

THE INFLUENCE OF SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL PARKS FREE WEEK ON DOMESTIC VISITORS' ENGAGEMENT WITH KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract: This purpose of this paper is to examine how ‘SANParks week,’ a yearly event where entrance fees are waived for domestic visitors, influences engagement with national parks, using Black domestic tourists to Kruger National Park as a case study. A primarily quantitative approach was utilized, purposively collecting surveys from Black South African visitors to Kruger National Park, both during SANParks week and outside of SANParks week. A comparative analysis was conducted between the two groups, focusing on differences in travel patterns, motivations and experiences within the park. The results show some variations in travel patterns and motivations of visitors between free week visitors and fee paying visitors, particularly in terms of travel patterns and the role of accessibility in motivations. In addition, there were high numbers of visitors from local communities as well as school groups during SANParks free week. However, some barriers to engagement appear to persist with respondents highlighting the need for more affordable options for accommodation and activities as well as a lack of directed marketing towards the domestic market. This study shows that SANParks free week provided important opportunities for Black tourists, by overcoming accessibility issues with very high engagement during this period. Initiatives such as these, are important in increasing engagement with national parks, particularly among local communities surrounding the park.

Keywords: National Parks, domestic tourism, South Africa, Kruger National Park, inclusivity, wildlife tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Nature-based tourism is one of the largest subsectors of tourism in South Africa (Spenceley, 2005). South African National Parks (SANParks), in particular, have formed an integral component of the country's tourism economy due to the presence of unique landscapes and wildlife which they seek to protect (McKelly et al., 2017; NemaKanga, 2024).

In 2024 tourism accounted for 8.8% of the total GDP of the country and directly contributes to more than 10% of all jobs, demonstrating the significance of this lucrative economic sector (WTTC, 2024). Nature-based tourism is not only significant as the largest subsector of the South African tourism economy but also important in the geographic distribution of economic development it allows for, particularly in peripheral rural economies (Saarinen & Lenao, 2014). Thus, the sustainability of this critical economic sector is crucial for many local economies throughout the country. Historically, engagement with leisure tourism, in particular national parks tourism, by Black South Africans was limited due to physical and financial constraints (Dlamini, 2020; Rogerson, 2025a; 2025b). With the fall of the apartheid government, legislative barriers previously preventing access to national parks by the majority of South Africans were abolished but many practical challenges remain.

Previous studies have indicated that financial constraints are some of the most significant barriers to engagement with national parks among Black South Africans (Butler & Richardson, 2015; Kruger & Douglas, 2015). These include the cost of entry, the cost of accommodation and the need for a vehicle to tour the park. This study, therefore, seeks to examine to what degree the implementation of the SANParks free week overcomes financial barriers to engagement with parks and what other challenges continue to remain despite this initiative. It expands on previous work which highlighted the growth of nature-based tourism among Black South Africans (Giddy & Kelso, 2025; Giddy et al., 2022; Kelso & Giddy, 2023) by comparing the motivations and experiences of typical (paying) visitors to Kruger National Park to those who visit during SANParks week when no entrance fees are charged for South African residents. This initiative began in 2006 aiming “to cultivate a sense of pride in South Africa's natural, cultural and historical heritage as protected and preserved by the national parks system” (SANParks, 2025). This paper is based on the results of a questionnaire survey that particularly targeted Black South African visitors to the park. The hope is to assist in overcoming barriers and increase visitation among a wider range of local South African tourists. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of initiatives such as this, in showcasing South Africa's national parks to an emerging, yet underrepresented, leisure tourism market.

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Nature-based Tourism in South Africa

Nature-based tourism forms an integral part of the South African tourism economy. South Africa has vast and widespread nature-based assets and thus allows for a range of nature-based tourism opportunities including adventure tourism, wildlife tourism and ecotourism (Spenceley, 2005). Nature-based tourism is also seen as an important contributor to local economic development, particularly in impoverished rural areas (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021).

There is a relatively wide body of research on nature-based tourism in South Africa which covers a range of topics including environmental impacts of nature-based tourism (Pope et al., 2019; Coldrey & Turpie, 2020), tourism motivations and experiences (Giddy & Webb, 2016; Hermann et al., 2016; Hermann & Bouwer, 2023), the role of nature-based tourism in local economic development (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014; Giddy & Rogerson, 2023) and pro-poor tourism (Hill et al., 2006; Mograbi & Rogerson, 2007; Gohori et al., 2022) as well as subsector specific research (van der Merwe et al., 2011; Giddy, 2016; Giddy & Rogerson, 2019). Much of this work has highlighted the significance of the contribution of nature-based tourism in local, regional and national economies (Saayman & Saayman, 2010).

