

NAVIGATING MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE IN ZIMBABWE'S ECOTOURISM SECTOR

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Abstract: Ecotourism governance requires coordination among public agencies, local authorities, communities, tourism businesses and conservation organisations whose mandates often overlap. This paper examines how multi-level governance shapes institutional coordination across Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga, Zimbabwe. Using an interpretivist multiple-case design, the study draws on 39 semi-structured interviews with government and parastatal officials, conservation organisations, tourism businesses and community representatives, supported by analysis of tourism, wildlife and environmental policy documents. Four connected challenges emerged: overlapping mandates and competing priorities created uncertainty and delay; inter-agency collaboration was irregular and constrained by limited staff, budgets and follow-through; decision-making remained predominantly top-down, with weak local influence and feedback; and coordination problems differed by destination. Victoria Falls faced congestion among numerous institutions, Hwange relied strongly on protected-area networks, and Binga had fewer institutional connections and weaker access to national decision-making. These contrasts suggest that the number of institutions involved is less important than the quality, reach and consistency of their coordination. NGOs and businesses bridged some gaps but could not replace consistent public-sector coordination. The study shows that a common national framework operates differently across destinations. Governance quality therefore depends as much on working relationships and implementation capacity as on formal mandates. It recommends clearer roles, routine and resourced coordination, stronger feedback mechanisms and targeted support for destinations with weaker institutional capacity. The comparison of destinations governed through the same national framework offers evidence that coordination reforms must be adapted to differences in institutional presence, administrative access and local implementation capacity.

Keywords: ecotourism governance, multi-level governance, institutional coordination, stakeholder participation, destination governance, Zimbabwe, Southern Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism governance rarely sits within a single institution, tourism promotion and licensing, environmental assessment, protected-area management, land-use planning, local development, community participation and private-sector implementation are usually distributed across organisations with different mandates and priorities (Forje et al., 2022; Wondirad et al., 2020). Although this distribution can broaden expertise and participation, weak coordination can produce duplicated procedures, inconsistent decisions and uncertainty over responsibility (Kodir et al., 2020; Sentanu et al., 2023). The practical question is therefore not simply how many actors participate in ecotourism governance, but whether they are able to work together consistently enough to translate policy into coherent action.

Coordination is important in nature-based destinations where conservation, community livelihoods and commercial tourism are closely connected (Forje et al., 2022; Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025). Previous research in sub-Saharan Africa continues to identify stakeholder participation, institutional capacity, accountability and collaboration as important conditions for effective ecotourism governance (Dangi & Petrick, 2021; Makhanyela et al., 2024; Wondirad et al., 2020). Collaborative arrangements can improve knowledge exchange and legitimacy, yet their effects are limited when responsibilities remain unclear, forums are under-resourced or participation does not influence decisions (Dangi & Petrick, 2021; Sentanu et al., 2023). Recent tourism-policy studies similarly show that power and institutional position shape which actors can influence policy networks (McLeod, 2023). These issues make coordination a central part of implementation rather than an administrative concern separate from sustainability.

Zimbabwe provides a strong setting in which to investigate this variation. Ecotourism is shaped by the Tourism Act [Chapter 14:20], Parks and Wild Life Act [Chapter 20:14], Environmental Management Act [Chapter 20:27], National Tourism Policy and local natural-resource governance arrangements, including the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) (Government of Zimbabwe, 1975, 1995, 2002, 2014). The

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institutional field includes the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA), Ministry responsible for environment and wildlife, Environmental Management Agency (EMA), Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks), local authorities, community structures, NGOs and tourism enterprises (Government of Zimbabwe, 1975, 1995, 2002, 2014; Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025). These bodies are functionally interdependent, but their statutory mandates do not automatically specify how competing priorities, joint approvals, information exchange or local feedback should be reconciled (Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025).

The three cases examined in this paper reveal different expressions of this shared national system. Victoria Falls is an internationally visible tourism hub with a comparatively dense regulatory, commercial and civic presence; research in Zimbabwe also shows that sustainability practices vary geographically and are more widely adopted in this internationally oriented destination than in several domestic-market destinations (Shereni & Rogerson, 2023).

Hwange is organised strongly around a major protected area and the networks linking conservation agencies, operators, NGOs and surrounding communities (Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025).

