

THE STATE OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN TRANSFRONTIER CONSERVATION AREAS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Tembi Maloney TICHAAWA* 

University of Johannesburg, School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, Johannesburg,
South Africa, e-mail: tembit@uj.ac.za

Refiloe Julia LEKGAU 

University of Johannesburg, School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, Johannesburg,
South Africa, e-mail: rlekgau@uj.ac.za

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Abstract: This study adopts a cross-border approach to examining the state of tourism development within the context of Transfrontier conservation areas, based on three case study sites (Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe). In-depth interviews conducted with 58 wildlife tourism stakeholders, including tourism businesses, conservation NGOs, community representatives, and governing authorities, demonstrate that while natural resources constitute the basis of the tourism economies, the level of development and ownership of tourism offerings differs significantly among the three destinations. Additionally, while international and regional tourists have been the dominant market for these destinations, there is a strong emergence of domestic tourists stemming from the post-pandemic era. The unbalanced scale of tourism development in the three destinations demonstrates that closer attention must be paid to tourism policies and practices that support the inclusion of local entrepreneurs in the tourism sector to generate a greater localised socioeconomic impact and align stakeholder interests.

Keywords: wildlife tourism, Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, Southern Africa, communities

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, there has been growth in transnational or transboundary management of natural and heritage resources (Adie and Amore, 2021; Mason et al., 2020). Adie and Amore (2021) provide examples of heritage tourism management, including the Silk Roads: Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor, which spans regions in China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan; The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, a landmark of the Modern Movement with sites in Argentina, Belgium, France, Germany, India, Japan, and Switzerland; and Sangha Trinational, a natural site shared by Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and the Congo. Similarly, a growing number of countries have begun collaborating in the protection of natural resources, with Linell et al. (2019) emphasising that the scale and complexity of current environmental concerns demand equally substantial interventions and governance responses. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the establishment of these protected areas marks an important milestone and a rethinking of conservation, poverty reduction, and regional peace and cooperation (Stoldt et al., 2020). Certainly, Transfrontier conservation areas are not only tasked with protecting unique and diverse wildlife and landscapes but also bear the responsibility of supporting the livelihoods of communities within these areas (Tichaawa and Lekgau, 2020). Owing to the spaces they occupy and the actors involved (both human and non-human), Transfrontier conservation areas hold great potential for sustainable tourism development (Stone, 2024). In this regard, tourism is positioned as a strategy for poverty alleviation by providing alternative sources of livelihoods, supporting conservation efforts, and increasing tourist arrivals in the countries of the Transfrontier conservation areas, thereby boosting their national economies (Chiutsi and Saarinen, 2019; Stone, 2024).

Research into Transfrontier conservation areas is arguably lacking, particularly in Southern Africa. Existing studies have evaluated the attainment of community inclusion in the management of Transfrontier conservation areas (for example, Chiutsi and Saarinen, 2017, 2019; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2019), efforts to integrate regional peace and cooperation in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region (Linell et al., 2019; Ramutsindela, 2007), the efficacy of conservation efforts in addressing current and emerging challenges (Nieman and Botha, 2023; Imbwaie et al., 2023), and the opportunities and challenges of wildlife tourism for host communities (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2024, 2022). Broadly, these studies have revealed the considerable potential of Transfrontier conservation areas for regional cooperation and conservation, which requires further harmonisation of policy and practice.

However, the myriad of stakeholders involved in these large, complex systems often marginalises communities, raising important questions about the inclusivity and sustainability of both the Transfrontier conservation areas and the

* Corresponding author

conservation efforts themselves. Moreover, conservation initiatives are further hampered by the human dynamics within these ecosystems, exacerbated by limited participation and, consequently, limited benefits derived from these protected areas. In recognising the complex nature of the Transfrontier conservation areas system and the actor dynamics involved, the current study focuses on one facet of this relationship: the current nature of tourism development in this context. This study aims to examine the nature and dynamics of tourism development within a Transfrontier Conservation Area in Southern Africa, serving as a foundation for emerging research and policy development focused on sustainable tourism in these protected spaces. The research centres on the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), which encompasses a combination of protected areas, wildlife corridors, and wildlife management areas across parts of Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. KAZA is regarded as the most ambitious protected area in the world, owing to its scale and objectives, which include conservation, community development, tourism growth, and regional cooperation (Stoldt et al., 2020; Nieman and Botha, 2023).

