Awareness of Cultural Tourism among Stakeholders in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa within the Context of Sustainable Participative Local Economic Development

Dr Yvonne Celinhlanhla Cele*[1], Prof. Muhammad Ehsanul Hoque[2]

[1]*Human Resources: Talent and Skills Manager, Eskom Holdings, Pietermaritzburg, 3201, South Africa, Mabikayv@gmail.com, (+27 64 244 6709)*

[2]*Full Professor and HoD: Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Department of Public Health Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, Pretoria, South Africa, Muhammad.esanul@gmail.com, (+27 82 592 8488)*

Abstract

The study examines the awareness among the stakeholders on KwaZulu-Natal's (KZN) culture tourism potential within the framework of sustainable and inclusive local economic development (LED). The study applies the mixed-methods method, combining quantitative from 71 respondents and qualitative from 12 in-depth interviews among members of the community, the authorities, and traditional leaders. The study's findings highlight the universal support for integrating the culture of the past into the core education system to long-term enhance awareness and respect for local ways. Additionally, the stakeholders were ready to engage with the tourists and provide unofficial assistance to guide them, showing community propensity for engagement in tourism business. The study, also observed limited awareness on the department's plans, including youth and women empowerment and support for small businesses. The departmental support to culture-derived tourism development came out lukewarmly, citing the lack of visible leaders and organized grassroots events. The study concludes there is a need for greater open planning, greater communication, and people-centered strategies focusing on education, capacity development, and stakeholder engagement to enable the scope of cultural tourism which enhances inclusive economic development in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The study confirms the participatory development theory through the central role played by awareness and stakeholder inclusion that unlocks the socio-economic strength of culture-derived tourism.

Keywords

Cultural Tourism, heritage, participative economy, sustainability

Introduction

Cultural tourism is now being viewed as a dynamic industry that not only improves heritage preservation but also socio-economic development. Cultural tourism is well-documented for its contribution to fostering sustainable local economic development (LED), especially in areas of dense cultural landscape [1]. On a global scale, cultural tourism has become popular as a means of fostering sustainability, cultural conservation, and community development. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [1] acknowledges that cultural tourism has the potential to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). This, however, depends on participatory governance, stakeholder involvement, as well as capacity building [2]. Tourism researchers emphasize that effective cultural tourism needs to go beyond shallow cultural display to engage communities in meaningful storytelling and decision-making [3]. Stakeholder awareness and empowerment are thus conditions for the sustainable execution of cultural tourism initiatives.

Africa's cultural tourism serves a dual purpose—economic development and a mechanism of recovery of native identity. In spite of its prospects, implementation is still patchy on the continent because of limited awareness, infrastructural constraints, and policy gaps [4]. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) initiatives have been touted as a silver bullet with local stakeholders prioritized at the center of tourism initiatives [5]. Whereas low awareness of stakeholders normally restricts actual participation in tourism planning as well as benefit-sharing [6]. Development thus continues to be top-down, entrenching marginalization instead of empowerment. In South Africa, cultural tourism is positioned as a priority sector within national development policy, such as the National Tourism Sector Strategy (NTSS) and the Tourism Act of 2014 [7]. Both documents promote community involvement and transformation through tourism. Although post-apartheid policies attempted to democratize tourism development, albeit rural communities, small enterprises, and traditional authorities still lack access to crucial information, training, and finance [8].

LED initiatives aim at decentralization, civic involvement, and locally initiated economic planning [9]. In tourism, LED models increase the involvement of stakeholders in the fair distribution of benefits [10]. Meaningful involvement, however, is contingent upon stakeholder awareness, interest, and the presence of enabling institutions. As emerged from recent South African case studies, capacity building and sensitization are necessary to enable tourism-led LED in impoverished communities [11;12].