South African national parks are some of the oldest national parks, globally. The first national parks in South Africa, Sabi Sabi (which became the Kruger National Park) and Addo Elephant National Park were developed in order to protect the country's declining wildlife population at the turn of the twentieth century (Brett, 2018). National parks also constitute some of the most significant tourist assets in South Africa, with Kruger National Park and Table Mountain National Park as the two most visited tourism attractions in the country (McKelly et al., 2017). That being said, there are still major issues, in terms of access to these parks by domestic tourists, particularly those from previously marginalized communities. Both in research and, importantly, in marketing, there is a continued focus on the influence and development of international tourism to South Africa (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Koch & Massyn, 2013).

This focus is problematic as local residents should be able to experience their country's tourist offerings but often prices are high and geared directly towards the international market, making these experiences inaccessible to many South Africans (Butler & Richardson, 2015; Kelso & Giddy, 2023). This is of particular importance in the South African context, where generations of indigenous communities were excluded from these spaces as a result of colonialism and apartheid. A couple of preliminary studies have sought to explore these inequalities (Butler & Richardson, 2015; Kruger & Douglas, 2015; Kelso & Giddy, 2023; Giddy & Kelso, 2025).

These studies have found that there is a growing market of nature tourists from previously disadvantaged communities, though they still constitute a relatively small share (Kelso & Giddy, 2023). However, little information exists on the specific motivations and experiences of this emerging market, which is needed to help advance and facilitate its growth for the sustainability of the sector, and thus conservation, in the future. SANParks does charge different rates to access Kruger National Park with lower fees for South Africans to make it more accessible. The implementation of SANParks week further bridges this gap by eliminating entrance fees entirely for a week once a year.

Kruger National

Kruger National Park is the largest national park in South Africa and one of the country's most significant tourism destinations (Wessels & Douglas, 2022). The park was established in 1889, then called the Sabi game reserve, becoming a national park in 1929 and renamed after the sitting president of the colonial Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger (Brett, 2018). Local communities were forcibly removed from the areas which now form Kruger National Park over decades and relocated to spaces outside of the park boundaries (Carruthers, 2012). During the apartheid era, Black South Africans were not legislatively barred from accessing Kruger National Park and a camp was designated for Black South African tourists within meso-apartheid regulations which plagued the country at the time (Dlamini, 2020). Nevertheless, the park was largely inaccessible to the majority of Black South Africans due to financial and mobility constraints implemented by the government. The advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 removed many of these barriers from a legislative perspective, as both physical and socioeconomic mobility barriers were removed (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). However, due to the legacy of relocation as well as the rhetoric, marketing and product offerings found within the Kruger National Park (most of which stem from the apartheid era), the park has remained a largely white recreational space (Giddy & Kelso, 2025).

Social research on Kruger National Park is varied but encompasses two primary avenues. The first is broad discussions surrounding tourism to and within the park. These studies have focused on a range of topics related to visitor behaviour, motivations and experiences (Engelbrecht et al., 2014; Kruger et al., 2014; Saayman & Saayman, 2008; van der Merwe & Saayman, 2008). Some of the motivational factors found in these studies included nature, attractions, activities, escapism and nostalgia (van der Merwe & Saayman, 2008). Most of this work, however, has looked at visitors holistically or focused on the so-called "traditional" market, namely white local tourists and long-haul international tourists. Some research has even emphasized the need to continue to grow this market (Saayman & Saayman, 2006). Kruger et al. (2014) discussed a focus on older local repeat visitors and young long-haul first-time visitors.

Another, smaller body of work looked at some of the management issues in relation to tourists in the Kruger National Park. Others have discussed the existing and potential future impacts of environmental issues on tourism to Kruger National Park (Mathivha et al., 2017; Pope et al., 2019; Zhou & Seethal, 2011).

This will likely be exacerbated in the future as a result of increasing climatic concerns impacting tourism, particularly nature-based tourism. In terms of other management issues, Ferreira & Harmse (2014) argue that increasing visitation by locals (who are primarily day visitors) can have negative impacts on tourism experiences due to oversaturation of visitor numbers during peak periods. However, day visitor access is what is accessible for local communities adjacent to the parks who cannot afford to stay overnight in the accommodation options on offer in the park.

The second avenue of research focuses on the interaction between the park and local communities surrounding the park. Previous research has demonstrated that there is a measurable disconnect between the parks and local communities (Anthony, 2007; Chaminuka et al., 2012; Tapela & Omara-Orjuna, 1999; Strickland-Munro et al., 2010; Swemmer et al., 2015; Turner, 2004; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2019). Anthony (2007) found that local communities do not feel that they benefit from the park. The only exceptions are those who are employed in the tourism industry and/or the small proportion of adjacent communities who are legally recognized victims of forced relocation enacted on local people when the park was created and extended, who now benefit financially from various compensation initiatives established to settle land claims. This is a relatively small sector of the communities who live adjacent to the park (Anthony, 2007). Saayman & Saayman (2006) echo this sentiment noting that most visitor spending occurs within the park with little direct benefit to local communities. The enclave nature of the park results in a disconnect between communities adjacent to the park and the park itself where the park experiences benefits, but these are not significantly experienced by the communities (Strickland-Munro et al., 2010). Other research within this scope of work looks at the Kruger National Park within a Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) framework (Cock & Fig, 2000; Fabricius & Collins, 2007). One significant focus area is related to the story of the Makuleke community in northern Kruger National Park. This area is one of the most recent additions to the Kruger National Park and constitutes one of the few successful land claims within South African National Parks which has resulted in a CBNRM approach (Reid, 2001). However, research has shown that there is often a disconnect between national goals and community interests, resulting in challenges to facilitating this management approach and sometimes culminating in conflict (Ramutsindela, 2002; Robins & Waal, 2008). Although tangential to this perspective on tourists, these studies are important in understanding local community perceptions of the park itself.