Specifically, this study considers three wildlife tourism destinations within these countries: Kasane (Botswana), Livingstone (Zambia), and Hwange (Zimbabwe). The selection of these three distinct wildlife destinations was intentional, aimed at addressing the cross-border nature essential for this type of research and providing multiple case studies that inform the study's objectives and outcomes. Based on the results gleaned from the data collected, we argue that if Transfrontier conservation areas like KAZA are to achieve a sustainable and meaningful impact on the natural environment, host communities, and regional development, they must be viewed as integrated systems.

Moreover, the representative components within these systems must be examined to attain a more comprehensive understanding of their inner workings. The contribution of this study lies in the insights provided regarding the embedding of sustainability and resilience within the system. Consequently, an exploration of the existing tourism dynamics within this context becomes imperative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transfrontier parks development in Southern Africa

Transfrontier conservation areas are global initiatives that involve collaboration between neighbouring countries to manage and conserve shared natural resources, particularly wildlife and ecosystems (Bhatasara et al., 2013; Buscher, 2013). These areas are also referred to as peace parks, as they promote regional peace and stability through joint conservation efforts. The development of Transfrontier conservation areas is rooted in the understanding that ecosystems do not adhere to political borders; thus, effective conservation requires a coordinated approach (Bhatasara et al., 2013; Buscher, 2013; Stone, 2024).



Figure 1. Map of transfrontier conservation areas in Southern Africa (Source: Author)

Transfrontier conservation areas aim to create large, interconnected landscapes that facilitate the free movement of wildlife across borders, promoting genetic diversity and healthier populations (Chitakira et al., 2018). These areas often involve the establishment of protected zones, wildlife corridors, and sustainable development areas (Stone, 2024).

In these biodiverse regions, countries pool resources, share knowledge, and address common conservation challenges. In Southern Africa, the development of Transfrontier conservation areas is supported by legislative and policy frameworks established by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which have provided an enabling environment for nations in the region (Stone, 2024). Notably, Transfrontier conservation areas emerged concurrently with the transition to democracy in countries such as Namibia (1990) and South Africa (1994). Ramutsindela (2007) found that these conservation areas did not arise in isolation but were rooted in pre-existing activities related to shared natural resource management in Southern Africa.

This suggests a historical foundation for Transfrontier conservation areas that predates their formal establishment. There are ten Transfrontier conservation areas in Southern Africa, encompassing countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho, and Eswatini, as illustrated in Figure 1 above. Generally, these Transfrontier conservation areas are guided by three broad goals: to protect biodiversity, to foster rural economic development through sustainable use of natural resources (such as wildlife tourism), and to promote regional cooperation in wildlife conservation and tourism development.

Wildlife tourism and sustainable community livelihoods

Wildlife tourism is positioned to support and act as an intermediary between conservation and socioeconomic goals. This sector represents one of the largest forms of tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa, with various reports indicating that wildlife tourism is a dominant factor in international arrivals to the region (Jones et al., 2023; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2022). Indeed, several African nations have developed their tourism industries by leveraging the diversity and abundance of natural resources and landscapes. As a result of the substantial economic benefits, wildlife tourism has been utilised as a means of fostering economic growth for impoverished communities in the region (Stone and Nyaupane, 2018). Snyman and Bricker (2021) elaborate on the significance of tourism as a source of economic relief for the poor, highlighting that tourism spending occurs where goods and services are produced.

This enables communities near protected areas to generate revenue through their entrepreneurial ventures. Additionally, the cultural and wildlife richness often present in rural regions, where both impoverished communities and protected areas are situated, adds considerable value to tourism (Tichaawa and Lekgau, 2020). Moreover, tourism is a labour-intensive industry that provides employment opportunities for a substantial number of residents (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2020; Stone, 2024). Furthermore, these forms of tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa are frequently characterised by community-led conservation initiatives, which play a crucial role in utilising these two sectors for community development through benefit-sharing schemes and skills development (Stone and Nyaupane, 2018; Snyman and Bricker, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Case study site: KAZA

The KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area is the largest transboundary conservation area in the world, covering approximately 520,000 square kilometres (Nieman and Botha, 2024). This Transfrontier Conservation Area encompasses five Southern African countries: Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Figure 2).

