

## TOURISTS' AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF GAME DRIVE PROTOCOLS POST COVID-19 IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**Abstract:** Embarking on a safari is a highly sought-after experience, attracting both local and global tourists in substantial numbers. Despite its widespread appeal, this type of experience entails inherent risks to both tourists and wildlife. This study aims to investigate the awareness and understanding of game drive protocols by tourists in South Africa. Using the Greater Kruger National Park, adopting an explanatory qualitative research approach, thirty-one semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted from different safari tourism stakeholders, including safari lodge managers, park authorities and tour guides. The study revealed varied levels of awareness and understanding of game drive protocols by tourists during safari experiences in both private and national park contexts. The causes are attributed to a lack of awareness of protocols and guide lines, self-guided safaris, lack of law enforcement presence (field guides and rangers), insufficient induction, and language and cultural barriers, among others. As a consequence, tourists non-compliance behaviour was found to not only have negative consequences on wildlife and the ecosystem generally, but also endanger themselves and other tourists, and threaten the safari tourism sustainability and livelihoods. The study has implications for the enforcement of tourist compliance to game drive protocols, to ensure tourists safety and animal welfare, as well as to increase the overall experience whilst on guided or self-guided safari in game reserves.

**Keywords:** Safari tourism, Kruger National Park, Greater Kruger Park, Con-compliance behaviour

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### INTRODUCTION

The safari industry is a leading economic sector globally, including in South Africa (Saayman et al., 2020). Safari is one of the fastest growing segments in the tourism industry, with it offering a range of products aimed at satisfying wildlife visitors' needs (Manrai et al., 2020). In South Africa, the industry is acknowledged to significantly contributes to economic growth through job creation, improving people's welfare and poverty alleviation (Mudzanani, 2017). Before the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, recreation and entertainment in the tourism sector experienced rapid growth, due to an increase in the number of tourists visiting South African ecotourism sites, including game reserves (Mbatha et al., 2021; Van der Schyff et al., 2019). South African game reserves are considered as wildlife custodians for protected animal species, as well as a principal source for leisure and adventure trips (Sims-Castley et al., 2015).

Despite their growth and popularity over the past few decades, South African game reserves still experience challenges in terms of managing their game reserves, while promoting the welfare of the wildlife involved.

This is owed in part, to the increasing number of demands from tourists, who are motivated by the desire to visit popular game reserves featuring wildlife (Signé, 2018). During safari expeditions, tourists either directly or indirectly interact with animals (Von Essen et al., 2020). To minimise the adverse consequences that could result from such interactions, protocols and guidelines governing human behaviour have been set by the relevant authorities and game reserve managements (Lloyd et al., 2021). The aim of such protocols and guidelines is to regulate behaviour, increase awareness and understanding by tourists in order to preserve their safety and the welfare of the wildlife, and to contribute toward a positive experience of the expedition in the game reserves concerned.

Some studies have reported alarming findings deploring tourists' propensity towards engaging in behaviours that contravene the set protocols and guidelines (Chow-Fraser, 2018; Ramaano, 2021; Tarver et al., 2019). Nonadherence to existing protocols and guidelines can have negative consequences for tourists, as well as for the well-being of the

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wildlife concerned, with such consequences ranging from endangering animals' life to exposing tourists to animals' reactive and aggressive behaviours (Von Essen et al., 2020).

While research findings have widely recognised the negative effects of tourists' nonadherence behaviours during and after safari expeditions, and the negative impacts of such behaviours on the tourism industry in general, we argue in this study that little is known of tourists' awareness and understanding of game drive protocols. Moreover, such a lack of research-related interest in factors contributing to tourists' non-compliant behaviours has recently been recognised by Hodgson et al. (2022), who found that animals' reactions to tourists' non-compliant behaviours during safaris can not only elicit a stress response in the different animal groups involved, but it can also compromise visitors' safety. It is within this premise that this study is developed and presented in the context of South Africa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the National parks and game reserves already have protocols in place, indicating how tourists should behave once on a self or guided tour. However, in some instances, the messaging is not always correctly and uniformly interpreted by tourists, leading to visitors engaging in noncompliant behaviours. In their work, Gessa and Rothman (2021) focused on the framing the message to get tourists to comply with established protocols. The study identified effective communication as an important factor in ensuring that tourists comply with existing guidelines. Similarly, Kusmanoff et al. (2020) found that being strategic while communicating with tourists can lead to improved compliant behaviours. According to Gessa and Rothman (2021), tourists that received negatively framed messaging had a good probability of following the regulations as set out while those who received positively framed messages were more likely to disregard the regulations as set out by the park authorities. While investigating the importance of communication between tourists and tour guides in order to enhance tourists' awareness and understanding of protocols and guidelines during a safari trip, Gessa and Rothman (2021) establish that nature-based tourism such as Gorilla trekking in both Uganda and Rwanda contribute significantly to conservation as well as persevering the local communities, but this should be done in compliant with the parks regulations to ensure sustainability. The study concluded that communicating with tourists in a strategic manner is more likely to yield positive results and improve compliance by tourists which could significantly reduce the possibilities of conflict between wildlife and tourists.