Binga is a more remote lakeside district where promising cultural and nature-based resources coexist with thinner institutional presence and weaker connectivity to national decision centres; research on Binga's VaTonga communities similarly identifies weak local representation, constrained access rights and limited capacity in natural-resource governance (Matsa et al., 2024). Comparing these three cases makes it possible to distinguish the existence of institutions from the territorial fit of their relationships (Guo & Li, 2025; Novalia et al., 2025).

Tourism-policy research has examined collaboration, participation, policy networks and destination management, but implementation remains under-studied, with important geographical, theoretical and practical gaps (Kifworo & Dube, 2024). Studies have examined protected-area partnerships, community-based natural resource management and local participation in particular parks or districts in Zimbabwe (Musakwa et al., 2020; Shereni & Saarinen, 2021; Forje et al., 2022; Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025). What remains less developed is a comparative account of how national institutions, local authorities, non-state actors and communities coordinate across ecotourism destinations with contrasting institutional conditions. This paper addresses that gap by raising the following key questions: How do relationships among institutions and stakeholders at different levels shape coordination in ecotourism governance across Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga, and what practical reforms could strengthen that coordination?

This study contributes a within-country comparison of how one national governance framework operates across destinations with different institutional conditions. The study shows how coordination challenges vary by place and identifies practical reforms focused on clearer roles, stronger feedback and differentiated institutional support, through combining government, business, conservation and community perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multi-level governance in tourism refers to interaction among national institutions, subnational authorities and non-governmental stakeholders whose responsibilities intersect in policy design and implementation (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Guo & Li, 2025). In ecotourism, such interaction is important because tourism development depends simultaneously on environmental safeguards, conservation management, local planning, infrastructure, community relationships and private investment. Tourism governance can therefore be understood as a networked process in which the effectiveness of individual organisations is partly shaped by their relationships with government, private-sector and civil society (Hartman, 2023; McLeod, 2023; Wondirad et al., 2020).

A multi-level perspective draws attention to how national decisions are translated into local action and how interactions between national and local actors affect policy implementation (Guo & Li, 2025; Novalia et al., 2025).

Institutional coordination concerns the practical arrangements through which these interdependent organisations align responsibilities, exchange information, resolve conflicting priorities and act on shared decisions (Sentanu et al., 2023; Wondirad et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that collaboration can support sustainable destination management, but it is not effective simply because committees, partnerships or meetings exist (Dangi & Petrick, 2021; Sentanu et al., 2023; Wondirad et al., 2020). Clear institutional roles, open communication, adequate resources, continuity and commitment are important for turning collaboration into coordinated action (Harilal et al., 2025; Sentanu et al., 2023; Serruto-Perea & Zapata-Mendoza, 2026; Wondirad et al., 2020). Public-private network quality can also influence destination-management performance (Serruto-Perea & Zapata-Mendoza, 2026).

Harilal et al. (2025) demonstrate how unclear responsibilities and weak communication can reduce stakeholder coordination, while McLeod (2023) shows how the distribution of power within tourism policy networks shapes the roles that different actors perform. Coordination should therefore be assessed through actual working relationships and implementation practices rather than formal institutional structures alone (Hartman, 2023; Sentanu et al., 2023; Wondirad et al., 2020). Participation is closely connected to coordination because local knowledge is more likely to inform policy when communities have meaningful channels through which to contribute to decision-making (Dangi & Petrick, 2021; Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025). Community-based tourism and conservation research shows that consultation without meaningful influence can leave local actors underrepresented and excluded from important planning and resource-management decisions (Dangi & Petrick, 2021; Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025; Shereni & Saarinen, 2021).

This is particularly important in ecotourism because communities and local businesses directly experience the effects of conservation restrictions, tourism development and natural-resource management decisions (Shereni & Saarinen, 2021; Wondirad et al., 2020). Recent evidence from Hwange identifies weak legislation, fragmented institutional arrangements, limited information and inadequate local capacity as barriers to meaningful community participation in

tourism planning (Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025). Effective coordination therefore requires two-way communication: institutions must communicate policies and responsibilities clearly, while communities and implementers need accessible opportunities to raise concerns, contribute knowledge and receive responses (Harilal et al., 2025; Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025; Sentanu et al., 2023). Place also matters because destination governance is shaped by different combinations of institutional capacity, infrastructure, actor networks, resources and administrative relationships (Hartman, 2023; Guo & Li, 2025; Novalia et al., 2025). Research shows that common national policies can produce different local implementation pathways when institutional capacity and stakeholder relationships vary across places (Guo & Li, 2025; Khanduri, 2026; Novalia et al., 2025).