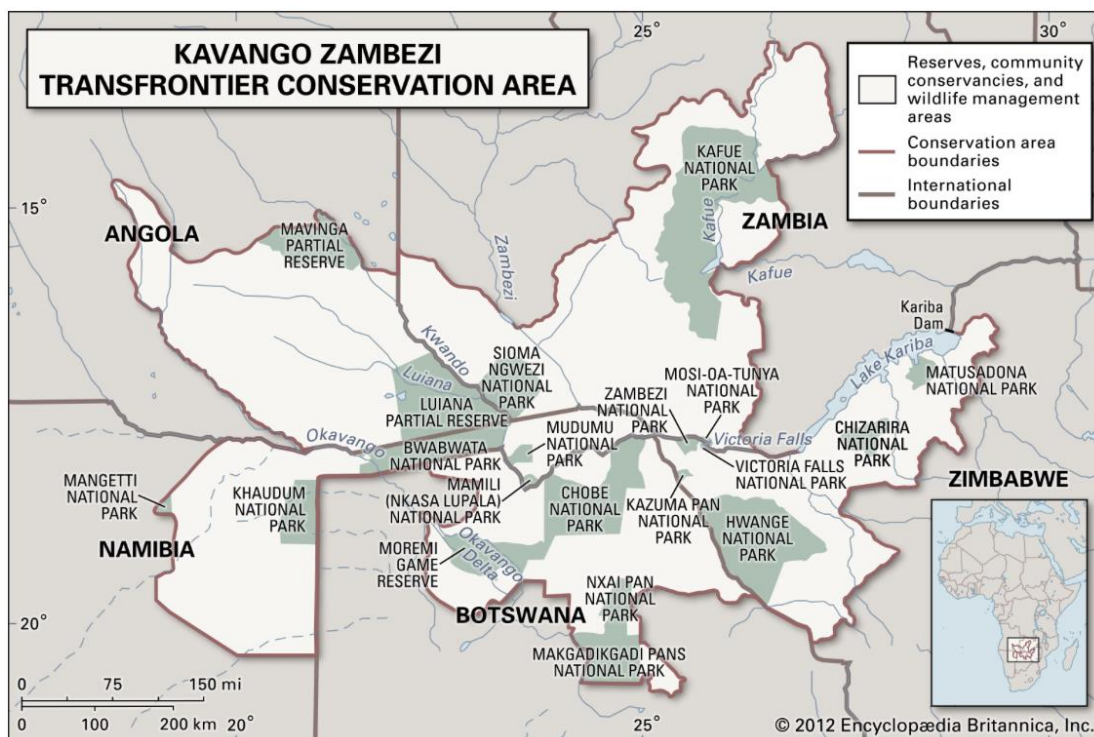


Figure 2. Map of the KAZA Transfrontier conservation area (Source: KAZA, 2024)

KAZA is situated in the Okavango and Zambezi river basins, which are home to a vast array of ecosystems, including wetlands, savannas, forests, and floodplains (Imbwaie et al., 2023). The area is renowned for its rich biodiversity and is home to significant populations of wildlife, including elephants, lions, leopards, African wild dogs, and numerous bird species (Nieman and Botha, 2024). KAZA also serves as a critical corridor for wildlife migration, particularly for elephants, which move freely across borders within the conservation area. The shared ecosystems are one of the primary reasons for the establishment of KAZA, aimed at fostering cross-border collaboration among the member states to ensure sustainable management of wildlife, natural resources, and tourism (KAZA, 2020). Tourism plays a major role in KAZA, contributing significantly to the national economies of the five countries involved. This area encompasses iconic natural landmarks, such as the Okavango Delta in Botswana, Victoria Falls in Zambia and Zimbabwe, and several national parks, including Chobe (Botswana), Bwabwata (Namibia), and Kafue (Zambia). Beyond the economic benefits derived from tourism, which supports both local and national economies, tourism in these countries is promoted to bolster conservation efforts and enhance community livelihoods and development (KAZA, 2020). To explore the nature of tourism in this region, three case study areas were chosen for this study: Victoria Falls (on the Zambian side), Chobe National Park (in Botswana), and Hwange National Park (in Zimbabwe). The research also considers the dependent tourism industries in Livingstone, Kasane, and Hwange, respectively.