METHODOLOGY

Kruger National Park is South Africa's largest national park at 2 million hectares and spans the provinces of Mpumalanga and Limpopo, in the northeastern region of the country (Botha et al., 2016). Kruger National Park is not only well-known for its size but also the diversity of unique flora and fauna which are found throughout the park. Furthermore, Kruger National Park is a significant contributor to the South African tourism economy. Income from tourism to Kruger National Park contributes to approximately 80% of the budget of the entire South African National Parks system (Chidakel et al., 2020). In addition, numerous tourism operations surround the park, further contributing, indirectly, to local economic development (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021). Figure 1, below, outlines the Southern section of Kruger Park, where the majority of tourism activities take place, along with significant surrounding towns and cities.

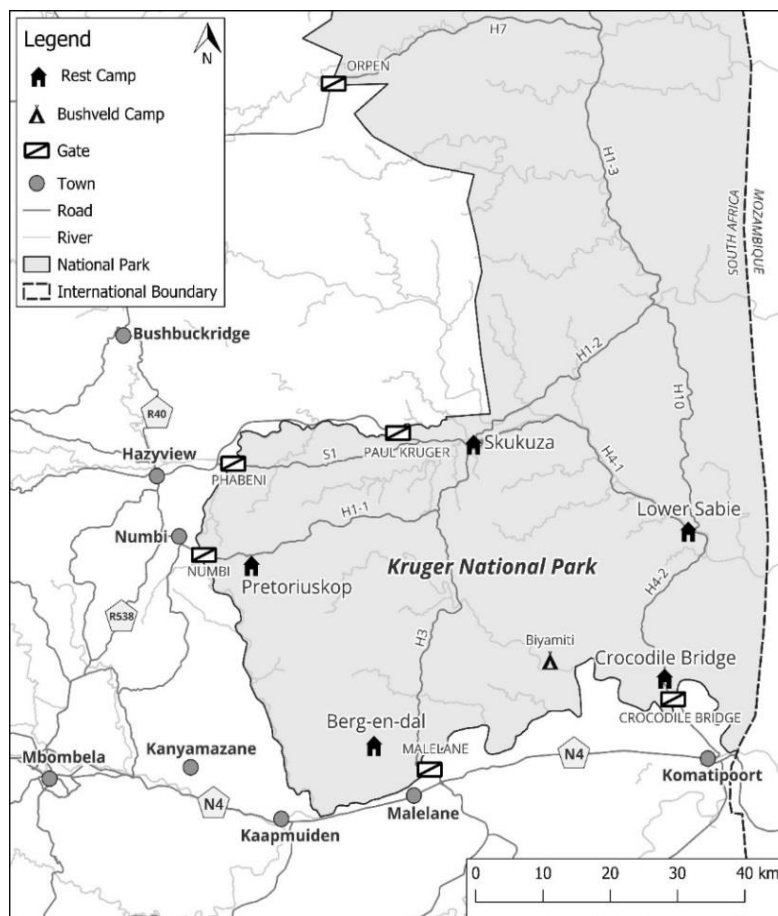


Figure 1. Map of Southern Kruger National Park and Surrounds (Authors, 2025)

This study implemented a largely quantitative approach to research, using a survey method and questionnaires. This method was utilized for a number of reasons, most notably the ability to gather information from a large number of respondents in a relatively short time. The study used a questionnaire to collect data, which sought to examine the travel patterns, motivations and experiences of visitors to Kruger National Park.

The questionnaire was based on previous research on tourism motivations, broadly, as well as nature-based tourism motivations, more specifically (e.g. Giddy & Webb, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Mehmetoglu, 2007).

It also included questions derived from qualitative research which had been conducted in the area on domestic nature-based tourists (Kelso & Giddy, 2023). The questionnaires included nominal and ordinal data as well as statements using 5-point Likert-type scales. Visitor experiences and perceptions of the park were interrogated using open-ended questions. The steps followed for the methodology are represented in the flow chart below (Figure 1).

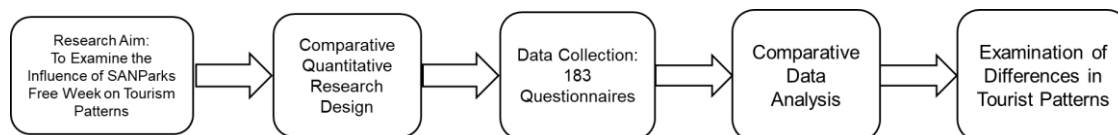


Figure 1. Methodology Steps

The focus was on Black South African visitors and thus data collection was conducted through in-person fieldwork within Kruger National Park using purposive sampling techniques to target the appropriate respondents. Black South Africans were chosen as the focus for data collection as they are under-represented in research and form an important emerging tourism market. Qualifying questions at the beginning of the questionnaires made sure that respondents were resident in South Africa and over 18 years old, to comply with the ethics requirement of interviewing adult respondents.