Research from Zimbabwe similarly reveals geographical differences in sustainability practices, community participation and experiences of conservation governance (Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025; Shereni & Rogerson, 2023; Shereni & Saarinen, 2021). A uniform governance arrangement may therefore not be equally suitable for every destination (Guo & Li, 2025; Novalia et al., 2025; Shereni & Rogerson, 2023).

Actor-dense tourism destinations may require stronger mechanisms for coordinating numerous organisations, whereas poorly resourced or remote destinations may also require capacity building, stronger institutional access and more reliable connections with national agencies (Hartman, 2023; Novalia et al., 2025; Wondirad et al., 2020). This paper examines how institutional responsibilities are coordinated in practice, how government agencies work together, and whether local actors have meaningful opportunities to participate and provide feedback. It compares Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga to explore how these governance processes vary across destinations with different institutional conditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Institutional and geographical context

The ecotourism architecture in Zimbabwe combines national legislation with implementation by specialised agencies, local authorities and non-governmental actors. The Tourism Act [Chapter 14:20] establishes the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) and assigns its responsibilities relating to tourism development, promotion, research, standards, and the registration and grading of designated tourism facilities (Government of Zimbabwe, 1995).

The Parks and Wild Life Act [Chapter 20:14] establishes the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) and provides for the management of protected areas, wildlife and associated tourism activities (Government of Zimbabwe, 1975). The Environmental Management Act [Chapter 20:27] establishes the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) and provides for environmental impact assessment, environmental monitoring and pollution control (Government of Zimbabwe, 2002). The National Tourism Policy provides broader strategic direction for sustainable tourism development, community participation and the distribution of tourism opportunities beyond established destinations (Government of Zimbabwe, 2014).

At the local level, Rural District Councils (RDCs) and traditional institutions perform functions relating to local development, land-use planning, community representation and natural-resource governance (Government of Zimbabwe, 1988, 1998). The Parks and Wild Life Act also allows qualifying RDCs to exercise appropriate authority over wildlife in communal areas, providing the legal basis for local wildlife-management arrangements such as CAMPFIRE (Government of Zimbabwe, 1975; Shereni & Saarinen, 2021).

Tourism businesses, NGOs and community organisations contribute through tourism investment and operations, conservation partnerships, technical assistance, training and community engagement (Musakwa et al., 2020; Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025). The study's document analysis found that, although these instruments assign substantial responsibilities to individual institutions, they provide limited operational detail on how overlapping mandates should be reconciled in routine ecotourism decisions. Table 1 summarises the principal institutions and their coordination needs.

Table 1. Institutional architecture of ecotourism governance in Zimbabwe (Source: Authors' analysis)

Level / domain	Principal actors	Principal roles	Main coordination need
National tourism	Tourism ministry; ZTA	Policy, promotion, facility regulation and standards	Alignment with environmental, wildlife and local-planning decisions
National environment and wildlife	Environment ministry; EMA; ZimParks	Environmental assessment, monitoring, protected areas and wildlife	Integration of conservation, tourism and local-development priorities
Subnational and local	Local authorities / RDCs; traditional and community institutions; CAMPFIRE structures	Land use, local services, community representation and local resource governance	Upward feedback, implementation resources and links to statutory agencies
Non-governmental	Tourism businesses; NGOs; associations	Investment, implementation, technical support, monitoring and training	Predictable participation, transparent decisions and public accountability

The cases were selected purposively to compare governance under a common national framework but contrasting destination conditions. Victoria Falls combines international market visibility, concentrated tourism investment and frequent interaction with regulatory institutions (Masimba, 2024; Shereni & Rogerson, 2023). Hwange is structured strongly around protected-area governance and conservation partnerships involving ZimParks, operators, NGOs and neighbouring communities (Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025). Binga is more remote from major tourism and administrative

centres and relies more heavily on local government, community leadership and project-based relationships to connect with external institutions (Dahl & Tevera, 2019; Matsa et al., 2024). Figure 1 locates the three study sites.