Research approach

The paper employed a qualitative research design, deemed essential for addressing the cross-border dynamics of the Transfrontier Conservation Area through the examination of three case study sites. This design necessitated an exploratory and inductive approach to assess the current state of development within the tourism industries. In-depth interviews were conducted with relevant local tourism and conservation stakeholders in the three case study areas. Additionally, interviews were held with community representatives, including local community leaders, community organisations, and community members employed in the tourism sector. In total, 58 interviews were conducted, as outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Number of interviews conducted

Study sites	Key stakeholder	No. of participants
Kasane (Chobe National Park)	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	12
	Community representatives	7
	Community trusts representatives	3
	Conservation agency representatives	2
	Tourism governing authority representatives	1
Livingstone (Victoria Falls)	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	10
	Community representatives	4
	Conservation agency representatives	2
	Conservation governing authority representatives	2
Hwange (Hwange National Park)	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	6
	Community representatives	5
	Community CAMPFIRE representatives	3
	Tourism governing authority representatives	1
Total		58

In the interviews, participants were asked questions to unpack the nature of tourism development in the destinations, including the various tourism experiences offered, common visitor markets, and collaborations and networks in the region. The data was recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed with the assistance of the Atlas.ti version 24.1. The software enabled the line-by-line coding of the data as well as the grouping of the codes to form the themes used in this research. To ensure the anonymity of the participants involved in the study and presenting the findings, all the responses have a 'P', followed by a specific number (with no significant meaning), differentiating the participants from one another. Participants are only differentiated by country, where BW at the end of the participant code represents a 'Botswana' participant, while 'ZM' a Zambian participant and 'ZW' a Zimbabwean participant. Four major themes emerged in the results linked to the study objectives and are presented and discussed below.

RESULTS

Tourism offerings in the region

The first part of the study sought to unpack the tourism offerings in the region to determine the flow of tourist spending within the local economy. In the case of Kasane, participants explained that their wildlife tourism sector centred on the Zambezi River. Many of the Kasane participants agreed that Chobe National Park and the river constituted the two key tourism attractions and activities in this part of Botswana. For instance, an accommodation owner highlighted:

We don't have many activities in Kasane. So mostly they come for a game drive. And then a boat cruise, And then I would say they have to spend in their accommodation, their meals, maybe if they have to get something petrol to just navigate around Kasane. But mostly, it's just accommodation meals, a Game Drive, and a boat cruise. (P13BW)

The participants further explained that the river supports the tourism activities of Chobe National Park due to its attraction of various animal species. Other participants noted that the proximity of two key tourist attractions in the

region, Chobe National Park and Victoria Falls, allows for day trips to Zimbabwe and/or Zambia. Additionally, some participants highlighted the opportunity to extend their trip to Maun, a popular tourism city in Botswana that features the Okavango Delta and the Moremi Game Reserve. Our main services [are] river cruises in the Chobe [National Park], and the size of the rivers. we also do Victoria Falls day trips. We'll do mobile safaris, normally from Kasane to Maun. I also [offer] game drives along the Chobe National Park. (P15BW)

Moreover, another major activity in Kasane is hunting tours. Participants explained that some parts of the Chobe district have been allocated to communities that have established hunting concessions, with one stating, "...and they are mostly dependent on hunting as their major cash injection; they even try to have community trust, and they do have hunting for particular seasons." (P1BW).

In Zambia, participants mentioned that there are several activities visitors can partake in. Indeed, while Victoria Falls serves as the main attraction in Livingstone, numerous tour operators offer a variety of tourist activities, such as micro flights, abseiling, bungee jumping, and boat cruises. The responses below illustrate this: When they [tourists] come here, in terms of activities, they [can] do different activities. Like in Livingstone we have the [Victoria Falls] game park, we have also different activities like bungee jumping, [river] rafting. They even go and see lions and elephants. There's the Mukuni Big Five, that they can go and see and even walk with the lions. So different activities. (P22ZM)

Most of them are the likes of Victoria Falls. They do zipline, Abseil Zambia goes that, by the gorge. The game viewing and boat cruises. Some go to the devil's pool, some bungee jumping. (P25ZM)

In Zimbabwe, visits to Hwange National Park and hunting safaris comprise the tourist activities offered in the region. Similar to Botswana, some parts of Zimbabwe have been designated for hunting activities. However, hunting was not widely discussed in the interviews, suggesting that this form of tourism is disconnected from the local communities. Additionally, the findings indicate that village tours, along with visits to local markets, are common tourist activities in this area, as illustrated in the quotes below by community representatives: Tourists mostly spend money on doing activities, and if ever they get to do village visits, they buy baskets and sculptures, anything that can be held as a souvenir, but still portable enough for them to cross the borders with when going home. (P45ZM)

Well, the products and the products, firstly, that sorry, spend money on are the cultural arts effects designed by the local people, by the locals. Rather, let me say, the sculptures or some authentic souvenirs that represent the cultural authenticity of our area and the services that they get to spend money on, mostly in our area, are game drives, nature walks and also night trips, mostly when we talk about wildlife related activities, and also the services that they get to spend money on, also the services that we offer in our lodge, such As accommodation, and also meals such as breakfast, lunch, dinner, and also other related services within the organization. (P50ZW)

The following theme presented in the paper draws attention to the market structure of the three wildlife tourism destinations.

