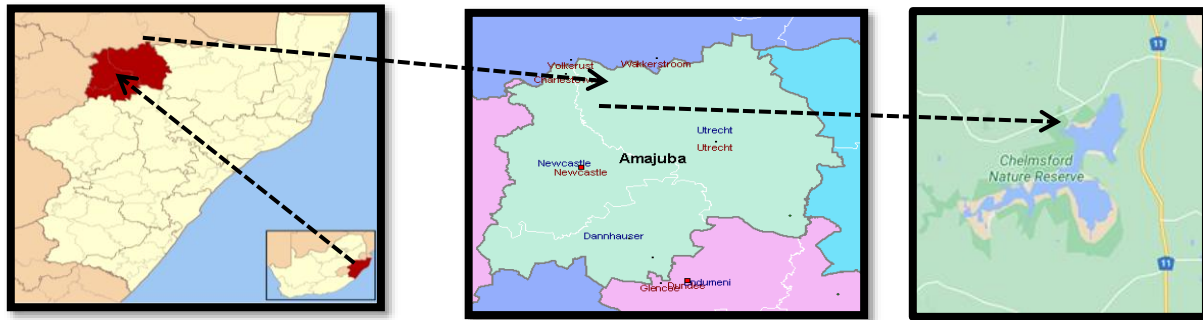
Figure 1: Study area location in South Africa, in KZN, and within Amajuba District
Source: adapted from Newcastle Municipality (2013) and Google Maps

Located on the N11, one of the busiest national roads, the study area is accessible along the N3 towards Durban, the country's most popular domestic tourism destination. In relation to the CNR's proximity to Durban and the N3, the ECR is well placed to provide another or complementary experience to an existing tourism market, while providing multi-pronged benefits as anticipated by the tourism market. Additionally, the Newcastle Integrated Development Plan (Newcastle, 2013) indicates that the area forms part of the Battlefields Route which attracts 7% of foreign visitors to the province annually and approximately 42 000 domestic tourists. The strategic location of the ECR in the context of popular tourism routes is a critical advantage and a cause for further developmental exploration of this tourist attraction.

Data collection approach

The data collection method used is key informant/ stakeholder interviews within a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is exploratory, aimed at understanding and explaining situations, perceptions and attitudes (Bryman, 2016; Mouton, 2014). This is an appropriate research approach for this study since the intention is to examine stakeholder perceptions of the proposed ECR. Mouton (2014: 138) considers research philosophy to be a simple structure if the Three Worlds framework is used, which guides the data collection process:

- World One: characterised by the social and physical reality of everyday life and related knowledge, or in summary, pragmatic interest.
- World Two: focuses on the scientific approach, scientific knowledge and scientific research as well as scientific disciplines, or in summary, epistemic interest.
- World Three: mirrors the philosophy of science, research methodology including research ethics, sociology and the history of science, or, in conclusion, critical interest.

The three stakeholder groups identified in this research are representatives of the three worlds. Firstly, households within rural communities are considered to interface distinctly with World One as lived experiences and social construction of everyday life. Worlds Two and Three focus on mostly expert and critical information from business and government stakeholders. The methodological approach adopted entailed interviews with 50 purposively selected respondents from the ranks of three key stakeholder groups - government, business and community

members. The interviews comprised of open-ended questions which permitted respondents to share critical information based on individual experiences.

The semi-structured key informant questionnaires were divided into three sections: demographic profile and awareness of respondents about the ECR; perceived understanding, benefits and outcomes of the ECR by respondents; and planning challenges and propositions including general comments about the ECR by respondents. The data was analysed thematically and presented in relation to the objective of this study. The questions focused on the perceived understanding, interpretation, planning matters and general issues relating to the value of developing the ECR. Moreover, respondents were also prompted to provide their interpretation of a context-based definition of the ECR. Moreover, the semi-structured key informant questionnaires also aimed to determine whether respondents' perceptions resonate with the literature reviewed.