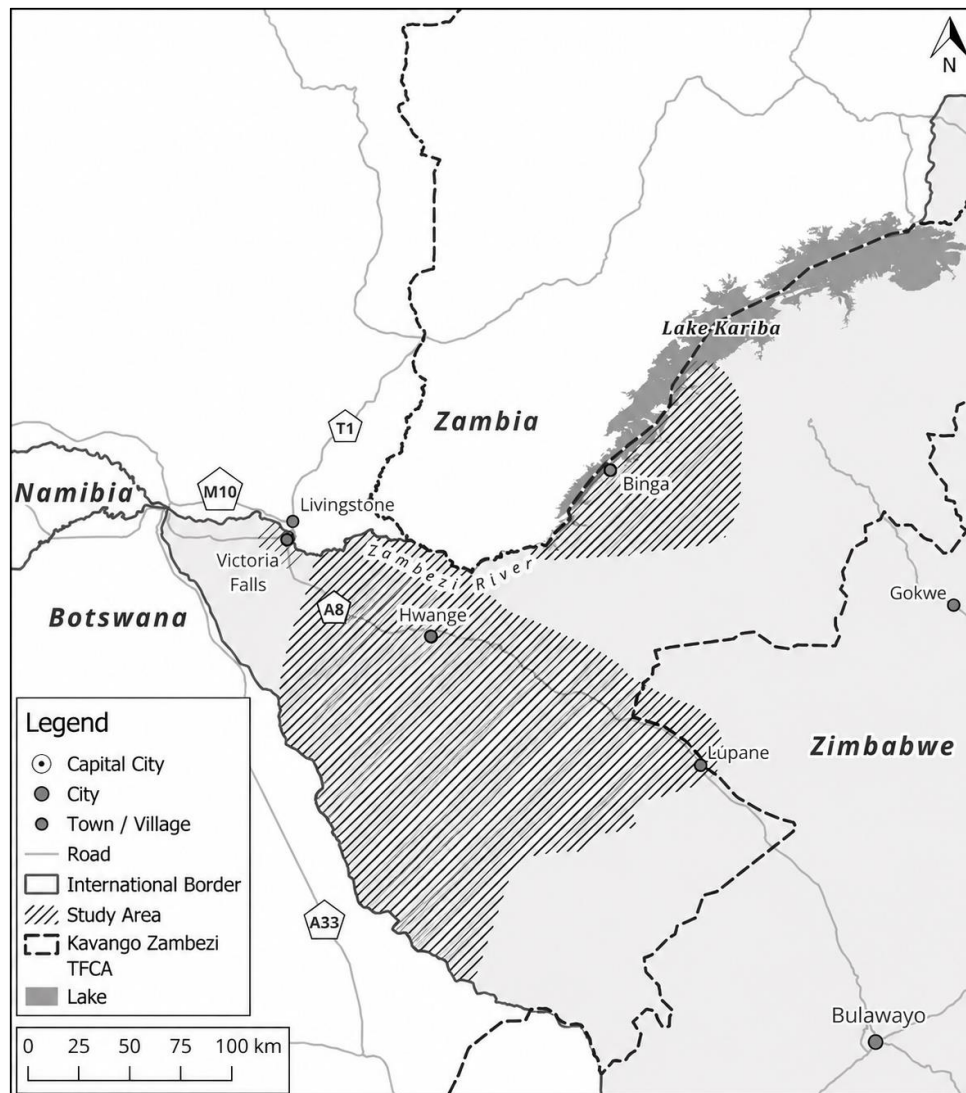


Figure 1. Location of Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga in Zimbabwe (Source: Authors' own)

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research adopted an interpretivist qualitative multiple-case design, appropriate for examining governance processes within their institutional and geographical contexts (Ridder, 2017; Yin, 2018). The study drew on 39 semi-structured interviews across four stakeholder groups: 12 government and parastatal officials, 5 representatives of environmental and conservation organisations, 14 tourism business actors and 8 community representatives. Participants were selected purposively for their knowledge of policy design, regulation, conservation, tourism operations or community experience, consistent with the logic of purposive sampling in qualitative research (Campbell et al., 2020).

Snowball referrals complemented purposive recruitment where specialised institutional knowledge was difficult to access. Interviews were conducted in person and online during the fieldwork period, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Table 2 presents the distribution of the 39 interviews used in this paper.

