

COMPREHENSIVE PARTICIPATION: A THEORETICALLY HAILED YET PRACTICALLY DISREGARDED APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM

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Citation: Makhanyela, D.S., Nkosi, G.S., Tshabalala, S.P., & Gumede, T.K. (2024). COMPREHENSIVE PARTICIPATION: A THEORETICALLY HAILED YET PRACTICALLY DISREGARDED APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 52(1), 276–285. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.52127-1204>

Abstract: The commitment and attitudes of all stakeholders, as well as giving recognition to their value as partners in the ecotourism domain, are crucial elements in ensuring sustainable ecotourism development. The social capacity theory (SCT) posits that implementing networks of relationships is a fundamental basis for successful and sustainable tourism development. However, research has shown that the planning and management of numerous ecotourism development programs are marred by a top-down approach. This study examined the level of stakeholder participation in ecotourism activities in the Umfolozi Municipality to determine if any gaps exist in the participation structure of this key economic enterprise. A concurrent exploratory mixed methods design was operated using qualitative and quantitative survey. Qualitative data that were collected from purposefully sampled participants were thematically analysed, while quantitative data that were collected from conveniently sampled respondents were analysed using SPSS software. The findings highlight the centralisation of power and a fragmented ecotourism landscape in the study area that is plagued by manipulative participation, lack of collaboration, lack of co-ordination, lack of awareness, and apathy among key stakeholders.

Key words: comprehensive participatory approach, social capital theory, top-down developmental approach, sustainable ecotourism development, KwaZulu-Natal

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been widely acknowledged for its significant ecological and non-ecological benefits for host destinations as it is a vehicle for foreign exchange earnings, economic growth, and the multiplier effect (Utami and Kafabih, 2021; Swemmer et al., 2015). Tourism is the travelling to and staying of people in places outside their residential environments, and they usually do this for leisure, business, or study purposes (Raj Sharma et al., 2022). For these reasons, tourism development is a sought-after activity that many tourism-based enterprises engage in, particularly in geographically small and economically emerging regions (Rayimovna and Shuxratovna, 2021). In 2019, the sector accounted for 10.6% of global employment and 10.4% of global gross domestic product (GDP) (Shchokin et al., 2023). Despite having been hard hit by the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019/2020 (Bama and Nyikana, 2021) that impeded human mobility and sociability that are the bedrock on which tourism sustainability depends (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020), the sector's share of global GDP exceeded 5.5% in 2022 (Roman et al., 2022). Indeed, tourism enhances the livelihoods of people inhabiting areas within or in the vicinity of tourist destinations (Ramaano, 2022). Tourism therefore lures direct foreign exchange earnings and enhances the socio-economic livelihoods of local communities. However, the sector is characterized by both positive and negative prospects (Streimikiene et al., 2020). On the one hand it has been responsible for global socio-economic advancement while, on the other hand, it has been responsible for environmental degradation due to mass tourism activities (Chan and Bhatta, 2013). In the ecotourism domain, the preservation of the natural environment is a main factor upon which the attractiveness of host destinations hinges (Rapti and Gkouna, 2022), hence ecotourism, which emerged during the 1970s, is widely embraced as an appropriate response to curb adverse impacts on the environment (Chan and Bhatta, 2013).

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While mass tourism refers to groups of people who travel to “renowned tourism destinations outside their places of origin for exploring, relaxing, and leisure purposes” (Khatun et al., 2023: 83), Ceballos-Lascurain (1987), a Mexican ecologist, states that ecotourism involves travelling responsibly to relatively fragile destinations for the purpose of studying, admiring, and enjoying natural landscapes, fauna and flora, and cultural resources while advancing the socio-economic well-being of local communities. The key principles of ecotourism are therefore conservation, the protection of natural resources, and the promotion of the socio-economic and socio-cultural well-being of local communities (Fletcher, 2009). Moreover, it is widely regarded as a sub-set of sustainable tourism and a benign approach to mass tourism (Saurombe et al., 2017; Kodir, 2018; Chan and Bhatta, 2013). Ecotourism has been adopted by numerous developing countries¹ as a powerful economic development and conservation strategy (Stem et al., 2003a).