According to Bryman (2016), population is a significant part of the comprehensive units where a sample is carefully chosen. In this study, to ensure the right population is targeted, this research contextualises population as referring to a group in the universe which possesses characteristics of a similar nature or common interest. As indicated earlier in this study, three stakeholders were identified (business, government and households from communities in the study area). Furthermore, the population in this research includes the entire group to which the researcher wishes to extrapolate common themes and conclusions using a cross-sectional design. A purposive and referral (snowballing) sampling technique was used. Bryman (2016: 696) states that "a snowball sample is a non-probability sample in which the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contact with others". This approach allowed the researcher to identify the best qualified respondents to participate in the study. Five research participants were initially purposefully selected from the local government, households from communities and businesses. Thereafter, in conjunction with the snowballing approach, more respondents were identified for further interviews from the targeted populations. A total of 50 respondents were interviewed. Most of the respondents were community members (21 - 42%) followed by government representatives (17 - 34%) and stakeholders from the business sector (12 - 24%).

Senior leadership and management in government were identified and approached to participate, especially the local municipalities within Amajuba District, for example, Municipal Managers, the Provincial Regional Coordinator, the Tourism Information Officer, the Manager: Local Economic Development, the Director: Town Planning, the Director: Planning and Development, and the Portfolio Chairperson (Councillor): Planning and Economic Development. In addition, businesses active in the value chain of tourism were identified from the Newcastle business directory. Thus, in relation to business stakeholders, they were not confined to those in close proximity to the proposed ECR. Finally, households in close proximity to the proposed ECR were purposively selected to be interviewed.

Data analysis
The data analysis in the next section is undertaken thematically. As Mouton (2014) states, data analysis filters data according to elements and constructs, including variables which help identify trends and patterns to align with the research themes. According to Bryman (2016), the recurrence of a one or more common aspect in collected data justifies it to be considered a theme. Bryman (2016) and Mouton (2014) further note that organising the data, data reduction through categorisation and summarisation, and linking themes and patterns emanating from the results constitute data analysis. The data analysis procedure commenced with the transcription process. This study included the quantifying of common words used to interpret and express

understanding of different phenomenon. The data was analysed by applying content analysis which permits the generation of figures from the collected qualitative data as well as creating meaning and interpretations based on the information collected.

Profiles of respondents

In terms of gender, more male (28) than female respondents (22) were interviewed. Specifically, 10 males compared to 7 female respondents among government representatives, 10 males compared to 2 female respondents among business representatives and 8 males compared to 13 female respondents among community members participated in the study. More female respondents were among the community members interviewed. The responses could reflect that men play a more authoritative role in decision-making in government and business. All government and business respondents had post-secondary matric qualifications. Among the community respondents, however, 9 respondents had completed secondary education, with 7 possessing post-secondary qualifications. Moreover, 4 respondents had attained primary education and 1 community respondent had no formal schooling. With such low levels of education among the community respondents, projects such as the ECR may be considered catalytic in inspiring further learning in relation to developmental, environmental and hospitality aspects, including tourism skills. Using government and business knowledge, community development may easily be achievable, especially developing and mentoring of profitable businesses and job creation ventures in the ECR value chain as well as integration guided by existing and new government policy, including local government legislative frameworks that promote local community development and skills enhancement.

The importance of tourism is also reflected in terms of the profiles of the respondents. In relation to the business stakeholders, 5 of the businesses interviewed are in development consulting, 3 are directly in tourism business operations, 2 in media and marketing, and 1 each in land development and from the aviation industry. Additionally, in terms of local government respondents, 5 respondents were from provincial government, comprising 2 senior executives, 1 manager and 2 regional coordinators, all responsible for the development of tourism within the province. Eleven government respondents constituted of 2 senior executives, 3 senior directors in planning who are responsible for broad planning and development matters, 2 human resource-development officials in middle management, 1 project manager, 1 research officer, and 2 respondents from lower management in tourism. For both businesses and government, most respondents are directly or indirectly involved in aspects linked to tourism which reinforce that the ECR is viewed as a tourism project. The diversity in terms of the profiles of the respondents reinforces the importance of examining stakeholder perceptions to ensure that different perspectives, voices and interests are considered.

Results and discussion

The findings in this study are grouped into two themes that relate to the research questions posed in the introductory section: perceptions and understanding of the ECR among the respondents, and perceived socio-economic and environmental impacts of the proposed ECR.