Table 2. Distribution of the study sample by stakeholder group (Source: Authors' analysis)

Stakeholder group	Interviews
Government and parastatal officials	12
Environmental NGOs and conservation stakeholders	5
Tourism businesses	14
Community representatives	8
Total	39

Interview evidence was triangulated with qualitative document analysis of the principal statutory and policy instruments governing tourism, wildlife, environmental management and community-based resource use. Documents

were examined for institutional mandates, coordination requirements, participation provisions, monitoring responsibilities and areas of overlap. Documentary analysis was used to compare formal institutional design with stakeholder accounts of implementation, drawing on recent guidance for systematic policy-document analysis (Dalglish et al., 2020). Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Johannesburg School of Tourism and Hospitality Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participant codes identify stakeholder category rather than individual identity: GOV for government and parastatal participants, NGO for environmental and conservation organisations, BUS for tourism businesses and COM for community representatives. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly and analysed thematically. Open inductive coding was first undertaken manually and then organised in ATLAS.ti to support systematic retrieval and comparison. Related codes were grouped into themes addressing institutional roles, overlapping mandates, inter-agency collaboration, participation, feedback, implementation capacity and differences among the three cases. Themes were refined by comparing evidence across stakeholder groups and sites and by examining divergent examples where coordination did work.

This process was consistent with contemporary guidance on thematic analysis and emphasised coherence between the research questions, coding decisions and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Interview and documentary evidence were then brought together to compare formal responsibilities with reported governance practice. All direct quotations used in the paper were checked against the study records for accuracy.

RESULTS

Institutional mandates and coordination

Zimbabwe's ecotourism system contains numerous institutions with legitimate but intersecting responsibilities. Tourism agencies focus on sector development, promotion and standards; EMA regulates environmental assessment and environmental management; ZimParks oversees protected areas and wildlife; and local authorities carry planning, service and community-facing responsibilities. Participants described examples of cooperation among these bodies, including environmental assessments, inspections and conservation initiatives. The problem was therefore not a complete absence of collaboration, but uncertainty and delay when several mandates applied to the same issue. Different institutional priorities complicated coordination, a government participant explained:

“Sometimes, our priorities don't align perfectly, to mention an example, the Ministry of Tourism might be focused on increasing visitor numbers, while we at ZTA are more concerned with sustainability, but obvious we can always try to make sure that we are on the same track” (ZTA official, national level).

The comment illustrates how disagreement can occur even among institutions working within the tourism field. Participants also described situations in which tourism development, conservation and environmental requirements were considered through separate administrative processes. Although each process served a legitimate purpose, the absence of a consistently understood pathway for resolving overlaps could create duplication, slow approvals and make it difficult for operators or communities to know which institution was responsible for a final response.

Inter-agency collaboration and resource constraints

Participants from government reported working relationships among the tourism ministry, ZTA, EMA, ZimParks and local-government institutions. Joint inspections and environmental assessments showed that agencies could coordinate when a specific need arose. One official described the practical pattern as follows:

“We try to work with EMA and ZTA. We go together sometimes to check, but not all the time. Sometimes it's hard because everyone [each organisation] is busy, you know? But we try to meet and talk about the problems.” (Tourism ministry official, national level)

The distinction between occasional cooperation and routine coordination was important. Participants described collaboration as dependent on the issue, available staff, transport and project resources. This limited continuity and made follow-through difficult. A government participant discussing proposed coordination structures captured the problem directly:

“One of our more recently proposed initiatives is the inter-ministerial committee on tourism sustainability, which aims to bring together representatives from various ministries. We can have all the committees and meetings we want, but if we don't have the resources to follow through, we're not going to see the results we need.” (Tourism ministry official, national level)

These accounts suggest that institutional forums alone cannot solve coordination problems. Without staff time, budgets, shared work programmes and clear responsibility for implementing decisions, meetings may improve communication temporarily but without changing routine practice.

Tourism businesses experienced this weakness through slow approvals and the need to engage several authorities sequentially, increasing the time and effort required to develop or adjust tourism activities.

Governance processes and local feedback

Participants consistently described a governance system in which rules and policy directions moved more clearly from national institutions to destinations than local experience moved back into decision-making. Businesses and communities attended consultations and interacted with local authorities, but several participants were uncertain whether their contributions influenced final decisions. A Victoria Falls business participant stated:

“We are occasionally consulted, but not as often as we should be. Sometimes it feels like decisions are made without fully understanding the practical challenges we face. Operators like us have firsthand experience with what works and what does not, so our input could definitely help shape more effective regulations.” (Tourism business representative, Victoria Falls)

The problem was not whether consultation occurred, but whether it occurred early enough to influence decisions and whether participants received feedback on the outcome. In Binga, a participant similarly described consultations that did not reliably shape higher-level decisions:

“We need to be asked what we think about tourism developments, not just told what is happening after the decisions are made.” (Community representative, Binga)

This shows that stakeholders were not entirely excluded from decision-making, but opportunities to provide feedback were irregular and rarely followed by a clear response. Participants could not identify a consistent process for communicating whether locally raised concerns had been addressed, declined or referred to another institution. Access to formal meetings was also uneven, as established organisations were generally better placed to participate than small businesses and geographically dispersed communities. Thus, practical experience from the local level did not always reach the institutions responsible for policy and regulatory decisions.