The success and development of ecotourism depend largely on the comprehensive participation of a variety of stakeholders (Kline and Slocum, 2015) who range from people in the public and private sectors to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), destinations’ marketing structures (DMOs), ecotourism operators, ecotourism site operators, ecotourists themselves, academic researchers, and local communities (Snyman, 2016). Liu (2003) acknowledges the importance of all human role-players in ecotourism, highlighting the value of their capability for facilitating effective management as well as their ability to utilize and conserve natural resources. However, according to Chan and Bhatta (2013) and Stone (2015), the participation of local communities in ecotourism, especially in developing countries, has been quite limited. They attribute this to a top-down planning and management approach, arguing that this model poses a main barrier to sustainable relationships among ecotourism stakeholder groups (Murphy, 1985). While an extensive body of academic literature (Gumede and Nzama, 2020; Ying and Zhou, 2007; Chili and Ngxongo, 2017; Prameka et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2021; Nugraha, 2021) highlights the significance of local community participation in ecotourism development, numerous studies (e.g., Mustapha et al., 2013; Marzuki et al., 2012; Dogra and Gupta, 2012; Snyman, 2016; Wang et al., 2015; Wen and Ximing, 2008) found manipulative participation to be dominant in most tourist destinations, including some in South Africa. Moreover, there is a paucity of academic research in the field of sustainable ecotourism development in KwaZulu-Natal. This study therefore examined the level of stakeholder participation in ecotourism activities in the Umfolozi Municipality to determine if any gaps exist in the participation structure of this key economic enterprise.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Social Capital Theory

A significant percentage of individuals derive socio-economic benefits from tourism development and growth, such as job and business opportunities and infrastructural development (Baloch et al., 2022). However, the natural and environmental capital associated with this sector is steadily deteriorating due to land overuse, the accumulation of solid waste and sewage, and carbon emissions, which are mostly prompted by human mobility and sociability (Aguilar and Domasian, 2023). Currently, many African countries, including South Africa, face these challenges and, as a result, tourism authorities and policymakers are confronted with relentless pressure to cope with and mitigate these challenges (Nchor et al., 2023). By the same token, these issues create opportunities for all stakeholders, especially policymakers, to improve conservation strategies and develop strategic responses to deal with the most prevalent threats that endanger the sustainable conservation of natural resources (Watson et al., 2014; Leverington et al., 2010). Despite the challenges, tourism activities, including mass tourism, should never be diminished due to the positive socio-economic spinoffs associated with them.

Consequently, the commanding criterion of *sustainable* tourism development has been foregrounded as an urgent precedence for the development of national and provincial policies (Ramaano, 2022). Tourism that promotes and demands responsible human behaviour is therefore required to ensure minimal adverse impacts on the natural environment and the culture of indigenous groups (Aguilar and Domasian, 2023; Ramaano, 2022). Moreover, ecotourism and nature conservation are complementary and overlapping sectors of the economy as revenue generated from ecotourism can be used to fund nature conservation and socio-economic development programmes to benefit local communities (Buckley, 2010; Bello et al., 2017). This means that the development and sustainability of ecotourism depend largely on the collaborative participation of various stakeholders, including local communities (Kline and Slocum, 2015; Nchor et al., 2023) whose involvement in the management and decision-making processes influences their perceptions and attitude towards ecotourism initiatives (Ramakrishnan, 2017). Garrod (2003) and Jha and Mishra (2014) add that sustainable ecotourism needs to be complemented and supported by local residents, and therefore their voices on how ecotourism should be developed in the area where they live and work has become indispensable. Inclusive participation in and benefits from ecotourism activities encourage local custodianship, and where this has been achieved, it has minimised conflict between authorities and local residents (Balint and Mashinya, 2006). However, various studies (Gumede and Nzama, 2019a; Nchor et al., 2023; Aguilar and Domasian, 2023; Giriwati et al., 2019; Buscher, 2016) have demonstrated that local communities, despite inhabiting ecotourism-inclined areas, are not actively participating in ecotourism development processes, particularly those that were initiated in rural areas, due to various socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-political factors. These include, but are not limited to, lack of the necessary skills, apathy, poor infrastructural development, and fortress conservation practices pertaining to natural resources. As a result, participants tend to be drawn from among those who are perceived to have the necessary skills and who then directly benefit from ecotourism ventures through employment and direct involvement (Zanamwe et al., 2018; Vannelli et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, it is vital that all stakeholders are involved in ecotourism management to bring together a range of vantage points that will align all role-

¹ A developing country is defined by the World Bank Institute (WBI) (2012) as one in which the majority of citizens live below the poverty line (i.e., spending less than US\$1.90 per day), which includes South Africa due to its unstable economic landscape and resultant high inflation rate (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

players' interests with innovative problem-solving strategies and solutions (Nchor et al., 2023). The social capital theory (SCT), which was first proposed by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), posits the notion that environmental transformation is advanced by the comprehensive participation of key players who need to play an active role in sustaining the pristine nature of the environment (Field, 2003). This theory argues that establishing networks of relationships is a fundamental basis for successful and sustainable development endeavours that are based on social values, norms, beliefs, trust, and institutional networks (Balijepally et al., 2004; Fukuyama, 2001). In this context, social capital is described by Prayitno et al. (2023: 209) as "a social network that benefits all elements of society" because it strengthens relationships among individuals, enhances direct action, and facilitates joint ownership by parties who share a common goal.