Fieldwork was conducted over two South African long weekends, which included long weekends associated with public holidays, in August and September 2023. Data was also, importantly, collected during the 2023 ‘SANParks week’ which took place from 16 to 24 September 2023 during which entrance fees are not charged. Although advertised as a week, entry to Kruger National Park was only free from the 18th to the 22nd of September 2023, Monday to Friday, weekdays only, so that is when SANParks week visitors were targeted. A total of 183 usable questionnaires were collected for analysis, 127 of which were from paying Black domestic visitors and 56 of whom were visiting during SANParks week. Data collection was focused on the busiest places such as the section of the main camp at Skukuza where day visitors can come to the shop, restaurant, takeaway places and tables are available with a view of the Sabie River. Data collection was also done at the day visitor picnic site next to Skukuza where there is a swimming pool, braai and picnic facilities. A range of data was gathered from these questionnaires.

Fixed response questions were first analyzed using basic descriptive statistics including percentages and frequency distributions, while Likert-scale data also included calculating means for the relative strength of various factor items. Open-ended questions were categorized and quantified where appropriate. From this information, basic inferential statistical analyses were conducted, primarily focused on comparative analysis based on respondent grouping (i.e. SANParks week visitors vs regular visitors) using crosstabulations. Specific quotations were extracted from open-ended questions and included where relevant, highlighting differences between the two groups. In addition to data from the questionnaire, thorough field observations are also included in analysis as supplementary data.

RESULTS

The results and discussion section are based on the 183 questionnaires which were collected from Black South African visitors to Kruger National Park. The data is discussed as a whole and disaggregated into the two groups under investigation, namely those who visited during SANParks free week (‘Free Week’) and those who visited outside of SANParks week (‘Fee Paying’). The demographic details of the respondents who during SANParks week and those visiting during normal fee-paying days were pretty much the same, as seen in Figure 2 and 3 below.

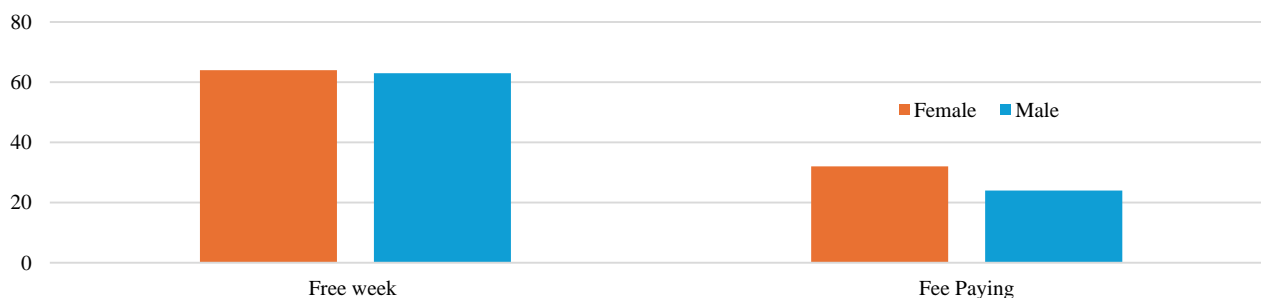


Figure 2. Gender profile of respondents

There was a relatively even split between male and female respondents, with a slightly higher percentage of female respondents during SANParks week. In terms of age, those who visited during SANParks week were slightly younger, with nearly 60% under the age of 35, while there was a higher percentage of middle-aged visitors outside of SANParks week.

The only statistically significant difference was a noticeable percentage difference in the place of origin of visitors. Of those who visited during the free week 73% were from the areas immediately surrounding KNP, in contrast to only 42% of those who visited outside of SANParks week. Many respondents came from Bushbuckridge (immediately bordering the park), Malelane, Mkhuhlu, Hazyview, Sabie, Mbombela, all in Mpumalanga and within approximately an hour's distance of the park. This noticeable difference demonstrates that the South African National Parks week is effective in creating an opportunity for local community members to engage with the park.

This paper focused on Kruger National Park, but it would be interesting to extend this research to other national parks during the free week to see if a similar pattern of enhancing access for local communities exists. It also shows that the fees, even though they are lower for South Africans, are still a barrier for certain people.