KwaZulu-Natal is famous for rich racial diverse culture, historical battlefields, creative craft markets, and jubilant festivals. Cultural sites like the birthplace of Shaka the native King of Zulus, the Reed Dance (Umkhosi Womhlanga), and the iSimangaliso Wetland Park have immense potential for tourism growth [13]. For tourism, despite its strengths, KZN has structural weaknesses: inadequate marketing of cultural heritage, irregular coordination of stakeholders, and a lack of local awareness of tourism opportunities. A study conducted by [13] established that the local traditional leaders of Umzumbe Municipality, as custodians of culture, are not necessarily consulted during tourism planning because of policy uncertainty and ineffective communication. Similarly, [8] cite insufficient co-management institutions in such heritage sites as iSimangaliso, which constrains long-term sustainability. [11] highlights that rural coastal communities remain uninformed about tourism plans devised for their localities, undermining the participatory aspect of LED.

Stakeholder Theory proposes broad consultation and co-decision-making in development planning [14]. Stakeholder consciousness governmental and non-governmental is a precondition for sustainable long-term vision in cultural tourism [15]. In KZN, the degree of awareness influences tourism results. For instance, urban entrepreneurial stakeholders are better informed and engaged in decision-making compared to rural stakeholders, who are disenfranchised because of communication disconnections and logistical remoteness [13; 12].

Whereas national and provincial policy documents position cultural tourism at the forefront as an LED tool, empirical evidence of stakeholder awareness in KwaZulu-Natal is limited. Current research concentrates mainly on tourist behavior, marketing, or environmental sustainability, with limited emphasis on awareness among the full spectrum of stakeholders engaged in tourism development [8]. An understanding of such gaps is necessary to re-align cultural tourism planning to participatory LED goals. This research attempts to fill this gap by investigating current awareness and participation levels of stakeholders in KZN.

Methods

In the study, mixed methods research design incorporating quantitative and qualitative methods was employed in examining awareness among stakeholders and how cultural tourism can be harnessed in ushering in sustainable participative local economic development in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province.

Its quantitative component was the administration of a standardized questionnaire to gather data on the level of awareness in tourism concerns. The questionnaire was taken from a random sample of 71 respondents who are members of the community, small businesses, municipal governments, and provincial tourism officers. The items were closed-ended questions rated on Likert scales. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics with the use of the SPSS computer program.

The qualitative aspect of the study used semi-structured interviews to gain rich information on the stakeholders' experiences in the context of cultural tourism. Purposive sampling guided the selection of 12 participants, including traditional leaders, managers of the sites of historical significance, and tourism officials, to undergo detailed interviews. After getting the consent of the participants, all the conversations, including the interviews, were taped and transcribed word for word. Thematic analysis was carried out to uncover common themes and tendencies, based on the tenets of the theory of participatory development, to form the interpretative framework of the study.

The research was carried out in line with rigorous ethical guidelines. Approval was requested from, and granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Ethics Committee, and signed informed consent was obtained from participants before data were collected. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were protected through participant coding and de-identification of data when reporting results.

Results

Table 1 describes results on the stakeholder awareness levels of the KwaZulu-Natal Province's cultural tourism sector against the backdrop of the tenets of sustainable and inclusive local economic development. The most positive awareness indicator is the agreement that the marketing of the culture can be done through embedding it in the fundamental education system of South Africa, with an aggregate score of 4.18 (SD = 0.639). This is closely followed by the willingness among the subjects to communicate with visiting tourists, who gave it a mean score of 3.62 (SD = 0.930). This is followed, although with negligible variation, by confidence expressed among the subjects of their ability to accommodate the number of visiting tourists in their areas of residence to the best of their capacity, with an average score of 3.55 (SD = 0.923).

Table 1: Stakeholder Awareness of Cultural Tourism in KZN Descriptive Statistics

Statements	Mean	SD
The KZN tourism department leadership is actively supporting the cultural tourism activities that are happening within our area	3.28	1.003
The KZN tourism department leadership is actively involved in supporting the small businesses operating in the cultural tourism industry	3.27	.910
I am aware of the tourism strategic plan that aims to develop and improve the skills and knowledge of the youth participating in cultural tourism in the province	2.94	1.081
I am aware of the tourism department's plan aiming at refining and showcasing the cultural talents and knowledge of people from the local level in the province	3.04	1.101
I am aware of the tourism department's plan that it seeks to strategically prepare our communities in the province to become cultural tourism destinations	2.99	1.102
The inculcation of culture heritage can be achieved through the integration into the basic education curriculum	4.18	.639
In the past five years I have seen visitors coming to visit my area (township, rural, urban)	3.11	1.225
The KZN leadership has been actively involved in supporting the small businesses operating in the tourism industry	3.00	.971
I have developed interest in working with tourists	3.62	.931
I fully understand how to interact with tourists when I meet them in my area or town	3.55	.923