Structure of the tourism market

Participants were asked to specify who their primary markets were. In terms of outbound tourists, it is interesting to note that while international tourists were among the first to be highlighted by the majority of study participants across the three destinations, there appears to be a noticeable increase in the arrivals of regional tourists from neighbouring countries:

Mostly South Africans and Europeans, countries like Britain, Germany, sometimes a few Batswana. It depends on the seasons because they [Batswana] usually are not around since they will be at work. (P19BW)

You get people from Denmark, and the UK. We had some Americans the other week, and we've been getting quite a few people from South Africa as well, Kenya. I think that's... off the top of my head. (P25ZM)

They come from other countries or continents. So those would be Americans, Germans, Europe, as well Asians, but not so much. (P38ZW)

As seen above, the common source countries include the USA and a few European nations, South Africa, and very few Asian countries. Regarding South African tourists, one of the destination marketing managers in the region mentioned that these tourists are typically self-drive visitors: So now we are starting to see international tourists come back, the regional tourists like, South Africa is our number one market in terms of regional tourism, because we get so many South African self-drive tourists. And they love Chobe. The Afrikaaners, they have got 4x4s and they love to do off road driving, we have got a lot of off road driving. So the regional market is the South African market. (P2BW)

Notably, the participants mentioned that these tourists often visit within the KAZA countries, with one participant highlighting that "*they're also coming from Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. So there is an opportunity for foreign exchange.*" (P11BW). It is important to note that most of the above responses were received from the larger hotel companies in the three destinations, and the multinational scope of these destinations allows them to market their facilities on a larger scale. For instance, some participants in Botswana mentioned that they have agents in their key source markets who promote their companies for them, stating, "*So like, us here, it is our main reservation office, which works with agents in different countries, starting with South Africa, Zimbabwe, and some in the UK*" (P4BW).

Furthermore, these companies can afford to attend regional and even international roadshows as part of their marketing activities. To exemplify, one participant underscored: We have BTO [Botswana Tourism Organisation], we have Africa's Eden because with BTO and Africa's Eden, they always do some road shows in these different countries such as SA [South Africa], Namibia, Zambia, [and] Zimbabwe. And then as a company, as an establishment, we also look at what roadshow can benefit us. Because BTO and Africa's Eden, they also organise European roadshows. There is one in Berlin, in Germany, that normally happens around February. There is also Australia, you know, those European roadshows, Belgium, as an establishment, that's where you decide where you are sending your representative to go and seek business. (P3BW)

Interestingly, in Zimbabwe, the findings further revealed that missionaries and researchers are a key market for Hwange.

And then they've also engaged in wildlife tourism through cultural exchange with the tourists that come to this area. And also is part of the benefits to the previous question. Some of these tourists include missionaries and donors. And once they come to these areas, they may leave sponsorships for underprivileged people or excellent individuals. (P38ZW)

All three destinations are experiencing promising growth in their domestic markets. For Kasane, some participants explained that government workers comprised their largest domestic market: For instance, an accommodation manager stated: The tourists visiting this community are mainly local tourists who are big on government business. A government constitutes about 80% of the occupancies. Then the other 20% is mainly leisure. (P17BW)

While in Livingstone, the domestic market primarily consists of leisure tourists, although the larger hotels do receive some business tourists for conferences. It is important to note that these two towns represent the highest concentration of tourist activities in their respective countries. For instance, participants in Livingstone mentioned that the town is the tourist hub of the country. Similarly, in both countries, the growth in these markets resulted from the previous pandemic, which encouraged more local travel. A representative from a tourism governing authority had the following to say on the matter:

Botswana was mostly dependent on international tourism. Now that the international tourists were no longer traveling, there was a big drive to push for domestic tourism. For the first time in my life, that was when I saw a lot of Botswana travelling, also because they were hungry to travel. They've been locked up. Kasane was just fully booked for two years, domestic tourists, they really did go a long way to resuscitating the tourism industry in this place. (P1BW)

Structure of the tourism sector

Another major theme emerging from the results relates to the structure of the tourism sectors in the three destinations, primarily considering the ownership of tourism products and services. Largely, this region appears to be dominated by large multinational companies. In Botswana and Zimbabwe, this dominance is primarily evident in the accommodation sector, while in Zambia, these businesses extend to the tour operators. For example, one tour operator from Zambia stated:

On that issue, it is mostly these big businesses operate [in Livingstone]. So, you would find that these big companies like Mukuni Big Five, The African Queen, [and] ourselves are the ones offering boat cruises (P26ZM)

Certainly, this has been a big concern in all destinations as it raises the concern of tourism leakages, where one governing authority representative and community representative in Botswana lamented:

These foreign-owned companies, so they take the money here, most of the money, [and] they take it back to their countries. And then for the locals, there isn't that development that we were waiting for. Because a lot of the money is shipped out of the country, back to where these investors are coming from. (10BW)

The rich people are eating too much. Yeah, the small guys. And they can't grow if things are not corrected. (P20ZW)

Furthermore, some participants highlighted the dominance of bigger hotel groups which pose a severe challenge to smaller local accommodation providers, coupled with the fact these bigger accommodations have a prime location, by the Zambezi riverfront. One such a participant underscored:

And then the other challenge will be, for a small business like us to penetrate is a problem because we have those big hotels that are well established internationally and locally. But we are slowly and surely making it it's not that that much of a problem. But it's a challenge. Because you know, when you go online, you search for something that is well, that is already new, that is established, that is reputable, but we will get here ultimately. Yeah, to compete with them, and then their location like they are in the prime of the riverfront. So it gives them an added advantage. But yeah, we are fighting our own battles, we are competing on a different level and different market altogether. (P7BW)

While the majority of the accommodations in Kasane are owned by larger businesses not originating in Kasane (or even in Botswana in many cases), the tours and tour guide services are largely offered by local entrepreneurs. Furthermore, in the case of Kasane, there are three trusts: the Chobe Enclave Trust, Paleka, and Seboba (though the latter is not fully functioning). These trusts operate their own tourism ventures, such as lodges, and maintain partnerships with hunting safari operators that they manage for the benefit of the community. A representative of one of the community trusts explained:

Community Trust [are] members of the community - they're run by the community. They are chosen by the community, they elect the members right into those community trusts and they have campsites and lodges, and they can win quotas for trophy hunting and sell those to tourists, the hunters. The trophy hunters buy through the trusts. So, the trust generates income through the hotel and the quotas, those concessions. (P10BW)

In Livingstone, as most of the hotels and tour operators are foreign-owned businesses, the study found that locals often act as agents, some functioning as tour operators, while others operate as informal entrepreneurs selling arts and crafts. In the case of agents, this refers to small informal entrepreneurs who help find clients for the tour operators. The two quotes below elaborate on this group of stakeholders: A lot of activities are offered by most of these big companies and then the locals are more like the agents. Many agents don't really have the capacity to offer these activities, for instance, let's say the helicopter flights for helicopters, you know, an agent can't afford to buy a license. So instead what they do is just market it and then when they have tourists they bring them and collect money. (P30ZM)

In Livingstone, we have a lot of agents, small companies, who actually like for instance, they bring like we have Livingstone's adventures, which actually gives activities. We also have other agents who sell our activities and then they bring clients here when they bring the clients they collect commission. So basically, it's also giving younger people in small businesses business opportunities. (P31ZM)

Furthermore, informal trading is another prominent subsector of the tourism market. In fact, there is a designated place for many of the informal traders in Livingstone, a permanent structure funded by the World Bank. Unfortunately, this

structure is located in the middle of town, where much of the activity and accommodation are situated at the edge of the town, closer to Victoria Falls. Some participants in this market contended that this arrangement has left informal entrepreneurs on the periphery of tourism development in the town, a concern further exacerbated by the bigger hotels beginning to sell similar souvenirs for their guests. In this case, an informal entrepreneur stressed: the people that benefit are people who own lodges and hotels. Before then it was okay because those guys only used to offer accommodation and hospitality but they never used to sell all these things but for now, we find that someone in the lodge put up a shop. And then they told them [tourists] to say you know if you shop outside here, its at your own risk. (P27ZM)

In the case of Zimbabwe, most of the locals are operating in the informal sector, as traders of arts and crafts souvenirs, as well as in restaurants. One community leader responded: Members of the community can provide tourism establishments with products and services like local crafts and arts which include traditional handicrafts, textures and artwork. We can also prove fried fruits, vegetables, fresh produce and ingredients. We can provide meat and dairy products, baked goods, traditional music, entertainment, local transportation services, accommodation services to name a few. (P53ZW)

