

Socio-cultural Impacts of Tourism on the Rural Areas within the World Heritage Sites – The Case of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

South Africa qualified for world heritage site status after rejoining the United Nations in 1994. Currently, KwaZulu-Natal which is one of the nine provinces in South Africa has two World Heritage Sites, The Greater St Lucia Wetland Park recently (01 November 2007) renamed iSimangaliso and uKhahlamba Drakensberg. In 1999 iSimangaliso was listed as the first World Heritage Site and was followed by uKhahlamba Drakensberg in 2000. Since then these heritage sites have become major tourist attractions. The focus of this study is on iSimangaliso Wetland Park. There are several communities that reside within the borders of this world heritage site and are also surrounded by rural areas that are relatively pristine and have characteristics of ecological importance. It is through these areas that tourists who enter the world heritage sites travel. Most tourists stop along the road to interact with the local people and purchase art and craft and other products. A few kilometres from the entrance of iSimangaliso World Heritage Park there is a Cultural Village and homes that have been opened up for 'home stays' to tourists who want to have closer contact with local communities. These activities and many others are the attempts to promote tourism development which is seen as having a potential of providing both direct and indirect economic benefits to local people. Tourism development has, in many cases been associated with discernible changes in the culture and lifestyles of affected communities if it is not well managed. In South Africa research on the impacts of tourism on rural environments within and around the world heritage sites has not been documented till now. This study explores the perceived socio-cultural impacts of tourism by residents of iSimangaliso World Heritage Park and focuses on the first decade since the park received a world heritage status which was followed by an increase in host-tourist encounters.

KEYWORDS: *iSimangaliso, World Heritage Site, pristine environment, ecological importance, socio-cultural impacts.*

INTRODUCTION

Most rural areas in South Africa are characterized by underdevelopment, unemployment, low literacy rates and a lack of basic infrastructure. This description fits the rural areas within and around iSimangaliso World Heritage Park. Though undeveloped, these areas are rich in cultural qualities which can be packaged as tourism products. Cultural tourism in its various forms such as cultural villages, heritage routes, art and craft and various local dances are promoted in order to provide a variety of products that are offered to tourists who visit the world heritage site. "Home stays" have also been introduced and offered to tourists who want to spend more time with local community members. The local government has also put a concerted effort in encouraging the infiltration of tourism in these rural areas. This infiltration of tourism into these pristine rural environments with low levels of development could, psychologically and culturally damaging. With this infiltration which encourages mingling

between tourists and local community members, socio-cultural impacts of tourism are unavoidable.

Socio-cultural impacts refer **to the changes in the norms and values of the society that are more apparent in the short term but lead to longer term and gradual change in a society's values, beliefs and cultural practices (Brunt & Courtney, 1999)**. This change is exacerbated by tourists who demand instant local cultural products. The extent to which socio-cultural impacts are experienced by host communities depends on a number of factors such as the number and type of tourists, cohesiveness of the community, duration of stay of residents in the area, the extent of their economic dependence on tourism, the nature and pace of tourism development in the area, as well as the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the host community **(Ratz, 2003)**.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Tourists' attitudes and motivations for travel are gradually changing and most tourists now view travel not as a "vacation" but as a learning experience. Their quest to learn about different socio-cultural experiences and ways of life entails contact with members of local communities. South Africa is currently witnessing an increase in the number of tourists who travel to rural areas where, apart from appreciating flora and fauna, get contact with local people with the purpose of understanding and/or experiencing a culture which is different from their own thus broadening their knowledge base and personal experiences. This trend has led to a situation where tourists stay over in the homes while local community member leading to what is referred to as "home stays". In these circumstances local community members open up their homes without any modification or change in any of the usual way of life to tourists. These tourists mainly consume socio-cultural products and their source of fascination is the understanding of different cultural and unusual experiences which result from close contact with indigenous groups of people **(Boniface, 1995; Lubbe, 2003; Smith, 2003)**. Although tourists seek authenticity, it may be difficult to distinguish between true authenticity and what has been termed staged authenticity since they are foreigners and they do not know anything else. Staged authenticity refers to a situation where some activities and performances have been contrived so as to seem authentic to a person who does not know better **(MacCannell, 1988)**.