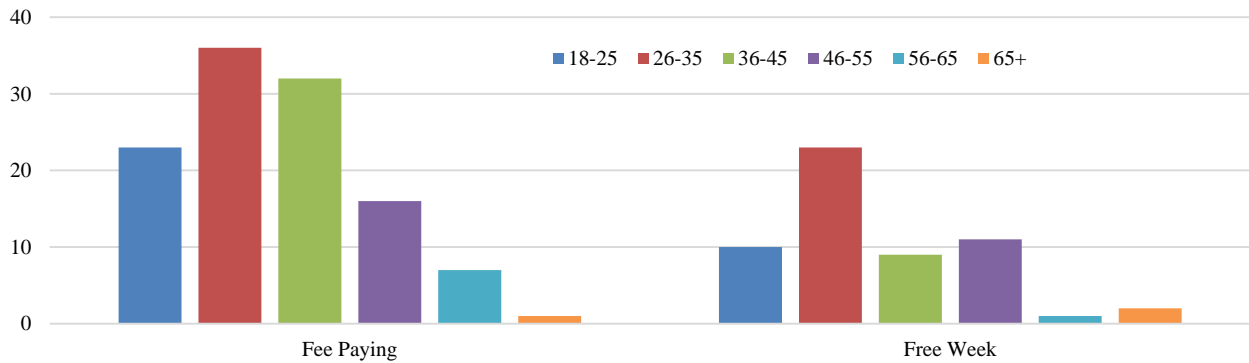


Figure 3. Age profile of respondents

Travel Patterns

Travel patterns of visitors are important for understanding how visitors access the park, some of the group dynamics and how they utilize different facilities. It is only entrance fees that are waived, so the main benefit is for day visitors to the park. Table 1, below, shows some differences between those who visited the park during SANParks week and those who visited outside of SANParks week.

Table 1. Travel Patterns

Who are you travelling with?				
	Fee Paying		Free Week	
By myself	8	7%	0	0%
Extended family	12	10%	7	13%
Friends	31	25%	9	16%
Immediate family	50	41%	15	27%
School	1	1%	12	21%
Colleagues	2	2%	0	0%
Partner/spouse	13	11%	3	5%
Tour group	4	3%	9	16%
How did you get to Kruger and the surrounding area?				
	Fee paying		Free Week	
Bus	4	4%	12	23%
Flight	0	0%	1	2%
Guided tour	5	5%	0	0%
My own car	75	73%	22	42%
Rental car	6	6%	0	0%
Shuttle	3	3%	0	0%
Taxi	10	10%	17	33%
Have you ever been to the Kruger National Park before?				
	Fee Paying		Free Week	
No	18	11%	6	11%
Yes, once before.	15	9%	6	11%
Yes, 2-4 times before.	31	19%	18	32%
Yes, 5-9 times before.	20	12%	7	13%
Yes, more than 10 times.	19	11%	12	21%
Yes, more than 20 times.	13	8%	7	13%
How many days is your current trip to KNP?				
	Fee Paying		Free Week	
Day Visitor	69	54%	49	88%
2-4 days	39	31%	3	5%
5-7 days	6	5%	3	5%
8 days or more	2	2%	1	2%

In terms of group dynamics, a significant proportion of SANParks week respondents were on some form of tour, either on a group tour or a school group. It emerged that there is a substantial uptake of SANParks week by large school groups. It clearly provides an important opportunity for school children, particularly those from nearby communities, to experience the park. The responses about the school trips that are incorporated into the results were collected through interviews with the teachers, as children were not surveyed. This means that the teachers that were interviewed from the 12 school groups shown in the table represented an exponentially higher number of school children visiting the park.

Another interesting difference between those visiting during SANParks week and those visiting when fees were charged was the transport used to access the park. A wildlife protected area can only be accessed and toured in a vehicle, either a safari game drive vehicle, a booked tour or a private vehicle and according to previous studies, this has been one of the barriers to access for some people (Butler & Richardson, 2015). The results of this study show clear differences in the transport used by those visting during the free week and those visiting with normal fee paying.

While 75% of the fee-paying respondents accessed the park using their own private cars, only 42% of the free week respondents came in their own cars. A number of different forms of transport were used to overcome this barrier to access. The school groups predominantly came in buses, while a number of the smaller private groups composed of families, friends and social organisations such as church groups, had utilized mini-bus taxis, a common form of transportation in South Africa. These were often privately hired for the day trip to the park. Interestingly, a higher percentage of those who visited during SANParks week were more frequent visitors to the park, with nearly half of all respondents having been to the park upwards of five times previously, when compared to only 31% of those who visited outside of SANParks week. This demonstrates the importance of the opportunity SANParks week provides for engagement with the park by people from the surrounding communities and the results seem to show that the opportunity for annual engagement with the park during the free week is a regular event for some respondents.

A total of 88% of those visiting during SANParks week were day visitors, while 46% of those that visited outside of SANParks week were coming to the park for more than one day and 38% were spending at least one night inside the park. These results have interesting implications for overall tourism spend related to SANParks week, demonstrating that it might be more of an opportunity for those who cannot afford the park to visit, rather than encouraging future visitation and additional spending outside of the free week. Furthermore, 20% of those visiting during the fee paying days are going on some kind of guided game drive, while only 7% of those visiting during SANParks week are engaging in a guided drive. These results likely indicate socioeconomic differences between these two groups and thus have interesting implications. In this sense, it appears that SANParks week is an important opportunity for those from local communities who cannot otherwise afford visiting the park. Thus, SANParks week is not necessarily attracting visitors for increased exposure but actually works more as a community outreach programme.