Destination-level variations in institutional coordination

The cross-case comparison shows that a common national framework does not generate identical governance conditions. The same laws and national agencies interact with different levels of institutional presence, stakeholder networks and administrative access in each destination. Table 3 summarises these differences.

Table 3. Place-specific coordination conditions across the three study sites (Source: Authors' analysis)

Site	Institutional setting	Main coordination challenge	Priority response
Victoria Falls	Dense presence of regulators, established operators and environmental actors	Multiple agencies and sequential processes create congestion and delays	Coordinate approvals, monitoring and operator feedback
Hwange	Strong protected-area and conservation partnership networks	Local government and community influence is uneven within a park-centred system	Link conservation networks to a broader destination forum
Binga	Thinner institutional presence and greater administrative distance	Weak routes for local concerns, support and follow-up	Strengthen district coordination, outreach and formal feedback channels

Victoria Falls had the densest interaction among regulators, operators and environmental actors. This institutional presence improved access to agencies and made joint activity more feasible, but it also created coordination pressure because several authorities could become involved in the same proposal or issue. Businesses described administrative delay and consultation that did not always lead to visible responses. The central problem in Victoria Falls was therefore coordination among co-present institutions rather than the absence of governance actors. Hwange displayed strong conservation relationships centred on the protected area. Tourism businesses described partnerships with conservation organisations that supported monitoring, compliance, training and community initiatives. These networks provided practical capacity, yet formal governance remained strongly shaped by protected-area priorities.

Participants still reported top-down communication and limited influence over some regulatory decisions. The main challenge was to connect existing conservation networks more consistently with local government, tourism enterprises and community interests at destination level. In Binga, fewer institutions were directly involved in tourism governance, coordination therefore relied mainly on the local authority, community leaders and relationships developed through individual projects. Participants reported limited opportunity to influence policy, weaker implementation support and greater distance from national institutions. Remoteness was not the only problem, but it made coordination more difficult because there were fewer routine opportunities through which local concerns could be transmitted, interpreted or followed up. Therefore, Binga faced both a coordination problem and a capacity problem.

Bridging roles of NGOs and tourism businesses

Across the cases, NGOs and tourism businesses helped connect institutions and stakeholder groups. NGOs supported environmental assessment, training, community engagement and advocacy, while businesses translated regulatory requirements into day-to-day operations and sometimes contributed to conservation monitoring and local development projects. One NGO participant described this intermediary role directly:

“Feedback is provided to government on how these laws are being implemented on the ground, which helps to make sure that our advocacy is not only aligned with the laws and policies but also practical and reflective of community needs.” (Environmental NGO representative, national level)

These bridging roles strengthened communication where formal channels were weak, but their limitations were also clear. NGO projects depend on funding, business participation varies, and neither group can guarantee that public agencies will respond to local concerns. Non-governmental actors can therefore support coordination, but they cannot replace clear public responsibility, predictable institutional processes or sustained government presence across destinations.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that Zimbabwe does not lack institutions or regulations for governing ecotourism. Responsibilities are already distributed among specialised government agencies, local authorities, community structures and non-state organisations. The main difficulty lies in coordinating their work when mandates intersect. Differences in

priorities, infrequent joint activities and limited resources often weaken implementation, even though formal institutions and regulations are in place. Comparable research on developing-country and forest-based ecotourism identifies fragmented governance, overlapping regulation and uneven institutional capacity as recurring implementation barriers (Forje et al., 2022; Lawasi et al., 2025; Wondirad et al., 2020). Sentanu et al. (2023) likewise found that participation and communication contribute to tourism governance only when they are supported by arrangements that enable stakeholders to coordinate decisions and carry them through. The findings help explain why establishing another committee would not, on its own, resolve coordination problems. Participants were already aware of joint initiatives, meetings and inspections, but reported that these activities were irregular and often limited by a lack of resources. Improving coordination therefore depends less on creating new structures than on making existing arrangements work consistently. Institutions need clearly defined roles, workable procedures for making and implementing joint decisions, and sufficient resources to undertake shared activities. This finding is consistent with Harilal et al. (2025), who identify communication, clarity of stakeholder roles and cohesion as important to inclusive tourism development.