In South Africa staged authenticity is evident in some cultural villages where the culture is 'performed' to entertain the tourists. At the end of the 'show' actors return to the backstage where they return to their real cultural roles and normal daily activities **(Richards, 1977; Bennett & George, 2004)**. The 'actors' communicate with tourists during and after the 'performance.'

These situations bring tourists and hosts together thus generating potential conflict between the two groups. The analysis of host-guest impacts is a function of the interaction between these two groups and will depend upon among other things:

- (a) the nature and extent of social, economic and cultural differences between tourists and hosts
- (b) the ratio of visitors to residents
- (c) the distribution and visibility of tourist developments and
- (d) the speed and intensity of development.

Many studies have concentrated mainly on the negative impacts of tourism and disregarded the positive impacts which go beyond the injection of foreign exchange in local economies. Since it received a world heritage status, iSimangaliso Wetland Park is experiencing an increase in the number of tourists therefore there is an equivalent increase in the rate of contact between tourists and local people. Local people are encouraged to participate in tourism development thus providing an impetus for a further increase in the interaction between tourists and local community members. The participation of local people in the

decision making process and tourism related businesses has been seen as one of the ways in which negative impacts of tourism can be minimised (**Pedersen, 2002**).

OBJECTIVES

Objectives of this study are as follows:

- To establish the perceptions of the people living within iSimangaliso World Heritage Park towards the presence of tourists in the park.
- To establish the level of involvement of the community members in tourism development.
- To find out if there has been any change in the lifestyle of the community from interacting with tourists.
- To recommend an approach that can be used to minimize socio-cultural impacts of tourism in the study area.

METHODOLOGY

A random sample of 360 respondents was drawn from three communities that reside within iSimangaliso World Heritage Site. The questionnaires were directed mainly to the heads of families. These communities were selected because of their geographical location and close proximity to the main road into the world heritage site which makes it easy for them to have constant interaction with both domestic and international tourists. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to collect and analyze data. The questionnaires had both open and close ended questions. Open ended questions were used to establish respondents' perceptions towards the socio cultural impacts of tourism on their families and communities as well as their perceptions towards tourism development.

The questions were phrased to establish areas that are affected by tourism which include but not limited to the following: individual behaviour, family relationships, collective lifestyles, safety levels, value systems, creative expressions, traditional ceremonies and community organizations and moral conduct. Five point Likert scaled statements ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree were used to establish respondents' perceptions towards a wide range of socio-cultural impacts of tourism in their areas. The basic procedure employed in developing the scale included the identification and generation of socio-cultural impacts variables which were used to formulate attitudinal statements. Person to person interviews were conducted and participant observations were done to provide qualitative insights and an in depth understanding of the respondents' daily lives and culture.

Various data analysis procedures and statistical procedures were employed to analyze data. For the purpose of this paper, data were analyzed using cross-tabulations and the significance of differences between respondents was determined using chi-square tests. Significance levels were set at $p < 0.05$.

FINDINGS

The findings indicated that indeed there are socio-cultural impacts that resulted from an increase in the number of tourism who visit iSimangaliso world Heritage Park. Much as tourism is perceived as a solution to the problem of unemployment and poverty, respondents indicated that there are inherent negative and positive impacts that seem to increase with an increase in tourism development.

PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE PRESENCE OF TOURISTS

An attempt was made to seek the perceptions of local community members towards the presence of tourists which would indicate the threshold of tolerance of tourists by local people. The responses in **Table 1** reflect that people who live within iSimangaliso Wetland Park generally have a positive attitude towards the presence of tourists. This means that for

local people benefits accruing from the presence of tourists outweigh the negative effects of tourism. What is of concern with these responses is that local people do not at this point see the protection of tourists as their responsibility and yet safety and security of tourists encourages return visits as well as new visitors. The responses were as follows:

TABLE 1. Perceptions towards the presence of tourists

	<i>Percentage</i>
Tourists are a common sight in this area	88
I like seeing tourists in this area	79
More tourists should be encouraged to come to this area	77
Tourists' visit to this area make the park known internationally	70
I would not mind if the number of tourists increased	70
Tourists should communicate more with the local people	67
Tourists should spend more time at iSimangaliso Wetland Park	65
Tourists are friendly towards the local people	59
Local people should protect tourists against criminals	49