Motivations

Tourist motivations are an important component of understanding tourism dynamics in order to facilitate market growth and product development. In this case, motivations are divided between push factors, which drove visitors to seek out a tourism experience and basic pull factors which influenced their decision to visit Kruger National Park specifically, shown in Tables 2 and 3, while more specific motivational dimensions are discussed in Table 4.

Table 2. Broad Tourist Motivations: Pull Factors

Pull Factors	Fee Paying		Free Week	
Accessibility	18	17%	6	11%
Accommodation	12	11%	1	2%
Affordability	42	40%	30	55%
Availability of a guided tour	3	3%	2	4%
Distance from home	16	15%	14	25%
Great restaurants	15	14%	2	4%

Table 3. Broad Tourist Motivations: Push Factors

Push Factors	Fee Paying		Free Week	
Activities	19	17%	4	7%
Natural landscape	9	8%	7	13%
Seeing more of South Africa	4	4%	4	7%
Seeing wildlife	50	44%	29	52%
Views and attractions	32	28%	12	21%

When considering broad push and pull factors, only slight differences were noted between the two groups. Many of these differences make sense in the context of free entry and demographic profile, namely those who came during SANParks free week were more likely to be motivated by pull factors such as affordability and distance from home than those who came outside of SANParks week. This is not surprising as the elimination of the entry fee makes the visit more affordable and there was a higher proportion of visitors during SANParks week from the local surrounding areas. Accommodation and restaurants were more significant for those who visited outside of SANParks week.

In the case of push factors, only slight differences were found, including more of an emphasis on the natural landscape and seeing wildlife for those who visited during SANParks week, while activities and views and attractions

were slightly more significant for those who visited outside of SANParks week. The slightly higher emphasis on aspects such as activities, restaurants and accommodation of those who visited outside of SANParks week is likely indicative of socioeconomic variability between the two groups, supporting the other findings.

Table 4. Specific Tourist Motivational Dimensions

Motivations	Fee Paying	Free Week
Having a good time with friends.	4.63	4.40
Meeting new people.	3.93	3.97
Being closer to nature.	4.69	4.57
Learning more about South African history.	4.11	3.96
Discovering new things about nature.	4.41	4.39
Being able to tell my friends that I did something unique.	3.62	3.47
Feeling a connection with South African nature.	4.70	4.20
Relaxing.	4.38	4.27
Seeing the Big 5.	4.26	4.20
Getting away from crowds and be with just a few people.	4.00	3.91
Posting pictures on social media.	3.03	2.97
Seeing unique animals.	4.40	4.33
Doing something new.	4.32	3.84
Appreciating nature's beauty.	4.55	4.36
Feeling a connection with South African history.	4.21	3.97
Experiencing wildlife in its natural state	2.57	1.56

In investigating more specific motivations for tourists selecting this type of nature-based experience, various factors were explored and only minor differences emerged. Being close to nature and feeling a connection with South African nature were ranked high for both groups, though appeared most strongly among those who visited outside of SANParks week. Socialization, particularly spending time with friends and family, was found to be very important. SANParks week may allow larger groups of friends and family to visit due to overall decreases in pricing.

Although wildlife viewing was significant in motivations, experiencing wildlife in its natural state appeared much less significant, possibly because the landscape of KNP is so similar to the spaces in which many people included in this study live. Furthermore, the role of social media was much less significant.

Experiences and Satisfaction

Nearly all respondents from both groups stated that they were likely to visit KNP again in the future, which is positive for KNP and demonstrates the impact that the implementation of an initiative like SANParks week can have on attracting diverse visitors. Respondents were also asked about the best and worst aspects of their experiences visiting the park, using open-ended questions.

Positive experiences

The most common aspects mentioned in terms of positive experiences were related to seeing animals. A total of 110 respondents mentioned animals in response to the best part of their experience, with a slightly higher percentage among those who came outside of SANParks week (64%) than those who visited during SANParks week (52%). One respondent who visited during SANParks week stated *“I always see animals.”* One respondent from Johannesburg was excited about seeing animals in person saying *“Saw animals in real life. (I have always seen them on pictures and tv).”* Demonstrating the importance of these experiences, particularly among urban dwellers.

Another key theme which emerged was the psychological benefits of visiting the park such as *“One is able to think peacefully...if one is depressed, they come here and forget about problems.”* Another had a similar sentiment related to spirituality saying *“The silence and atmosphere have made me to feel closer to God. That's why I call this place Paradise.”* This demonstrates how important spaces like this can be for well-being.