The findings also indicate that decision-making within Zimbabwe's ecotourism governance system remains largely top-down. Although consultation took place, participants generally felt that they had little influence over final decisions and received limited feedback afterwards. Being invited to meetings did not necessarily amount to meaningful participation, what mattered was whether the views and practical knowledge shared by communities and implementers were considered, and whether institutions explained how this input informed their decisions.

Attendance at meetings did not necessarily amount to meaningful participation; influence, responsiveness and evidence that local knowledge shaped decisions mattered more. Similar patterns of centralised decision-making and passive community participation have been reported in South Africa and Uganda (Makhanyela et al., 2024; Nabalegwa et al., 2025). Dangi & Petrick (2021) similarly identify representation, responsiveness and collaborative participation as important elements of sustainable community-based tourism governance. Mpofu & Van Der Merwe (2025) also emphasise the need for more meaningful community participation in tourism planning in Hwange. Comparable evidence from KwaZulu-Natal shows that centralised administration, fragmented stakeholder relationships and weak coordination can limit meaningful community participation in ecotourism development (Makhanyela et al., 2024).

Improving participation may therefore depend less on creating additional consultation forums and more on ensuring that existing consultations lead to clear responses. Local authorities, community organisations and tourism businesses often encounter implementation problems first and can bring these concerns to the attention of responsible institutions. However, their contribution has little effect when issues raised during consultation are not recorded, referred or followed up. Institutions could address this by documenting the main concerns raised, assigning responsibility for each issue and reporting back on the action taken. NGOs may help communicate community and technical concerns, but the relevant public institution should remain responsible for providing a response.

The comparison shows that coordination challenges take different forms across the three destinations. In Victoria Falls, the large number of institutions involved can lead to overlapping procedures and difficulties in aligning their activities. Hwange benefits from established conservation partnerships, although coordination needs to extend beyond institutions and organisations centred on the national park. In Binga, links with national institutions are less frequent, leaving local actors with less access to the institutional support needed to address tourism and conservation issues. These findings support recent studies showing that multi-level governance is shaped by local conditions and that the same national policy may be implemented differently from one destination to another (Guo & Li, 2025; Novalia et al., 2025). They are also consistent with Zimbabwean studies that identify geographical differences in sustainability practices and continuing challenges surrounding community participation in Hwange (Mpofu & Van Der Merwe, 2025; Shereni & Rogerson, 2023).

This does not mean that each destination requires separate environmental or tourism legislation. Common national standards remain necessary to ensure consistency and public accountability. However, the support required to meet those standards will differ between destinations. Victoria Falls may benefit from clearer procedures for coordinating the many institutions already present, while Hwange requires stronger connections between park-centered partnerships and the wider district. Related research within the KAZA conservation network shows that local and sectoral partnerships vary with community agency, institutional context and power, supporting stronger links between local collaboration and higher governance levels (Tichaawa & Lekgau, 2025). In Binga, the priority is to improve access to national institutions and strengthen local administrative capacity. Applying the same administrative response across all three destinations could therefore place those with fewer resources and weaker institutional connections at a further disadvantage.

This study makes an empirical contribution by bringing together evidence from 39 interviews with government and parastatal officials, environmental and conservation organisations, tourism businesses and community representatives.

Considering these perspectives together shows how the same coordination problem can be experienced differently across the sector. Overlapping responsibilities within government may result in delays for tourism operators, limited opportunities for communities to influence decisions and additional pressure on NGOs to connect institutions and local stakeholders. The study therefore presents a broader account of how ecotourism governance operates in practice rather than examining it from the perspective of a single group. The comparison of Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga also adds an important geographical and comparative contribution. Although all three destinations are governed under the same national legal and policy framework, coordination does not work in the same way in each place. Victoria Falls illustrates how the presence of many institutions can create overlapping procedures and make coordination difficult.

Hwange benefits from established conservation partnerships, but these relationships remain largely centred on the national park. In Binga, distance from national institutions and limited institutional presence reduce access to support

and opportunities to provide feedback. The findings therefore show that governance can vary considerably within one country, even where the same laws and policies apply (Guo & Li, 2025; Novalia et al., 2025).

The findings also have practical contribution, they suggest that Zimbabwe's immediate priority is not necessarily to create additional institutions, but to improve how the existing ones work together. This requires clearer responsibilities where mandates overlap, more regular and adequately resourced joint activities, stronger obligations to respond to concerns raised by local stakeholders, and greater support for destinations with limited institutional capacity.