Perceptions and understanding of ECR

Several environmental and ecotourism-related issues were raised among respondents to qualify their opinions in relation to the ECR, and how their understanding of the ECR was expressed. The majority of the respondents were precise about what ECR entails. The responses generally showed the dominance of environmental considerations, specifically, key terms used were 'conservation', 'protected area', 'ecosystem', 'sustainability', 'environmental issues', and 'nature'. This was followed by tourism aspects, such as 'development', 'ecotourism',

'attracting visitors' and 'nature-based-tourism'. Table 1 summarises the main responses in relation to three aspects: conservation area, nature resort and development. Differences are noted with more government and business stakeholders identifying nature resort compared to development. On the other hand, development was more prominent among community members compared to government and business stakeholders.

Table 1: Understanding of ECR by respondents

	Government (N=17)	Business (N=12)	Community (N=21)	TOTAL (N=50)
Conservation area	5 (29%)	2 (17%)	2 (10%)	9 (18%)
Nature resort	7 (42%)	7 (58%)	4 (19%)	18 (36%)
Development	5 (29%)	3 (25%)	15 (71%)	23 (46%)

It is interesting to note that only a few responses included cultural aspects which were generally seen as complementary to the core component of focusing on environmental/ natural resources and tourism. This does not necessarily imply that stakeholders neglect or ignore cultural dimensions but suggests an important recognition that eco-cultural initiatives are intricately linked to well-maintained and marketable natural resource assets as the basis for developing the ECR. However, cultural aspects need to be integrated and highlighted in the planning process from the inception of a project. This is particularly relevant in the South African context, where cultural activities are more likely to generate direct business opportunities for local communities related to tourism. Local rural communities in particular have rich cultural traditions, including arts and crafts, which can be promoted in ECR initiatives.

One respondent mentioned that an ECR is a project that enables benefits for various stakeholders. In terms of the perceived environmental benefits of ECR, the responses emphasise conservation/ protection of wildlife, improved environmental/ protected area management, and sustainability as being the main benefits. Additionally, environmental benefits were linked to awareness raising, increasing stakeholder involvement and promoting lifestyle changes while concurrently creating opportunities to 'experience' and interact with nature (both for tourists and local residents). In line with the reviewed literature, the development of nature-based tourism may foster biodiversity conservation, but in some cases, it can result in policies that are a threat to biodiversity conservation (Tisdell & Wilson, 2012). For example, some of the respondents noted that ECR includes tourism development and this could undermine the integrity of the natural environment as well as cultural assets, which will eventually threaten sustainability. Since the natural beauty of many destinations is the main reason tourists visit the area, it is essential that the hospitality industry does not disturb the flora and fauna while hotels are being built and resorts developed (Ranade, 2012). This resonates with the respondents' expressions of their understanding of ECR and associated environmental benefits. Significantly, the level of respondents' knowledge about the ECR prospects is likely to be a vital contribution, including the management of expectations and ensuring that preconceived understanding is aligned to actual reality.

One of the tourism business respondents highlighted that 'biodiversity without business cannot sustain itself'. They further elaborated that biodiversity generally requires funding. Additionally, the importance of the business and development components was also emphasised by government officials, with one respondent stating that ECR is 'development within a protected area that embraces the environment and culture'. Thus, it is clear that within communities, ECRs are not perceived merely as conservation areas for the protection of nature. Their role in promoting development is important as indicated in the literature, especially conservation tourism, responsible tourism and sustainable tourism. This position was supported by all the stakeholders interviewed. However, it is important to note that the stakeholders

placed different emphasis on components of ECR. Specifically, government respondents place more emphasis on the 'eco' and 'equitable distribution' components, underscoring the importance of nature conservation and social benefits which align to government policies. For example, one government official stated 'development in a protected area that puts nature first and adds value to the ecosystem' and another stated 'envisaged project supported for all stakeholders to benefit'. Business respondents focused more on the 'resort' component, for example, one respondent stated 'business opportunities to participate in the green economy' while another said 'investment targeting tourism'. Community member focused on economic aspects ('bring more jobs in the area', 'bring investors thus developing the area' and 'living standard of household is likely to improve significantly' as examples of responses) and cultural considerations (for example, 'an opportunity to profile unique Zulu culture' and 'to celebrate who we are as a people'. Furthermore, one respondent stated 'an opportunity to market local culture' and another indicated 'sale of arts and crafts', which links to economic benefits as well. One business respondent noted the link to the natural resource base stating that the ECR is a 'resort in a protected environmental that has a link with world heritage sites'.