Furthermore, Zimbabwe has CAMPFIRE, which is spearheading the local communities' involvement in wildlife tourism with the development of the community markets being a notable project to absorb the community into tourism ownership. Participants explained as follows: Then we have community-based projects, [which include the] development of community based campsites, crafts, market, etc. So the campsites actually help management and the community to interact because they work, they may act as an intermediate. Then also [the] development of crafts markets. These actually empower the local community. They have a sense of belonging because now they are selling their own projects. (P58ZW)

Networks between tourism stakeholders

The final theme of the research relates to the formal and informal (as well as direct and indirect) linkages between tourism stakeholders in the region. In all three destinations, the study found tourism businesses to have close direct relationships with local tourism and non-tourism suppliers. Speaking on the relationship with the tourism supplier, one accommodation manager described: We do give business, we don't offer activities, your game drives and boat cruises, we don't have such activities. So we partnered with a local tour operator. So when our guests come, we sometimes do offer them a complete package, including the activities and then we give a certain payout to those guys who are providing activities for us. (P10BW)

Additionally, some of the participants representing the accommodation subsector in this region alluded to their indirect support of informal tourism entrepreneurs offering crafts and art souvenirs for tourists. Generally, the findings point to formal and informal networks existing among accommodation and tourism suppliers, with some participants going further to mention that trust and service quality are key determinants in maintaining and growing these networks. Interestingly, one participant in Botswana contended that the difficulty in absorbing new informal tourism suppliers into the supply chain is hampered by the mismatch between international guest service expectations and service quality. To substantiate such views, the participant offered: Let me take an example of taxi drivers, they feel that sometimes they can go pick the clients, we try and bring into the industry but the service that they are providing... it doesn't meet the tourist satisfaction. (P13BW)

However, there appears to be an indirect and informal relationship between the tourism private sector stakeholders and the key attractions, primarily Chobe National Park and Victoria Falls. When describing this relationship, study participants explained it to be one-way, with accommodation providers supporting conservation in the attractions through the payment of levies and entrance fees. The management of these attractions is centred around, and to a substantial extent, not aligned with the wider decision-making processes of the region. Furthermore, there appears to be a direct relationship between the conservation authorities (government and conservation NGOs) and tourism businesses, as well as community representatives in Botswana and Zimbabwe. Notably, in Zambia, this is a major concern, as one conservation representative argued that while there is some collaboration between leading tourism businesses and conservation agencies, locally-led conservation agencies (which have closer ties to communities) are often on the periphery of tourism development in the region, which has implications for deriving mutually beneficial results from such relationships.

Finally, the participants further recognised the opportunities in the proximity of Chobe National Park and Victoria Falls (in both countries), as well as Victoria Falls and Hwange National Park, alongside Kasane and the Namibian cultural villages. One participant remarked, "...we have access to four nations, now to three nations: Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Namibia..." (P11BW). This has resulted in operators offering tours to multiple countries and establishing networks within those countries, with one tour operator expressing: I established relationships with some of the businesses [tour operators] across the KAZA region. I know some other operators [in Botswana], they have partnerships with other tour operators on the Zimbabwean side of Victoria Falls. Because for them to [be able] offer those complete packages like the Victoria Falls transfers, they must have a direct relationship with some of the activity providers on that side. (P13B)

The following section of this paper unpacks the results further and discusses the findings alongside relevant literature.

DISCUSSION

This current study sought to explore tourism development in selected towns within the KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area. The findings showcase that natural attractions are the core products of wildlife tourism developments in these locales. Indeed, the natural diversity of Southern Africa is one of the region's greatest tourism assets, benefiting from the global interest in wildlife and environmental education, as well as the increasing disposable income and urbanisation (Rizzolo, 2023; Esparza-Huamanchumo et al., 2024). The dependence of the tourism sector on these natural assets—such as national parks and rivers, as well as other water sources—alongside the reliance of these destinations on tourism, makes them extremely vulnerable to climate-related changes that have already been notable and reported in the region (see

Mpolokang et al., 2022; Hambira et al., 2021; Dube et al., 2018). As such, more efforts are required in this region for climate adaptability and building destination resilience at both country and KAZA scales.

The matter of regional peace and tourism growth emerges strongly in the results. In relation to tourism growth, the findings suggest nuances in the visitor markets for these destinations. While international markets have traditionally been the dominant drivers of development in these areas, there has been a notable emergence of regional markets, primarily within the SADC region. Moreover, while South Africa constitutes a strong market for these destinations, the findings indicate growth in KAZA member states exploring partnerships with neighbouring countries. This trend may be linked to the economic recovery in certain sectors, as well as a renewed interest in African heritage and experiences, with one participant noting, “*Africans are back to their culture*” (P26ZM).