To substantiate the quantitative findings, qualitative data gathered through participant interviews offered deeper insights into stakeholder awareness and perceptions of cultural tourism in KwaZulu-Natal.

Promotion of Culture through Education

Participant 10 passionately articulated the need to embed cultural heritage within the education system, stating:

"If I had my way, I would ensure that all schools, from basic education through to high school, incorporate culture and heritage into their curricula. I believe this is the most effective way to instil cultural values in our children—capture them young, so that as they grow, they grow up proud of our traditions and heritage. The government could play a pivotal role in supporting this transformation in our education system."

Echoing this sentiment, Participant 7 expressed concern about the erosion of cultural values among the youth, remarking:

"Our children have become westernised—they look down on our heritage. Ironically, tourists from outside the continent are eager to learn about our culture. Since I began interacting with visitors to our

province, my own appreciation for our heritage has deepened. I proudly showcase our traditions—our dances, our food—and the tourists love it."

Perceived Support from Tourism Authorities

Quantitatively, respondents moderately agreed with the assertion that the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) tourism leadership actively supports cultural tourism initiatives, as reflected by a mean score of 3.28 (SD = 1.003). Similarly, perceptions of the tourism department's support for small businesses in the cultural tourism sector received a mean rating of 3.27 (SD = 0.910).

However, Participant 11 expressed skepticism, noting:

"I'm not convinced our tourism leadership truly supports cultural tourism. It feels like business as usual—perhaps that's not the right term—maybe laissez-faire fits better. If they were genuinely involved, we'd see more small, locally owned businesses flourishing in this space."

Tourist Interest in Cultural Attractions

Respondents generally acknowledged a visible presence of tourists in their communities over the past five years, particularly for cultural tourism, with a mean rating of 3.11 (SD = 1.225). However, Participant 9 questioned the actual motives of these visits:

"I'm not denying that tourists visit the province each year. What I'm unsure about is whether they come specifically to engage with our cultural heritage—or simply to see the Blue Ocean."

Community Involvement and Departmental Plans

The idea that the KZN tourism department has effective plans to highlight and nurture local cultural talents was supported to a limited extent (mean = 3.04; SD = 1.101). Perceptions of the department's support for small enterprises in the tourism sector were slightly lower (mean = 3.00; SD = 0.971). Participant 12 offered a critical perspective:

"If such plans exist within the tourism department, they are clearly ineffective. The outcomes on the ground are underwhelming. We see minimal community participation in the sector."

Participant 8 reinforced this point:

"If the department's plans were effective, we'd see a rise in cultural tourism activities led by locals, along with the emergence of businesses they own. At present, there's very little evidence of that."

Strategic Direction and Youth Engagement

Respondents were somewhat aware of efforts by the tourism department to prepare communities for cultural tourism opportunities (mean = 2.99; SD = 1.102), while the lowest rated item (mean = 2.94; SD = 1.081) was awareness of strategic plans aimed at upskilling the youth for participation in cultural tourism.

Participant 4 highlighted this gap:

"The tourism department still has a long way to go in raising awareness about opportunities for community involvement. This must begin with clear strategies aimed at preparing communities to serve as cultural tourism destinations and to benefit economically from these efforts."

Participant 3 echoed similar concerns:

"Strategic plans are essential for driving meaningful transformation. Without them, the status quo persists. Women and youth remain largely excluded. Those who do participate seem to find personal routes to engagement, but there are no formal structures encouraging widespread involvement."