Therefore, most economic behaviours are embedded in social capital (Granovetter, 1985) which plays an important role in solving collective action challenges (Welzel et al., 2005). By extension, there is a positive correlation between social capital and human socio-economic well-being (Prayitno et al., 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2002). It is against this backdrop that this paper affirms that the SCT is a sound theoretical foundation within which the concepts of 'comprehensive participation' and 'sustainable ecotourism development' are embedded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comprehensive Participatory Approach and Sustainable Ecotourism Development

Ecotourists are described by Al Fahmawee and Jawabreh (2023: 28) as "tourists who seek nature-based learning experiences in an ecologically and socio-culturally sustainable way"; thus, sustainable ecotourism development depends on the voluntary and collaborative participation of a variety of stakeholders who perform different roles depending on the nature of the ecotourism destination and the required standards that its management should meet (Kline and Slocum, 2015).

This collaborative effort is described by Gumede and Nzama (2019b: 2) as "a comprehensive participatory approach (CPA) towards ecotourism development". In ecotourism, sustainable development should meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations who will also need to satisfy their livelihood needs (Stem et al., 2003b; International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2012). Ecotourism can therefore be considered sustainable if it meets the needs of ecotourists and local residents while conserving natural resources and securing future opportunities for local residents (Kiper, 2013). Accordingly, CPA encourages the involvement and participation of local beneficiaries with exponential influence on the management and sustainability of ecotourism activities as a prerequisite for successful ecotourism operations (Simon and Etienne, 2009; Vaidya and Mayer, 2014). 'Local participation' is therefore recognised as mandatory in ensuring the sustainable development of ecotourism (Simon and Etienne, 2009), while 'local involvement' simply implies gaining the co-operation of local people to achieve the predetermined aims and objectives of an ecotourism project in compliance with tokenism. The local participation approach therefore requires collaboration among community-based stakeholders (community members or end-beneficiaries and academic researchers) and system-based stakeholders (a mixture of representatives from the public, private, and governing sectors) (Vaidya and Mayer, 2014).

However, although local participation in ecotourism has been widely adopted as a strategy for assessing sustainability, efficiency, ease of use, and time saving (Vaidya and Mayer, 2014), indicators are that a lack of adequate knowledge of the basic characteristics of an ecotourism project often leads to failure to address key issues (Reed and Dougill, 2002). This means that, although numerous sites in developing countries across the globe have been declared ecotourism destinations, national policies and plans have largely ignored the significance of local communities' participation in ecotourism planning and decision-making processes (Chan and Bhatta, 2013). Several studies (e.g., Nyaupane and Thapa, 2010; Myeza et al., 2010; Nepal, 2003, Gumede and Nzama, 2019a) have argued that this exclusion is a threat to comprehensive sustainable ecotourism development as the results are often issues such as environmental degradation, marauding, and criminal offenses against tourists. Local community participation therefore remains a basic necessity for the operationalisation, management, and sustainability of ecotourism projects (Prameka et al., 2021; Nugraha et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2021).

In this context, CPA is a viable mechanism for mitigating these shortcomings as it facilitates collective contribution and local custodianship (Kline and Slocum, 2015; De Santo, 2012; Myeza et al., 2010). Sustainable ecotourism is therefore undeniably dependent on collective buy-in and the participation of informed local communities (Sibiya et al., 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted in 2021 in the Umfolozi Local Municipality (ULM) area that falls under the King Cetshwayo District. The municipality is situated on the northern coastal plain of the KwaZulu-Natal province which boasts a fair view of the Indian Ocean. The climate is mild to hot with good average annual rainfall (Umfolozi Municipality, 2021/2022). This municipal area is rich in natural beauty and resources. It is, amongst others, host to the world-famous Nhlabane Nature Reserve which is adjacent to the St Lucia Estuary World Heritage Site. Another world-renowned nature-based attraction is the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve. Ecotourism is a significant contributor towards the municipality's GDP (Umfolozi Municipality, 2021/2022) and the study area has great potential for ecotourism development.