N=360 Some respondents gave more than one answer

INVOLVEMENT OF THE COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The pace of tourism development is undeniably fast and that is welcome news to local communities who stand to reap economic benefits. The magnitude and pace of tourism development is usually accompanied by both positive and negative impacts. Participation in tourism development has been identified as one of the factors that have the potential of influencing the socio-economic impacts on tourism. Studies have indicated that the greater the participation of communities in tourism activities the greater the impact on the tourism landscape and community lifestyles. Respondents were asked to indicate the levels of involvement of community members in tourism development. The findings indicated that the majority (58%) were not actively involved but they recognized the indirect economic benefits that accrued from the increased tourism activities. The respondents who expressed their involvement indicated that they either owned small businesses or were employed in various tourism related businesses. Some respondents anticipated that with further tourism development more opportunities would be created. Respondents were also asked to express their feelings towards further increase in tourism and whether the increase in tourism development should be restricted. Responses again showed that the majority of the respondents would like to see more tourism facilities and infrastructure so that more tourists would visit the resource (Table 2). There seemed to be a strong positive relationship between the extent of their involvement in tourism development and their perceptions towards an increase in tourism development. Those who had businesses understood tourism issues more and their perceptions were more positive towards tourism development than those who were less involved in tourism.

The findings also indicated that the majority of the local community members support tourism development in their areas. Statements that were asked from the respondents included the following: **“further growth will result in overcrowding”** **“the community should take steps to restrict tourism development”** **“locals are being exploited because of the growth in tourism”**. Table 2 depicts the relationship between respondents whose level of involvement is high in terms of business ownership or employment and those who are not directly involved in tourism activities. Those who are more involved reflected more positive reaction towards tourism development and an increase in the number of tourists who visit their areas that those who are less involved.

TABLE 2. Perceptions towards tourism growth and development

	<i>Tourism business owners (%)</i>	<i>Non-tourism business owner (%)</i>
More facilities should be built to encourage tourists to visit the area	88	62
Tourists should stay longer in the area	79	21
More infrastructure should be built	77	23
Further tourism growth will result in overcrowding	38	62
An increase in the number of tourists will lead to an exploitation of the locals	35	65
There should be more activities that will encourage tourists to stay longer	67	33
Further tourism growth will result in over use deterioration of facilities	33	67
The community should take steps to restrict tourism development	52	48
Increase in tourism will generate pollution	64	36

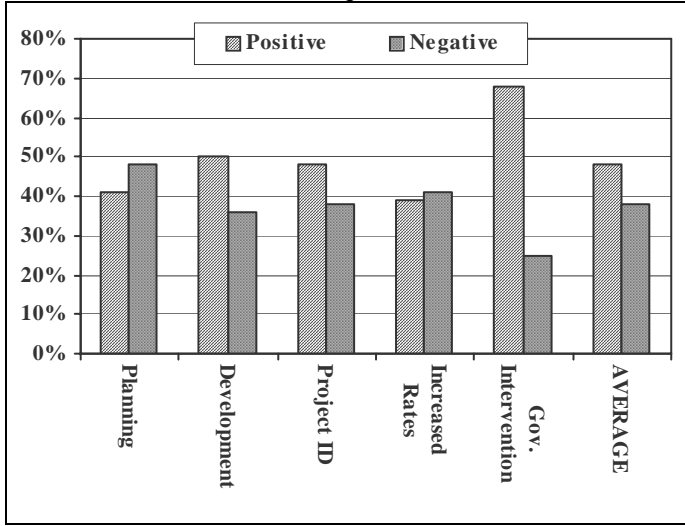
N=360 Some respondents gave more than one answer

The respondents were also asked to reveal their perceptions pertaining to their *levels of involvement in tourism decision-making*. A significant number of respondents showed a moderate response (31%-49%) in support of their involvement and participation in tourism decision-making in the study area. One of the prominent strategic planning objectives and policy stipulations of the White Paper on Tourism in South Africa (DEAT, 1996) is to make tourism sustainable and community driven which requires that communities should be involved at all levels of decision making. The respondents further indicated that there are inadequate decision-making processes in place in the study area, hence, they expressed that they were less involved in planning and decision making regarding further development.

The majority of the respondents also showed a moderate response to other statements relating to decision-making. Respondents had to respond to statements such as the following: "local communities are satisfied (a) with their level of involvement in tourism planning, (b) tourism development, (c) the identification of tourism related projects, (d) the increase of local rates due to tourism and government support."