The majority of all the stakeholder groups (10 government officials, all the businesses and 17 of the community respondents) viewed the role of government (specifically the Newcastle Municipality as the local authority) where the ECR is located as critical and central to the proposed ECR's success. Engaging with the local municipality as champions of the ECR is key to attracting other public-sector departments or private stakeholders with an investment appetite for the proposed ECR project. In support of the above, one of the government respondents indicated that 'national and provincial environment authorities, EKZNW as custodian of the area and Newcastle Municipality', are central to the ECR development. Therefore, it is clear that government's role in development, especially in ecotourism and in conservation tourism (particularly in protected areas), can play a facilitative and regulatory role. To ensure environmental sustainability, many tourism operators and other businesses have sustainability policies of their own, guided by legislative imperatives (McCabe et al., 2012: 169), as it is with the area where the ECR is proposed. Some respondents were specific about how local government should implement this project to derive tourism benefits, for example, including the ECR as a tourism catalyst project in the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and the Sector Development Framework (SDF), resourcing agencies to marketing the ECR, and developing and attracting ideal skills to maximise revenue from tourism development.

Socio-economic and environmental impacts of the ECR

When asked specifically about the social and economic benefits of the ECR in Newcastle, respondents' views expressed varied in many respects. For instance, jobs, skills, unemployment, recreation, environmental awareness, changing of cultural stereotypes, financial benefits (revenues) and the upliftment of standards of living were indicated as direct benefits to Newcastle; associated mainly with tourism activities. This is shown in Table 2 that summarises the main responses thematically. This responses again reflect higher expectations in relation to the anticipated economic injection and benefits (including in relation to job creation) that the ECR may contribute to the development of the area.

Table 2: Main socio-economic and environmental benefits of the proposed Newcastle ECR

	Government (N=17)	Business (N=12)	Community (N=21)	TOTAL (N=50)
Jobs	3 (18%)	4 (33%)	5 (24%)	12 (24%)
Skills development	2 (11.5%)	2 (17%)	1 (4.5%)	5 (10%)
Recreation	2 (11.5%)	2 (17%)	1 (4.5%)	5 (10%)
Environmental awareness	3 (18%)	0	4 (19%)	7 (14%)

Cultural	2 (11.5%)	1 (8%)	0	3 (6%)
Revenue/ tax/ rates	3 (18%)	2 (17%)	5 (24%)	10 (20%)
Socio-economic	2 (11.5%)	1 (8%)	5 (24%)	8 (16%)

Generally, and as perceived by this study's findings, Reddy and Wilkes (2015: 323) emphasise that "tourism has been seen as an economic activity that has two unique characteristics, low impact on nature and great capacity on social inclusion". This has relevance for the proposed ECR, which also aligns with the general economic narratives such as an inclusive economy. This is further emphasised by one of the respondents who expresses how complex the Newcastle ECR can be: 'highlights the rich history, as a family attraction that is business/ traveller friendly'.

Comments by respondents expressed benefits such as 'attractiveness of Newcastle as a destination over weekends' (a business respondent), development prospects such as the 'creation of facilities to match client needs' (a government response) as well as 'addressing unemployment' (a community member response). Furthermore, some respondents expressed their opinion of the ECR as having an 'international appeal to an international market', with multiple 'opportunities for local entrepreneurs to benefit from tourism'. Significantly, there was a strong voice supporting the ECR as a major 'Gross Domestic product (GDP) contributor through rates and taxes' (a government respondent). These responses reinforce views expressed by respondents that this ECR proposed for Newcastle will have tourism benefits, with one respondent stating that the ECR may 'broaden tourism scope and opportunities' in the area. This will create more jobs and contribute to socio-economic development, as reflected in responses from the majority of all the stakeholders. Including its location for tourism recreation, views from respondents attest to the multi-layered nature of the proposed ECR, including the varied business opportunities based on the aspects indicated as attributes to economic growth.