Elsewhere in extant literature, Hausmann and Schuhnauer (2022) investigated the importance of using various information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a means of communicating with tourists during their journeys. They found that tourists frequently rely on ICTs to acquire information about their destination. This includes using such ICT tools to direct their attention to regulations pertaining to good practices while on safari. Hausmann and Schuhnauer (2022) therefore suggested that it is important for park authorities to understand their visitors' ICT preference for them to be able to communicate important information about the destination.

It is also paramount for holiday organizers to invest in understanding their clients' wants and needs before travel to be able to provide them with information that will promote compliance. This is because of cultural diversity that can affect the perception of the wildlife, leading to the adoption of compliant or non-compliant behaviours. For example, Moorhouse et al. (2019), found that the attitudes of Asian tourists differ from those of Westerners when it comes to how they appreciate viewing animals in captivity against protected areas where animals are allowed to roam freely.

It is believed that one of the fundamental functions of the green market which was formed to promote the safety of Wildlife Tourist Attractions (WTA) is to ensure that tourists' behaviours do not impact on the welfare and species conservation (Moorhouse et al., 2019). Furthermore, while research work has been conducted on consumer behaviour in tourism, there is still a lack of extensive reviews of the body of knowledge in the area which has led to some of the unruly behaviour witnessed in the field (Cohen et al., 2014).

In their study Cohen et al. (2014) define tourist's behaviour which is also referred to as consumer behaviour as decisions, actions and ideas about their safari that will satisfy their own needs and wants. Van Vuuren and Slabbert (2011) refers to tourists' mode of conduct reflecting their perception and attitude, which occurs before, during and after their travel. It is clear from the definitions above that consumer behaviour is mostly linked to personal attitude, wants, and needs, occurring at different stages of the holiday including after travel. Failure to address this problem may result in a decline in the tourism industry, tourists' negative experience after a safari trip, and degradation of the ecosystem. Tourist practitioners and researchers in the field of tourism should be sensitive to the current environmental-related issues and contribute toward aligning the protection of the wildlife (Drosos and Skordoulis, 2018). However, their contribution in ensuring the safety of tourists during safari expeditions is also crucial in developing the tourism industry and enhancing tourists' positive experience of their visits in the game reserves.

Although viewing animals in their natural habitat remains exciting and attracts millions of tourists from across the globe, the risk of undesired incidence remains significant to both tourists and wildlife. Abrams et al. (2020) investigated the importance of viewing wildlife in protected areas from a safe distance and looked at campaigns aimed at communicating with tourists' acceptable and non-acceptable behaviours. Viewing animals at close proximity could have undesirable consequences to both tourists and wildlife. Although there are pamphlets which are handed out at the entrances to these protected areas, most of the tourists still do not read them to understand what is acceptable and what is not.

Hence, Abrams et al. (2020) advocate the need to introduce effective communication with tourists which will easily reach its audience and reduce tourists' non-compliant behaviours. The study suggested platforms such as community-based social marketing to combat noncompliance behaviour by tourists. In its conclusion, the study recommend communication

approaches and strategies that are easily accessible to tourists with an element of interaction and fun that could yield more positive results from tourists (Abrams et al., 2020). According to Mekonen (2020) it is important for protected areas to manage tourists and wildlife conflict which usually happens when the behaviour of tourist's impact on the natural way of life. Human and wildlife conflict refers to a situation where the existence of the one party negatively impacts on the other which could result in injuries, death, and many other occurrences (Mudimba and Tichaawa, 2019; Mekonen, 2020). Even though there is a need to improve accessibility to protected natural areas such as the Kruger National Park in the context of this study, this has a major impact on the numbers of tourists as well as behaviour. Tverijonaite et al. (2018) investigated the access to protected areas as well as visitor behaviour and found that it is important to align accessibility to a protected area with the number of tourists that will be generated as an improved ease of access to an area leads Safari is not merely a tourism-related concept, but also carries cultural, social, and economical meaning that has raised the interest of many researchers in a variety of research sectors, including business management, animal psychology, geography, and history, to name but a few.