Various social aspects of the experience were also highlighted as positive for many respondents. One notable aspect is the importance of socialization in positive experiences, with fifteen respondents specifically stating that meeting new people was the best part of their visit to the park. This was noted in particular by those who visited during SANParks week, representing more than half of those responses. Examples of these responses were *“Meeting new people, having conversations with them”* with others specifically citing the opportunity to meet a range of different types of people such as *“Meeting people from different countries with different behaviours.”*

Furthermore, some really interesting and important aspects to highlight are related to feelings of inclusivity and connectedness that they experienced in the park. Respondents made statements such the park is an *“inviting environment, in the park everyone is friendly sharing information about sight-seeing, even got stuck and was helped by other tourists.”* Others specifically mentioned race with one respondent saying the best part of their experience was that they felt *“No racism, everyone is friendly and treat us all the same.”* Finally, another said they particularly appreciated *“meeting people, respectful people. I appreciate people greeting each other.”* These statements are interesting because although not explicit, they seem to implicitly imply that this is somewhat unique and important in their overall park experience, which is different to everyday experiences.

Identity

Respondents discussed their perception of whether or not they feel KNP is linked to South African national identity. This was investigated because a lot of secondary material talks about the extent to which KNP is perceived as linked to identity by many South Africans. A number of interesting responses emerged, with some divided opinions.

There were slight differences between the two groups, which is interesting. Among those who visited during SANParks week, 78% definitively stated that they do feel there is a link, while 90% of those who visited outside of SANParks week identified a connection. This is interesting, as there was a higher proportion of SANParks week visitors who are actually from the local areas surrounding the park and yet this was the group who linked it slightly less to national identity. The explanations were interesting and diverse. There were broad statements about the role of nature and importance of nature for South Africans with statements such as *“the trees, animals and nature as a whole has a great deal of our identity”* and *“Africans are related to animals and nature.”*

Other interesting responses included admiring the inclusivity of the park and the diversity and interaction between different people. One respondent said, *“every race is here and everyone is welcome”* and another saying, *“Kruger National Park accommodates different people and cultures.”* This echoes some of the responses on the best part of individual experiences. Others mentioned the importance of broad diversity in the park stating *“Yes, it identifies how diverse the country is because of its culture, people, tradition and environment.”* And also, how it instills national pride *“it makes everyone to be a proudly South African.”*

Although the majority indicated that they do feel that the park is linked to South African national identity, the responses from those who do not feel links warrant discussion. Some of these statements highlight aspects explored in previous literature, particularly that related to the colonial and later apartheid history of the park (Dlamini, 2020; Rogerson, 2025b). One respondent said they do not feel the park is linked to national identity simply because *“it was colonized.”* Another mentioned that *“Local people were evicted from different camps and placed in certain areas and worse, they were evicted forcefully so I don't know if these people benefit from this place”* with a second echoing this saying *“It does not involve many local people.”* Finally, one mentioned the conflict with the current naming of the park saying *“the name Kruger was a name of a white person and not South African so the park is not linked to the South African identity.”*

Negative Experiences

Respondents were also asked to comment on any negative experiences they had while visiting KNP as well as their suggestions on how to improve the park. A total of 22 respondents complained about issues surrounding affordability of visiting the park, 17 of whom visited outside of SANParks week with statements such as *“Offerings should be made affordable for people who live in South Africa.”* In particular complaints were made about the affordability and quality of accommodation options throughout the park with one respondent noting *“Affordability and improve the accommodation in the park because their accommodation doesn't deserve to be charged the price.”* This indicates that although barriers to entry are minimized as a result of SANParks free week, they are not able to access all facilities. In addition, many respondents, across both groups, noted infrastructural aspects which have been highlighted in numerous previous studies on the area (Giddy & Kelso, 2024; Mhlabane et al., 2023).

A total of 19 respondents mentioned general maintenance issues, while another eight cited issues in particular, with the roads and another ten specifically with issues of signage both going to the park and throughout the park. All of those who complained about poor signage visited outside of SANParks week which is likely linked to the fact that this group contained a higher proportion of visitors from outside the surrounding area who may have been affected when trying to find the entrance to the park. The fieldnotes of the study also noted some missing signage outside the park (where a necessary turn is needed to get out of the town of Hazyview). One would not be able to get to the park without GPS maps. This demonstrates the impacts of a failing municipality on a tourist destination like the Kruger National Park, as shown in Giddy et al. (2022). In addition, without a map, which must be purchased, navigating the park can also prove difficult. These are issues which need to be addressed.

Other aspects which respondents felt need to be addressed were issues surrounding marketing and awareness. This is interesting, as KNP is, arguably, one of the most iconic and well-known tourism attractions in the country. However, there were clear sentiments that marketing should be improved, particularly to domestic tourists. In addition, several stated that they feel visitors and local communities alike need to be more educated on issues of conservation and environmental behaviour. One respondent said the park needs to *“Encourage locals to visit more often and teach them about the importance of conservation.”* while others made statements such as the need to *“Raise awareness through vigorous advertising.”* Others mentioned that they feel the park is too focused on international visitors, which is also linked to concerns of the costs, particularly accommodation, with one respondent highlighting that *“The park could encourage repeat visitors more. They seem to focus on internationals.”* This is concerning for an organization which states that its mission is to be the *“pride and joy of all South Africans”* (SANParks, 2023).