Respondents identified a range of challenges associated with the proposed Newcastle ECR. Respondents presented multifaceted issues in line with planning, operational and marketing activities. For example, respondents' voices echo statements such as 'post-operations maintenance' and 'marketing and promotion to fill the resort, through radio and television', as well as maintaining it as a consistently good area for 'family entertainment, with affordable family packages'. Significantly, one of the respondents stated that 'improper planning and an improper feasibility study will have implications to the development', and without empirical evidence, these may be of concern to stakeholders. Additionally, respondents emphasised 'stakeholder agreement, accessibility and internal infrastructure' as being among the major challenges. Moreover, 'water preservation' was cited as another key challenge, considering the significant role the dam plays in the region, compared to it being the tourist drawcard for the ECR. The need to protect the environment to ensure ecological integrity and sustainable tourism development was also noted by mainly government officials who highlighted the importance of wildlife protection (especially, dealing with rhino poaching and illegal hunting which was highlighted by 5 government, 3 business and 2 community respondents). Balancing economic and environmental interests was also highlighted as a key issue in the literature review section.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the perceptions and interests of key stakeholders (local communities, as the immediate and directly affected party, as well as business and government) pertaining to the proposed ECR in the CNR. The key research questions related to perceptions and awareness of what constitutes the ECR and perceived socio-economic and environmental impacts of the proposed ECR. Stakeholder perceptions and interests are deemed to be critical for sustainable

ECR development. The main findings reveal that the stakeholders linked ECRs with conservation, sustainable development and tourism-related opportunities. The stakeholders were also generally aware of the proposed ECR. However, their understanding thereof varied depending on their institutional affiliation as well as their levels of awareness of what constitutes an ECR and the specifics of the proposed project. Additionally, respondents perceived the planned ECR more in terms of what they believe its objective should be which were associated with differing stakeholder roles. Respondents also viewed the proposed resort as a tourist destination with huge economic development potential for the Amajuba District and the province of KZN as a whole, if implemented successfully.

The study reveals that the proposed ECR has stakeholder support. It is perceived to have the potential to increase tourism opportunities and enhance the level of environmental awareness among both would-be visitors and the broader community. To ensure continued stakeholder support, stakeholder engagement and extensive awareness campaigns are needed to ensure that the ECR and its environmental and conservation aims are extensively communicated, including the business potential perceived by respondents. This includes the development as well as the incorporation of the Newcastle ECR as part of the key attractions on the tourism route. As a result, marketing is therefore critical to creating the demand conditions for a green tourist economy, as indicated by Reddy and Wilkes (2015). This is similar to respondents' views that this ECR project should also be marketed both locally and internationally. The purpose should be to attract investors and travellers alike, enhancing what already exists and securing additional material resources for future growth.

Stakeholder engagement is intrinsic to sustainable tourism because "the more local communities or landowners can gain from such activities, the greater is their economic incentive to conserve the natural asset that helps to generate this tourism" (Tisdell and Wilson, 2012: 393). In addition, it is recommended that an ECR stakeholder forum be considered and should convene monthly, with the planning team reporting on the project's progress and challenges. This forum should have the capacity to deliberate on issues relating to the resort and make decisions in this regard. The chairing of the forum should be rotated in order to avoid monopoly by any one stakeholder. The rotational model is also symbolic and will ensure that stakeholders are more than mere spectators in the process. The involvement of local communities, in particular, in tourism endeavours not only benefits them but also improves the quality of the tourism experience of tourists, and the integration of these different aspects of tourism and culture increases the long-term viability of tourism as an industry.

The challenges identified in the literature link primarily to poor stakeholder engagement and planning. Thus, a key recommendation emanating from this research is to ensure that extensive stakeholder engagement takes place and that benefits are foregrounded during the planning and implementation stages of the ECR. Protected areas and natural reserves have strong economic linkages with tourism and provide a significant opportunity for community development and nature conservation. The importance of involving all stakeholders, especially communities, in the different stages of the ecotourism development processes is critical for sustaining natural reserves and protected areas for future generations, and ensuring that socio-economic opportunities are realised.

In terms of limitations, the study is focused on a particular planned resort in Newcastle Municipality and caution must therefore be exercised when projecting the study findings to similar initiatives. The qualitative approach, focusing on key stakeholders, also limits generalisations but contributes to exploring key issues and providing insights. Also, the study needed to be completed within a given timeline and, therefore, did not include an examination of stakeholder participation in the establishment of the facility.

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