Figure 1 indicates that 48% of the respondents supported the integrated planning and development initiatives, whereas 37% did not support such initiatives. A reflection on various activities shows that government support was the most positively perceived (68%) initiative. The reason for this is that with the advent of recent democratic elections and leadership, local communities are highly optimistic that there will be extensive government support in matters of community development in general, tourism development and planning in particular.

FIGURE 1: Participation of community members in integrated planning and tourism development



CHANGE IN THE LIFESTYLE OF THE COMMUNITY EMANATING FROM INTERACTING WITH TOURISTS

The findings of the study indicated that there are obvious direct and indirect socio-cultural impacts that have resulted from an increase in tourism development in the study area. Local people have tended to be more accommodative of outside influences brought by an increase in tourism development. Respondents were given an opportunity to express their opinions based on their experiences and observations regarding their interactions with tourists. Their responses were later clustered in relation to the socio-cultural statements which had been elicited from the literature. What is evident from the findings is that the respondents who are older expressed more concerns about the issue of lifestyle change than younger ones. Their responses are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Perceptions towards the general behaviour of individuals

	35 yrs and above(%)	18 – 25 yrs (%)
Local people tend to change their normal behaviour in order to please tourists	88	55
Local people’s dress code tends to follow that of tourists making it difficult to distinguish a tourist from a local person	82	52
An increase in the number of tourists tends to encourage local people to copy the character and general behaviour of the tourists	79	49
An increase in the number of tourists has weakened the cohesion of the local community	75	38
Interacting with tourists leads to a deterioration of local languages	77	26
Local people are treated rather that inferior than equal by tourists	70	25
Local culture is corroded as a result of tourism	70	23
Traditional culture is being commercialized for the sake of tourists	67	22
Tourism encourages a variety of cultural activities by locals	65	20
Meeting tourists promotes cross cultural change and understanding	59	20

N=360 Some respondents gave more than one answer

When asked if “they had noticed any disruption of family life due to the presence of tourists” the findings revealed that the majority of local community members disagreed with the statement. The question of family disruption was expanded to include the community. Respondents had to react to statements such as “Community life has been disrupted by tourism development” The responses indicate that the majority of the younger respondents did not agree with the statements but the older generation seemed to be concerned with the changes in family and community life as a result of tourism.

Respondents were also asked to show their perceptions towards the statement “tourism has resulted in greater employment opportunities for females”. On the whole respondents agreed with the statement. Employment of women has become a new phenomenon since women in rural areas used to be home keepers. The increase in tourism development has allowed women to start their own businesses outside the home environment. Some men are still finding the absence of their wives during the day hard to accept and in some instances has caused conflict within some household. These businesses have also given these women some financial independence and catapulted their positions to being breadwinners. Some men still feel threatened by new positions of women within their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study have indicated the fast pace of tourism development in the study area has been accompanied by an increase of both positive and negative socio-cultural impacts. The pace of tourism development in the study necessitates that socio-cultural impacts be acknowledged and managed. The findings of this study have made it evident that an increase in the number of tourists is perceived positively by local community members especially those that are actively involved in tourism development. Various methods can be used to ameliorate negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism in the study area.

On the basis of the findings it is recommended that there should be an approach that can be used to minimize socio-cultural impacts of tourism in the study area. At this point it is appropriate to recommend that the authorities set up a structure that will monitor the interactions between the tourists and the local communities. Local communities should be made aware of the consequences of unguided and rampant interactions with tourists. Awareness and some education about the significance of protecting the local identity and cultural heritage would help in protecting the tangible assets of the local community. Much as it is important to boost the local economy through tourism it is equally important to protect the integrity of the local culture and heritage. Also worth mentioning is that local communities should be actively involved in tourism development so that they have insight into the dynamics of the tourism industry and the socio-cultural impacts that accompany tourism development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to conclude that the socio-cultural impacts of tourism on the rural areas that have emerged in the study area are highly influenced by the national policies that have come with the new democratic order in South Africa. Some of these policies provided a legislative framework and guidelines for tourism promotion and development in KwaZulu-Natal. In an attempt to curb negative impacts, tourism development and promotion should be guided by the core values and principles of development. These core values and principles include, responsible tourism; community-driven tourism; integrated and sustainable tourism; peace, safety and security in tourism; and tourism assessment and accountability.

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