Research philosophy and design

The pragmatism philosophy was adopted which enabled the researchers to view the data and draw conclusions regarding the studied phenomenon based on participants' and respondents' practical experiences and perceptions rather than existing theories or preconceived ideas (Ivankova et al., 2016; Hildebrand, 2011). Also, CPA is practical and based on human experience, which justified pragmatism as an appropriate philosophical foundation for this scholarly enquiry.

Ivankova et al. (2016) argue that practical facts are a sound basis for empirical evidence. In consideration of the above, the key research question that this paper addresses is: *What is the level of stakeholder participation in ecotourism development processes in the Umfolozi Municipality?* To address this question, an appropriate research design had to be adopted. Nieuwenhuis (2016) refers to a research design as a strategy that is adopted in research enquiry to address a studied problem that is informed by the nature of the research question(s). A concurrent exploratory mixed methods design was operated because it strengthened the credibility of the results as the conclusions were informed by a combination of qualitative and quantitative data that were simultaneously analysed. All ethical research issues and permissions got acknowledged.

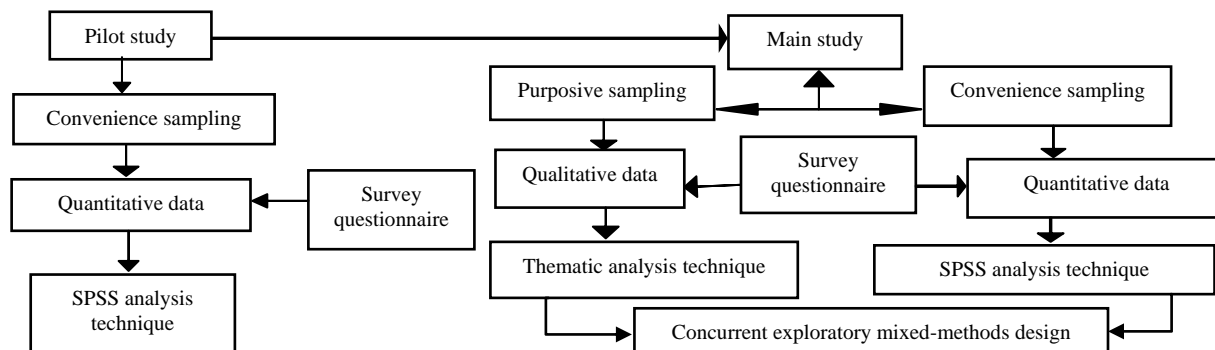


Figure 1. Research methodology flowchart (Source: Authors' illustration)

Sampling, Data Collection, and Analysis

To achieve the total sample (n=384), a sub-sample of participants (n=14) was purposefully selected and a sub-sample of respondents (n=370) was conveniently sampled from a total population of 348 553 based on the Researchers Advisory Spreadsheet of 2006. The generally accepted 5% level ($p < 0.05$) was used to measure the level of significance. Table 1 presents the breakdown and distribution of the participants and respondents.

Table 1. Distribution of participants and respondents in the total sample (Source: Authors' illustration)

Participants	Number
Tourism Officials (n=1 Tourism Officer + n=1 LED Officer)	n=2
Ecotourism sites' personnel (n=1 Marketing Officer)	n=1
EZKNW's representative (n=1 Nature Conservationist)	n=1
Community Tourism Organisation's Representative (n=1 Manager)	n=1
Community Leaders (n=1 chief, n=4 ward councillors + n=4 headmen)	n=9
Total sample	N=14
Respondents	Number
Local businesspeople (n=10 formal sector + n=10 informal sector)	n=20
Members of households (n=150 elders + n=200 youths)	n=350
Total sample	N=370

Other inclusion criteria were the participants' and respondents' anticipated knowledge and the information they could provide about issues related to the studied phenomenon as well as their accessibility, geographical proximity, and willingness to participate in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). As Finn et al. (2000) recommend, a pilot study was conducted using 25 respondents (not those participating in the main study) to determine the validity and reliability of the survey questionnaire. The piloted instrument was used to collect qualitative (questionnaire-based interviews) and quantitative (dichotomous, multiple choice, and most appropriate response formats) data from n=384 participants and respondents through face-to-face surveys. As a result, the analysis of the survey questionnaire yielded partly qualitative and partly quantitative results. Although the data collection process was time consuming due to the large sample size, rich information was obtained as the questionnaires were completed and follow-up questions for clarity were asked on certain issues on the spot (Kothari, 2004). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyse the quantitative data by means of correlation analysis to determine relationships between variables and frequency tables to illustrate the frequency counts of the responses. Moreover, thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. Broad themes emerged from the participants' perceptions of the studied phenomenon (Clarke and Braun, 2017).