Some other interesting suggestions for improvement were providing increased access to information among visitors to the park who do not go on guided tours. Finally, one respondent made an interesting suggestion which was that *“They should have free shuttles from a place to another.”* This is likely linked to the difficulty in getting between camps and picnic sites unless you are in private vehicle, thus significantly limiting access to many visitors. These strategies have been implemented in other such parks, globally (NPS, 2024), and would likely open up the possibility of visitation to many South Africans who do not have access to private cars. They would be able to get shuttles into the park and then get around through an intrapark shuttle system, which would at least provide some increased recreation opportunities.

There were less complaints from those visiting during SANParks week than those visiting outside of SANParks week, overall. A total of 41% during SANParks week said they do not need anything to improve with statements such as *"For now nothing, it's number 1."* This is compared to only 23% of visitors outside of SANParks week who had no complaints. However, several that visited during SANParks complained about the facilities. Notable were complaints of the lack of facilities for children from the school groups with statements such as *"Include kids play areas."* One of the days when the research was conducted the pool area at the Skukuza day visitors facility had to be closed for a while as it was simply too full, and there was a queue for people to access it, as others came out.

Many visitors during SANParks week also highlighted the constraints of only allowing free entry once a year and during weekdays, rather than on the weekend, which is prohibitive for many who work. Several respondents indicated that it would be helpful to have two free weeks per year or extend the existing free week to allow better access. This was noted by some coordinators of school groups as well with one saying *"Surrounding schools should be allowed to enter at discounted (lower) fees when it is not a free week."* This is an important comment as many school groups visit during this week due to costs but it can result in overcrowding for all visitors.

One major concern, which was highlighted by numerous respondents and observed, was the overcrowding, particularly of the day visitor spots, which occurred during SANParks week. As indicated in the data from this study, as well as others, most Black South Africans are day visitors. The day visitor areas, however, are inadequate for accommodating large groups, and thus some issues have ensued with regards to overcrowded spaces, a lack of seating areas and insufficient provisions of braai facilities. One respondent stated *"It's hard to relax when you are a day visitor."* Noted in the field notes for the free week was that the facilities in the day visitor area(s) had a lack of shaded areas (despite temperatures being as high as 40 degrees Celsius) and there were sewage leakages present which respondents complained about. These infrastructural issues are concerning, given the frequent use of these facilities by local visitors. This is something that needs to be considered and addressed by SANParks in the future.

CONCLUSION

Previous research has demonstrated a disconnect between the Kruger National Park and local communities adjacent to the park (Anthony, 2007). This relates to the complex history of the park as well as the economic barriers to access such as park entrance fees, cost of accommodation within the park and the need for a private vehicle or a paid safari to tour the park. This paper compared survey responses of Black South African domestic tourists who visited the park during SANParks free week when the entrance fees are not charged for South African residents, with those who visited on normal fee-paying days. The findings show that the free week is effective in enhancing visitation by groups particularly from adjacent communities, with 73% of respondents during SANParks week coming from surrounding areas. Many different groups took the opportunity to visit during the free week including immediate families, extended families, social groups and a large number of school groups. Multiple different vehicles were used with some people overcoming the transport barrier by hiring mini-bus taxis to enable the experience.

This seems to demonstrate that, given the opportunity, people from local communities do come to the park. Many of the free week respondents had visited the park upwards of 5 times indicating that SANParks week provides an important opportunity for those who cannot afford the park regularly to experience it. School groups were particularly abundant. These findings make it clear that SANParks week, in removing the barrier of affordability, provides an important opportunity for those from adjacent communities to access the Kruger National Park. Further research to see whether this is the case in the other national parks in South Africa, would improve the understanding of the role of SANParks week in enhancing local community engagement with these natural resources.

In terms of related recommendations, those visiting during the free week largely used the day visitor facilities with some respondents mentioning that these facilities could be improved. While these facilities are adequate with the normal permit allocation, they get very full during the free week. The Skukuza day visitors space, with a pool was enjoyed, but the communal braai facilities and lack of shade proved a problem for the extremely high temperatures that were experienced during that week in 2023 when the research was conducted.

Another interesting finding is the importance of SANParks week for school groups. The degree to which school groups are visiting the park during this free week demonstrates a shortfall in terms of engagement and outreach programmes between the park and local schools, if schools are only able to visit the park during the free week. Facilitating school visits at other times of the year should be considered, perhaps allocating a specific time period for schools to visit the park outside of SANParks week could both provide important opportunities for local students to engage with the park, and also mitigate some of the issues with regards to overcrowding of day visitor areas during SANParks week. The highest motivation people cited for visiting the park was being closer to nature and having a good time with family and friends. These results demonstrate that SANParks week is definitely effective in enhancing local engagement with the park. It can highlight the value of the park as a recreational space, educate people of different ages about nature and the importance of conservation for future generations.

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