The study shows that effective ecotourism governance depends on more than the existence of appropriate laws and organisations. It also depends on the working relationships through which institutions coordinate decisions, respond to local concerns and implement policy in different destinations.

The findings suggest four practical steps for improving coordination; at the national level, institutions responsible for tourism, environmental management and wildlife should develop a shared protocol for handling ecotourism proposals and recurring governance issues. This protocol should identify the lead institution, the information required from each agency, expected timeframes and procedures for resolving disagreements. Where a proposal requires approval from several agencies, assessments should be coordinated as far as the law allows to reduce unnecessary duplication for applicants. Coordination also needs to be strengthened at the destination level. Existing forums and partnerships should operate through agreed work programmes, designated responsibilities and sufficient budgets for implementation, rather than meeting only when a particular issue arises. The focus should reflect local conditions. In Victoria Falls, priority should be given to coordinating approvals, monitoring activities and responses to concerns raised by operators. In Hwange, conservation partnerships need stronger links with local government and community interests. Binga would benefit from more regular engagement and stronger connections between district institutions and national agencies.

Consultation should also be followed by a clear response, records of engagement should state the concern raised, the institution responsible for addressing it, the decision reached and any further action required. Communities and local businesses should be involved early enough for their knowledge to inform decisions, especially where proposed developments may affect land use, livelihoods or conservation responsibilities. The allocation of coordination resources should consider administrative distance and local institutional capacity, rather than being determined mainly by tourism volumes. More remote destinations may need additional technical assistance, visits from national officials and opportunities to participate remotely if they are to meet national requirements. NGOs and tourism businesses can continue to provide technical support and assist communication among stakeholders. However, responsibility for public decisions and for responding to concerns raised by stakeholders should remain with the relevant public institution.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how relationships among institutions and stakeholders at different levels influence ecotourism governance in Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga. Zimbabwe has an extensive set of laws, public agencies, local authorities and non-state organisations involved in tourism, environmental management, wildlife conservation and local governance. However, these arrangements do not always work together effectively during implementation.

Participants described overlapping responsibilities, competing institutional priorities, irregular joint activities and limited resources. They also reported that concerns raised locally did not always reach the institutions responsible for making decisions or receive a clear response. The comparison shows that these challenges differ across destinations, in Victoria Falls, the involvement of many institutions can result in overlapping procedures and difficulties in coordinating approvals and monitoring. Hwange benefits from established conservation partnerships, but these relationships remain largely centred on the national park and need stronger connections with local government, businesses and communities. In Binga, local actors have fewer regular links with national institutions and less access to technical support and decision-makers. The same national governance framework is therefore implemented under very different local conditions.

The findings do not point to an immediate need for additional institutions. Instead, they show the importance of improving how existing organisations work together. Responsibilities need to be clearer where mandates overlap, and joint activities require regular funding and agreed procedures. Approval and monitoring processes should be better coordinated, while communities and businesses should be involved early enough for their knowledge to inform decisions. Institutions should also report back on concerns raised during consultation.

The form of support provided should reflect local capacity, with less-connected destinations receiving greater assistance in accessing national institutions and meeting common standards. The study shows how coordination problems are experienced across institutional boundaries, through bringing together the experiences of government agencies, local authorities, communities, NGOs and tourism businesses.

Its comparison of three destinations also demonstrates that the effectiveness of multi-level governance depends on local institutional conditions as well as national laws and policies. For Zimbabwe, stronger coordination would improve more than administrative efficiency. It would help ensure that conservation priorities, tourism development and local interests are considered together. Ecotourism governance will be more effective and legitimate when institutions communicate consistently, follow through on joint decisions, respond to local concerns and remain accessible to destinations with weaker institutional connections.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was designed to generate analytical insights rather than findings that can be statistically generalised to all ecotourism settings in Zimbabwe. It draws on 39 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants.

Although the interviews included several stakeholder groups, individual accounts cannot be assumed to represent every view within an organisation or stakeholder category. Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga also provided useful contrasts, but they do not reflect the full range of conditions found across Zimbabwe's ecotourism destinations.

Future research could examine whether similar coordination challenges occur in other protected areas, borderland and community-based tourism settings. Longitudinal studies would help establish how relationships among institutions change as tourism and environmental governance reforms are implemented.

Social network analysis could provide a more systematic picture of which actors interact, how frequently they communicate and where influence is concentrated. Participatory research could also explore how communities experience consultation, representation, feedback and accountability over time.

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