Procedurally, the participants' responses and field notes were transcribed and recorded verbatim for scrubbing, coding, verification, and analysis. Where necessary, the responses were transcribed and translated from IsiZulu into English (Sutton and Auston, 2015). In essence, the participants and respondents suggested possible solutions for specific problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Successful ecotourism endeavours are dependent upon the positive attitudes of local residents, and therefore it was deemed crucial to ascertain if ecotourism activities in the study area involved locals who had knowledge and experience of natural resources and conservation requirements, as these are essential determinants of conservation behaviour (Waylen et al., 2009). In the following section, the findings that elucidated the level of participation by local communities in ecotourism in the Umfolozi Municipality area are discussed. The survey sample was representative of the Umfolozi population and comprised people aged 18-61 years and older.

Demographic background (gender, age, education, and income) of the participants and respondents (Table 2) were considered in determining their relationships and potential impact on the extent of all role-players' participation in ecotourism activities. As advised by Pietersen and Maree (2016), the Pearson correlation coefficient, obtained from the SPSS statistical program, was used to determine relationships between independent and dependent variables (gender and income, education and income, and education and participation in ecotourism) by means of bivariate correlation analysis. Table 3 presents the results of obtained correlation (*r*) as examined against the level of significance (α) at $p < 0.01$. The results revealed a low negative correlation (0.191) between gender and income at 0.0001 level of significance. The relationship between gender and income demonstrated that females (53%) earned a lower monthly income compared to males (47%) across all the income level categories. Morve (2016) argues that South Africa has a biased socio-economic landscape that manifests in inequitable income distribution as the majority of males, even those who share the same occupational status with women, earn more than their female counterparts. Clearly, the ecotourism sector, which is one of the central organs of South Africa's job market (Snyman, 2016), is implicated in this inequitable income distribution.

It was determined that a positive relationship existed between education and income as respondents with high education levels earned more than those who were less educated. Wolla and Sullivan (2017) also found a similar relationship between education and income in their study. In light of the South African Labour Relations Amendment Act No. 6 of 2014 (South African Government, 2014), it seems inevitable that those with a higher level of education, irrespective of gender, will earn more than their less educated counterparts.

Wilderness Holdings Ltd. (2015) support this notion, suggesting that individuals' education status remains fundamental in determining their suitability for participating in ecotourism development processes. In the current study, the responses also highlighted education as a basic prerequisite for effective participation in ecotourism development processes. The Chi-square goodness-of-fit was applied to test the null hypothesis (H_0), which was: *Community members of the study area do not participate in ecotourism development activities*. The result indicated a moderate negative correlation. As illustrated in Table 4, a negative difference was found between observed and expected values at $X^2(1) = 1.033$, $p = 0.310$. Simply put, there was a negative relationship between community members and participation in ecotourism.

This finding is contrary to the argument that community participation in tourism means the inclusion of local people in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of tourism development programmes and projects (Nchor, 2021). The respondents' perceptions of community participation in ecotourism activities are illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 2. Demographic background of the respondents (Source: Field survey, 2021)

Respondents		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	181	47
	Female	203	53
Age	18-28	128	33
	29-39	108	28
	40-50	68	18
	51-61	54	14
	Above 61	26	7
Higher education completed	No education	21	5
	Primary school	64	17
	Vocational training	47	12
	Vocational education qualification	34	9
	High school attended	23	6
	High school completed	98	26
	Technical college attended	23	6
	Technical college graduated	15	4
	Bachelor	23	6
	Honours	12	3
	B. Tech (Advanced Diploma)	16	4
Income	Masters	8	2
	PhD	-	-
	No income	63	16
	Less than R1, 000	114	30
	R1, 000-R5, 000	38	10
	R5, 001-R10, 000	68	18
	R10, 001-R20, 000	37	10
	R20, 001-R30, 000	21	5
	R30, 001-R40, 000	23	6
R40, 001-R50, 000	12	3	
Above R50, 000	8	2	

Table 3. Correlation between variables and level of significance (Source: Authors)