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of stakeholders toward the potential for KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) to develop cultural tourism, all within the context of sustainable and inclusive local economic development. The findings of this study show that the integration of national heritage within the national education curriculum of South Africa can become the key to enhancing the understanding and practice of cultural tourism across the province. The conclusion is supported by modern scholarly literature approving the educational role towards the development of national identity and values [16;4].

Education has a twofold function; it not only raises awareness about new ideas and innovations, but is also a key factor in the creation of human capital and in stimulating local communities towards tourism-led development [17;18]. The participants in the research expressed a strong interest and willingness to engage with tourists, including offers for guiding services informally, especially for first-time visitors this indicates an inherent potential within the community that may be maximized through structured training and assistance.

However, the study showed a broad sentiment of ambivalence and discontent with the perceived role and visibility of the KZN tourism department. The support provided for cultural tourism by the department is seen to be inadequate and poorly communicated according to the respondents. Investments in the infrastructures such as transportation, healthcare, and communication facilities are intrinsic to the growth of tourism, but such investments should walk hand-in-hand with visible and active governance to drive grassroots engagement and the creation of content [19;13]. Whenever there is no corresponding development, the infrastructure usually end up underutilized or defunct, leading to the common situation of "white elephants" [19;20].

There is an increasing recognition, both globally and within the African context, of the importance of culture as a vehicle for promoting economic and social development, especially in the tourism sector. The rise of cultural tourism is increasingly taking center stage, marked by the creation of new products like heritage routes, cultural festivals, and community-run heritage centers in many developing nations [21;22]. South Africa is no exception, with efforts being directed at positioning cultural tourism as a key driver of rural development and the improvement of community livelihoods [23].

However, the findings indicate that KwaZulu-Natal is omperatively behind other provinces such as Western Cape, and Mpumalanga. The members of this study show concern with the absence of inclusive and transparent strategies geared towards the development of cultural tourism among local communities. The tourism sector is seen as not doing enough for the development of local talent, nor to offer support to small businesses working within the sector. As noted by [20], effective tourism planning requires high levels of community input and the creation of platforms aimed at recognizing and celebrating local talent and expertise as true attractions to the tourism sector.

In addition, the study suggests for improved awareness strategies to place communities at the forefront of cultural tourism. The study further implore for strategic programmes intended to empower women and youth in the industry as [24; 25] regularly cite these as key to inclusive tourism expansion. The study took concern for very low corrolation between the planned tourism strategies and the actual deliverables.

The findings of this research augment broader concerns about the limited impact of cultural tourism on the economic development of South African provinces. Despite the growth that the tourism sector has experienced. [24] argues that the cultural tourism contribution remains untraceable from the total tourism contribution element to the sector. The poor performance of KwaZulu-Natal in terms of cultural tourism innovation and participation remains a concerning finding.

Strategically, the gap between planning processes and localized information undermines the ability of tourism to drive inclusive economic growth. Successful development plans require heavy investment in communication, marketing, and evaluation of their [10]. Without sufficient awareness and stakeholder involvement, even the best-formulated strategies are unlikely to generate their intended effects. The findings support the principles of the participatory development theory, according to which the education and engagement of all stakeholders, but especially those who have long been excluded, are incoporated and prioritised [26; 27] The theory suggests for the empowerment of young people and women through educational programs, capacity-building workshops, and special entrepreneurial support to enable them to contribute constructively to local economic development.

Conclusion

There is a necessity to create an appreciation towards cultural heritage to harness the eergy of the young people. The integration of heritage and art studies into the core curriculum in South African basic education can play an important role in raising awareness regarding the potential for cultural tourism in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). Education is prioritized as the key to driving knowledge generation, innovation, and human capital formation. The study confirmed that awareness and willingness to participate in cultural tourism among residents in the surrounding communities and to interact with international visitors as hosts and companions are present. The study, nevertheless, confirmed that there is no policy, leadership profile, and marketing effort by the tourism department to guide cultural tourism towards sustainable, community-focused economic growth. In addition, the department has failed to build talent at the grassroots level and small enterprise growth in the industry. The study emphasized the necessity for people-centered, participatory development in facilitating the local communities' socio economic status—women and youth, specifically—throughout tourism growth, as this people-oriented model introduces awareness, empowerment, and sustainability over the long term.