The study found that development of accessibility to any protected area should be done in line with the objectives and goals of each area. For Mateos et al. (2020) it is important for each protected area that attracts high numbers of tourists to have a management and participation agency that oversees and evaluates the effectiveness of tourism and its sustainability in an area.

Many studies have been conducted on behaviour of animals when tourists are present against moments of absence of tourism activities (see for example Barnes et al., 2016; Ranaweera et al., 2020; Gessa and Rothman, 2021). Most of these studies, unearth evidence that several animals behave more naturally and peacefully in the absence of tourists. When investigating the impact of tourists in protected areas, Ranaweera et al. (2020) found that large mammal animals such as elephants behaved more peacefully and calmly in the absence of tourists.

The study further looked at the importance of finding a balance when allowing tourists into protected areas to ensure that wild animals are afforded an opportunity to roam freely and undisturbed by tourists. Although an increased number of visitors to places such as National Parks is a desirable outcome and generates a lot of revenue for the area including the local community, there is a need to manage tourists' noncompliant behaviour and visiting hours to limit the impact on the environment and the wildlife (Ranaweera, 2020). The study concluded that there is a need to develop guidelines for viewing animals which could include the proximity to the animals, number of vehicles at a sighting and proper management of tourist guides. Some of the challenges encountered included no compliance by tourists' guides, this is mainly the case when they ignore the rules to get close to animals including over speeding in their quest to satisfy their clients to be able to get a better tip or petronage (Ranaweera, 2020).