Variables	<i>r</i>	α
Gender and income	0.191	0.0001
Education and income	0.214	0.0001
Education and participation	0.422	0.0001

Table 4. Results of the Chi-square goodness-of-fit test for community participation in ecotourism (Source: Authors)

	Chi-square value	Degree of freedom (df)	Asymptotic significance (2 sided)
Community participation in ecotourism	1.033	1	0.310

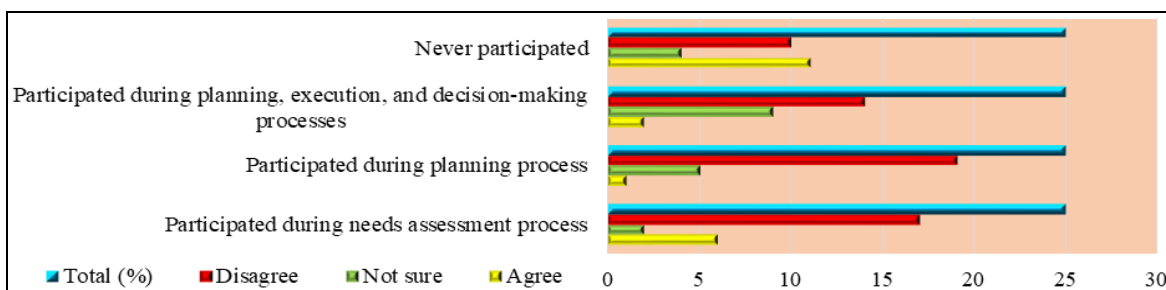


Figure 2. Perception of community participation in ecotourism activities (Source: Authors)

The data revealed that the involvement of local residents (based on their capacity and required standard of participation) in all stages of ecotourism development was low, as the majority (about 60%) did not agree that they participated in ecotourism development processes. Sustainable ecotourism needs to be complemented and supported by local residents (Garrod, 2003), and therefore their voices on how ecotourism should be developed in the area where they live and work become indispensable (Jha and Mishra, 2014). Data about participants' experiences of participation in ecotourism development were therefore generated and analysed. The findings are presented under broad themes and sub-themes below.

The centralisation of public administration in ecotourism

The centralisation of power in public administration is one of many pressing concerns regarding sustainable ecotourism in developing countries (Nyaupane et al., 2006; Tosun, 2000). In the current study, the local resident participants and a few others felt that they were not considered as the custodians of ecotourism resources in the study area. Manipulative participation (which refers to the power exerted by those who determined the role of local community members in ecotourism development processes) was identified as a main barrier to CPA. These power holders were local government officials, DMOs, people in the private sector, and ecotourism authorities who were flagged as the exclusive decision makers about ecotourism development. As effective participatory planning and decision making is a shared responsibility among all sustainable ecotourism role-players (Garrod, 2013), it was felt that this lack of collaboration resulted in a lack of co-ordination among ecotourism stakeholders.

A fragmented ecotourism landscape

The literature acknowledges the comprehensive participation of key stakeholders as a fundamental mechanism upon which sustainable ecotourism development depends (Kline and Slocum, 2015). Likewise, SCT upholds networks of relationships as a fundamental basis for the successful and sustainable development of ecotourism (Balijepally et al., 2004). Considering these literary and theoretical notions, the lack of collaboration and co-ordination in ecotourism exposed it as an exclusive and fragmented sphere of tourism in the study area. It appeared that local residents had neither been consulted nor invited to participate in discussions pertaining to ecotourism development and, as a result, most local residents, especially unemployed young people (18 to about 35 years old) who should have been involved in community development programmes, lacked information about and had lost hope in ecotourism as a potential intervention strategy to uplift their socio-economic plight.

Lack of collaboration: Based on a definition by Hardy et al. (2003: 323), collaboration in the context of this study was seen as "interaction and a collective effort among stakeholders aiming at sustaining ecotourism development in the Umfolozi Municipality". Tosun (2000) and Nyaupane et al. (2006) affirm the interconnectedness between effective ecotourism development and some aspects of ideological and political beliefs, administrative arrangements, and the redistribution of wealth and power to intended beneficiaries. However, the findings indicated a lack of interaction among local stakeholders (community leaders, business people, and members of households) in ecotourism development and management. Community leaders maintained that they had never been informed or consulted (on behalf of the local community) regarding ecotourism and development. It was found that most formal businesses were owned by foreign internationals while few local people owned tourism-related enterprises such as accommodation and culinary facilities. As a result, local residents' contribution towards local economic development was relatively low compared to that of their foreign counterparts. Locals therefore did not significantly benefit from ecotourism or its related activities. Moreover, members of households were dissatisfied as they considered ecotourism sites as isolated properties where the general public did not have a voice regarding development and management processes. Despite their willingness, they were barred from ecotourism development discussions and therefore lacked a sense of custodianship for the sites and other tourism offerings. Gumede and Nzama (2019a) and Chimirri (2020) also consider ecotourism as a fragmented phenomenon that occurs aloof from local citizens. Conversely, Bramwell and Lane (2000) argue that it is unlikely that individual actors will possess the skills or ability to control all relevant components required to offer an ideal ecotourism product to consumers.