References

[1]   UNWTO. (2023). Tourism and culture synergies. United Nations World Tourism Organization.
[2]   Richards, G. (2022). Creating sustainable cultural tourism: The challenge of scale. Journal of Tourism Futures, 8(3), 299–311.
[3]   Su, M. M., & Wall, G. (2019). Community participation in tourism at a world heritage site: Mutianyu Great Wall, Beijing, China. International Journal of Tourism Research, 21(5), 607–617.
[4]   Adeola, O., & Evans, O. (2021). Cultural tourism and sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 29(4), 555–571. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1823456
[5]   Tosun, C. (2021). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. Tourism Management, 32(3), 599–613.
[6]   Nzama, A. T. (2022). Community-based tourism as a strategy for rural development: Lessons from KwaZulu-Natal. Tourism Southern Africa, 44(1), 75–89.
[7]   Department of Tourism. (2023). Tourism hosts stakeholders during Presidential Imbizo. https://www.gov.za/speeches
[8]   Leonard, L., & Duma, S. (2024). Investigating the co-management of natural resources: Lessons from the iSimangaliso World Heritage Site, South Africa. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 59(1), 48–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231220283
[9]   Nel, E., & Rogerson, C. M. (2016). The contested trajectory of applied local economic development in South Africa. Local Economy, 31(1-2), 109–123.
[10]   Rogerson, J. M., & Rogerson, C. M. (2020). Inclusive tourism in urban South Africa: Towards a framework for analysis. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 9(1), 1–16.

[11] Gumede, N. G. (2018). Local community participation in coastal tourism: Experiences from Nonoti Beach in KwaZulu-Natal. University of KwaZulu-Natal.

[12] Mnguni, E. (2023). The role of traditional leaders in the promotion of cultural tourism in the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal: A case study of Umzumbe Municipality. Journal of Educational and Social Research, 13(2), 115–128.

[13] Linda, N. (2023). Tourists' profiles and the potential of pilgrimage tourism in selected KwaZulu-Natal municipalities. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 12(4), 1307–1321.

[14] Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic management: A stakeholder approach. Pitman.

[15] Su, M. M., & Wall, G. (2019). Community participation in tourism at a world heritage site: Mutianyu Great Wall, Beijing, China. International Journal of Tourism Research, 21(5), 607–617.

[16] Mheta, G., Mashau, T. & Mudau, M. (2020). Africanization of the curriculum in higher education: Perspectives of academics in South Africa. South African Journal of Education, 40(1), S1–S9.

[17] UNESCO. (2022). Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education. Paris: UNESCO.

[18] World Bank. (2023). Unlocking the power of education for inclusive growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. Washington, DC: World Bank.

[19] Jovanovic, S. (2016). Infrastructure as a determinant of tourism development. Current Issues in Tourism, 19(10), 929–945.

[20] Tichaawa, T.M., & Mhlanga, O. (2021). Repositioning tourism for post-COVID-19 recovery in South Africa. Tourism Review International, 25(3), 315–329.

[21] UNWTO. (2022). Tourism and Culture Synergies. Retrieved from https://www.unwto.org

[22] WESGRO. (2023). Western Cape Cultural Tourism Strategy Report. Cape Town: WESGRO.

[23] Department of Tourism. (2023). Tourism hosts stakeholders during Presidential Imbizo. https://www.gov.za/speeches

[24] South African Tourism. (2023). Annual Tourism Report 2022/2023. Retrieved from https://www.southafrica.net

[25] Du Plessis, C. (2024). Youth and women empowerment through tourism in South Africa: Policy implications. Journal of African Development Studies, 8(1), 17-34.

[26] Mutanga, C., & Tewari, D. (2021). Inclusive community-based tourism: A conceptual framework. African Journal of Tourism and Sustainable Development, 4(1), 41-58.

[27] Chambers, R. (2020). Participation: The new tyranny? Revisited. Development in Practice, 30(3), 278–288.Department of Tourism (South Africa). (2021). Tourism Sector Recovery Plan. Retrieved from https://www.tourism.gov.za