Furthermore, several studies affirm that the pandemic and subsequent travel restrictions have increased the desire for nature and outdoor experiences (Esparza-Huamanchumo et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2024), which these destinations are well-known for. Similarly, the growth in travel among KAZA residents within KAZA countries results from eased migration laws amongst these nations. This has facilitated tour operators in operating across multiple countries in the region and forming related partnerships that promote trade and provide much-needed economic boosts to local economies, which was one of the drivers behind such policy amendments (Ndebele, 2023).

The findings highlight several prevalent concerns regarding tourism development in the three destinations, notably the predominance of multinational businesses, which pose significant challenges to local entrepreneurs. This situation is unfortunately a common characteristic of tourism development in many destinations across Sub-Saharan Africa and extends to the wider Global South (Mbaiwa, 2017). It has prompted numerous calls to address the economic inequalities that persist in such settings in order to genuinely achieve local economic growth and development, as well as poverty alleviation (Saarinen et al., 2022). In nature-based settings, this includes concerted support for the conservation and protection of wildlife. Over a decade ago, Christie et al. (2013) identified economic leakages as one of the most frequently cited challenges to sustainable and inclusive tourism development in Africa. This concern remains relevant today and is further exacerbated in the case of Zambia, where multinational businesses have begun offering similar products to those of informal entrepreneurs. This raises critical questions about the extent to which informal tourism entrepreneurs are considered in tourism planning and development at the destination level, given that informality is central to local economies in the region (Makoni and Tichaawa, 2020). While tourism is positioned and promoted as contributing to conservation in nature-based settings (Dmitriyev et al., 2024) - by both funding conservation initiatives and providing an economic justification for stakeholders, particularly communities, to support conservation efforts and comply with conservation regulations - the findings cast doubt on the effectiveness of such contributions. There are significant gaps in creating an inclusive and sustainable sector that would engender support from local communities.

Contention among stakeholders is a common feature in Transfrontier Conservation Areas, as highlighted in studies by Lekgau and Tichaawa (2019, 2021) and Thakholi (2022). This study underscores the importance of representativeness and agency, with Botswana and Zimbabwe having state- and policy-supported community-based organisations involved in both tourism and conservation activities, thus establishing them as undeniable stakeholders in tourism development. While both community trusts and CAMPFIRE initiatives have faced criticism in previous studies - rightly questioning the transparency of benefit-sharing mechanisms and governance (Chiutsi and Saarinen, 2017; Shereni and Saarinen, 2020; Tchakatumba et al., 2019) - these organisations nonetheless provide the communities they represent with a presence among the myriad stakeholders within the sector. All these concerns suggest that efforts to harmonise policies among the five KAZA countries should also extend to harmonising tourism practices and policies, fostering a sustainable and inclusive tourism sector.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Wildlife tourism thrives in areas rich in biodiversity and wilderness landscapes. Many destinations in Southern Africa have successfully leveraged their natural resources as tourism offerings. Understandably, the majority of recent studies examining wildlife tourism have focused on the environmental changes impacting this sector. By concentrating solely on the tourism industry in wildlife destinations within Transfrontier Conservation Areas, the study findings highlight the existing tourism dynamics in these locations. It was discovered that the tourism industries in the represented KAZA countries are predominantly dominated by foreign-owned companies, with local communities providing tourism-related services to complement the existing attractions and market structures.

The findings underscored the power imbalances between tourism stakeholders and, in some cases, between tourism and conservation stakeholders. While international tourists constitute the majority of visitors to the region, opportunities exist to grow local and regional visitor markets, as well as to foster linkages among tourism businesses within the region for greater economic impact. These dynamics have significant implications for achieving the broader goals of Transfrontier Conservation Areas, namely nature conservation, poverty alleviation, and local and regional growth and development. The study has several practical and theoretical implications. Firstly, the gradual transition in the growing regional and domestic markets necessitates greater attention to targeted marketing and product development.

Secondly, the uneven scale of tourism development in the three destinations indicates that closer scrutiny is required of tourism policies and practices (within the region) that support the inclusion of local entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. This inclusion is vital for generating a more pronounced localised socioeconomic impact and for aligning stakeholder interests. Thirdly, the study demonstrated the importance of community-based organisations—such as community trusts in Botswana and CAMPFIRE in Zimbabwe—in facilitating community involvement in the tourism landscape, particularly within more complex tourism systems.

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