Lack of co-ordination: The term 'co-ordination' is described by Gulati et al. (2012:533-537) as "the deliberate and orderly alignment or adjustment of stakeholders' actions to collectively achieve determined goals". Simply put, every stakeholder has a role to play in ensuring sustainable ecotourism development, hence a lack of co-ordination among stakeholders may be detrimental to the effective implementation of CPA and sustainable ecotourism. Nyaupane et al. (2006) and Myeza et al. (2010) argue that the exclusion of some stakeholders from discussions concerning ecotourism poses a serious threat to building rapport and encouraging sustainable ecotourism development. For instance, vandalism, marauding, and other crimes against ecotourists are common manifestations of local residents' resentment for being excluded from local economic development projects in their vicinity. Thus, the participants, especially those in the age group 40 to 61+ (39%), perceived ecotourism as a poorly co-ordinated and dogmatic-oriented phenomenon. They argued that the preservation of wildlife was highly prioritised while local residents' interests were ignored. For instance, community leaders argued that infected livestock probably contracted foot and mouth disease (FMD) from conserved wildlife species. The participants expected the implicated nature reserve's management team, or Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (EKZNW), to reach an amicable solution by offering veterinary assistance for infected livestock. Instead, the victims had to seek medical intervention from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD), and only then was the outbreak neutralised. The participants acknowledged that media platforms, particularly commercial radio stations and television (TV) channels, had a significant influence on the positive response by DALRRD. Gupta and Sharma (2018) and Ozer (2019) shared information about similar experiences by the communities in their respective study areas. The findings thus exposed ecotourism in the study area as poorly co-ordinated and fragmented in terms of management and development. However, based on their capacity and capabilities, some actors such as EKZNW and DMOs could play a crucial role in

ensuring that local residents' concerns regarding ecotourism development are amicably addressed. According to Jha and Mishra (2014) and Baloch et al. (2022), ecotourism can be a catalyst for local communities' social and economic welfare but, according to the SCT, the resolution of community-based challenges will require collectively crafted solutions to enable access to information and achieve power and solidarity (Balijepally et al., 2004; Granovetter, 1985; Welzel et al., 2005).

Apathy and a lack of awareness: Comprehensive and active participation in ecotourism development processes may be stifled by apathy and lack of awareness among key stakeholders (Tosun, 2000; Nyaupane et al., 2006). In the study, the responses by predominantly officials and site personnel highlighted that a lack of awareness among members of the community (community leaders, local business people, and members of households) was the main factor that contributed to a fragmented ecotourism landscape. Members of the community argued that a 'top-down approach' to tourism development was detrimental to comprehensive participation and thus denied recognition of their significance and potential contribution to ecotourism development. One participant expressed the opinion of many: They are not inclined to provide us with employment or philanthropy assistance. The majority of us are impoverished as we lost jobs due to COVID-19 outbreak and a national looting rampage that occurred in July this year [2021]. Most youths, including graduates and matriculants, lack the necessary skills and experience and therefore cannot be hired by the ecotourism sector. Despite our interest in learning about and participating in tourism-related entrepreneurship, neither tourism sites' personnel nor government agencies are inclined to offer us any training programmes. Seemingly, our socio-economic wellbeing is never their concern over [preserving] natural resources (Survey participant, 2021).

Members of the community therefore argued that a top-down approach to tourism management was detrimental to comprehensive participation in ecotourism development. The acrimonious relationship on the one hand and an apathetic attitude on the other seemed to adversely impact both collaboration and sustainable ecotourism development in the study area. The literature suggests that such unconstructive relationships result in ill-planned ecotourism development and antisocial behaviours such as marauding, excessive waste generation, pollution, loss of cultural values and traditions, and criminal offenses against ecotourism site managers and ecotourists (Nyaupane et al., 2006; Myeza et al., 2010). These findings are also corroborated by Murphy (1985) and Hussain et al. (2022), who argue that a top-down management approach and lack of awareness of the importance of ecotourism are impediments to the effective and comprehensive development of this industry. To mitigate such an outcome, Jha and Mishra (2014) acknowledge that comprehensive participation is a means by which local residents, especially women and young people, can directly contribute towards improving their livelihoods. This notion is underscored by the SCT, which demands that networks of relationships should be created as a fundamental basis for successful and sustainable ecotourism development (Balijepally et al., 2004).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The aim of this study was to examine the level of stakeholder participation in ecotourism activities in the Umfolozi Municipality to determine if any gaps exist in the participation structure of this key economic enterprise in the study area. The rich and credible data that were obtained from participants and respondents were augmented by an extensive review and analysis of related literature. In essence, sustainable ecotourism development is predicated upon comprehensive stakeholder participation as posited by the SC theoretical perspective that posits that the creation of networks of relationships is a fundamental basis for successful and sustainable ecotourism development.

Moreover, the equitable distribution of economic spinoffs is another fundamental principle that underpins sustainable ecotourism development. However, inferential data analysis indicated inequitable income distribution in terms of gender, which poses a serious threat to the comprehensive development of ecotourism in the study area. Moreover, the data affirmed that education level influenced local community members' earnings as those with a higher level of education earned more than those who were less educated. Education also seemed to determine individuals' ability to participate in ecotourism activities, as a positive correlation was found between the two variables. Based on the results of the Chi-square test, it was evident that community members did not participate in ecotourism development due to their low level of education (i.e., the majority had not gone beyond primary school education). Ecotourism operates within a complex and challenging domain and therefore comprehensive participation by all stakeholders is a valuable resource for identifying and addressing planning and management challenges (Garrod, 2003). Thematic analysis revealed two key dimensions that impeded comprehensive ecotourism participation in the study area: (1) The *centralisation* of ecotourism public administration was a key finding. Ecotourism was viewed as a top-down oriented phenomenon that was dominated by local government, DMOs, the private sector, and ecotourism authorities, particularly where decision-making and the implementation of by-laws were concerned. Consequently, local residents were subjected to manipulative participation, which silenced their voices and prohibited their contribution towards sustainable ecotourism development. (2) A *fragmented* ecotourism landscape was also evident in the study area. Three fragmentation configurations were detected, namely lack of collaboration, lack of co-ordination, and apathy leading to lack of awareness. These findings highlight the necessity to address the prevalence of fragmentation by creating and forging collaborative participation bonds among all stakeholders. Willing community members felt alienated and deprived of opportunities to contribute to ecotourism and hence to economic growth in the area.

Lack of co-ordination was also flagged as a barrier, particularly as it manifested through the absence of a specific body that could be responsive to resentments concerning unsatisfactory ecotourism management. Apparently, stakeholders were apathetic about taking responsibility unless media coverage highlighted an issue. In consideration of the merging of data with theoretical background information, our overall conclusion based on both qualitative and quantitative analysis is that strategic organisation and collaborative management are preconditions for sustainable ecotourism development. Only when local community members' value is considered and they are involved as key players in the ecotourism domain, will this sector develop sustainably as a driver of the economy for host destinations and the community at large.

LIMITATIONS

During COVID-19, lockdown restrictions posed serious challenges for smooth and normal data collection approaches, procedures, and timelines. Consequently, data collection took longer than normal, particularly because the periods between making appointments and the actual survey often extended beyond the anticipated timeframe. Moreover, some local business people withdrew unexpectedly from participating in the study. Furthermore, non-probability sampling did not allow every element in the population an equal chance of being selected for participation in the study.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, D.S.M., G.S.N., S.P.T. and T.K.G.; methodology, D.S.M. and T.K.G.; software, D.S.M. and T.K.G.; validation, D.S.M. and T.K.G.; formal analysis, D.S.M. and T.K.G.; investigation, D.S.M., G.S.N., S.P.T. and T.K.G.; data curation, D.S.M., G.S.N., S.P.T. and T.K.G.; writing - original draft preparation, D.S.M., G.S.N., S.P.T. and T.K.G.; writing - review and editing, D.S.M., G.S.N., S.P.T. and T.K.G.; visualization, T.K.G.; supervision, G.S.N. and S.P.T.; project administration, T.K.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study may be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: The research undertaken was made possible by the equal scientific involvement of all the authors concerned.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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