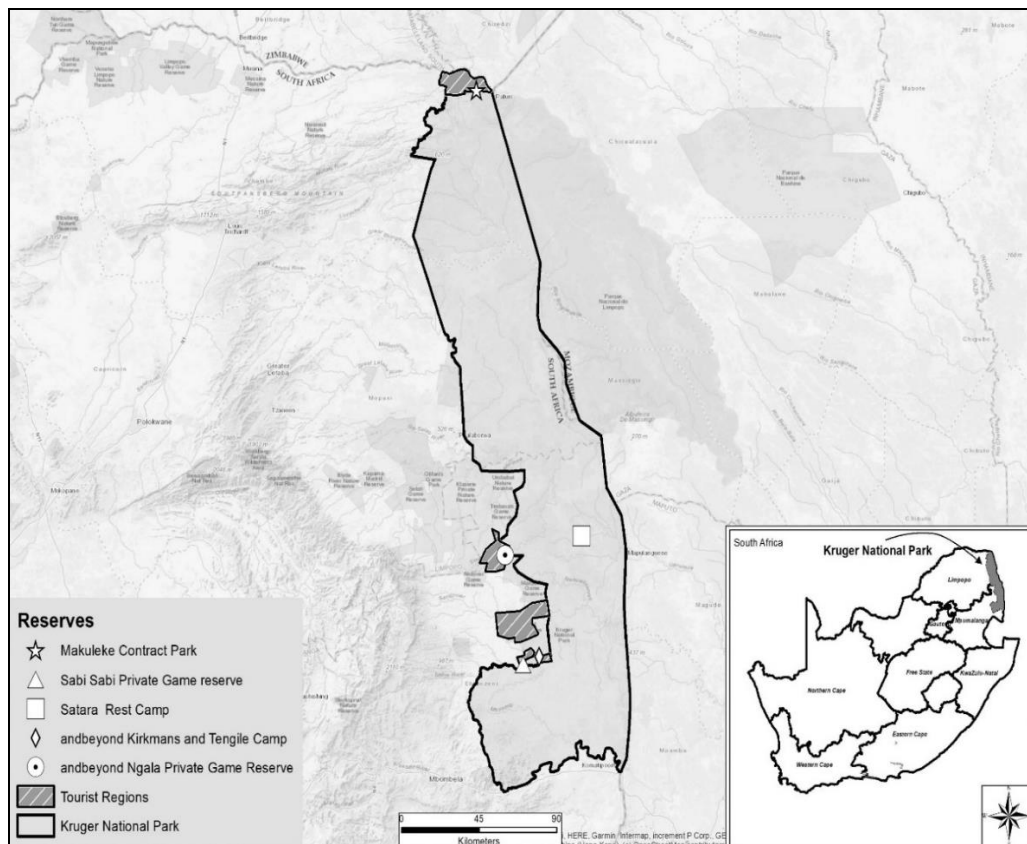


Figure 1. Great Kruger National Park Map (Source: Author's own work)

Regrettably, there has been limited research that specifically focused on investigating factors that influence tourists' non-adherence to existing protocols, guidelines, and rules regulating tourists' behaviours during safari trips. Chili (2018) recognized and emphasized the importance of ensuring the safety of tourists during their visits to places of interest

however, the study investigated tourists' safety from a broader perspective and did not focus on the causes leading to tourist's non-adherence behaviours to existing safety-related protocols as one of the reasons of the risk to which they might be exposed during their visits to the game reserves. Szott (2019) identified tourists' traffic in game reserves as one of the causes of aggressive behaviours exhibited by elephants towards other animals and tourists.

However, the study did not provide any further explanation on factors associated with tourists' non-compliance to the rules regulating their behaviours during safari expeditions. From the existing literature, it therefore appears that there is a paucity of studies on raising tourists' awareness on factors that may hinder the adoption of recommended behaviours during safari expeditions. By investigating factors that obstruct tourists' adherence to protocols and guidelines during safari trips, the current study intends to contribute towards improving awareness while ensuring tourists' safety, and enhancing their positive experience during and after a safari.

## METHODS

This study was undertaken in the Kruger National Park and surrounding private game reserves in South Africa (Figure 1). The region of the Kruger National Park and surrounds is one of the most popular safari destinations in the country, attracting a large number of tourists who engage in guided and self-guided safari. As such, there is a great focus on safety of tourists. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilising in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected key informants, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

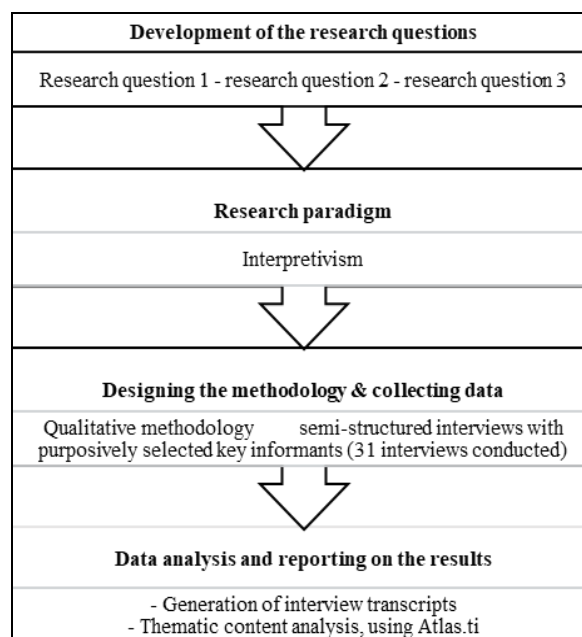


Figure 2. Summary of research design (Source: Author's own work)

Semi-structured interviews facilitate a deep understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Ruslin et al., 2022), and was therefore deemed appropriate in this study, given the exploratory nature of the research, and the need to gain nuanced information and perspectives on the issue of (non)compliant behaviour of tourists whilst on safari from those who have first-hand knowledge and experience of such. The key informants selected for this study included a selection of tourist guides, game lodge managers and park authorities. Tourist guides have direct contact with tourists during safari trips, and have closely observed tourists behaviour.

Therefore, tourist guides were able to provide information on tourists awareness and understanding of protocols, based on their experiences and observations. Game lodge managers were selected as a key informant group, owing to their daily experiences in the safari and hospitality industry, as well as their interactions with and observations of tourists who participate in guided or self-guided safari. Importantly, game lodge managers are responsible for inducting/educating tourists on compliance, appr. Lastly, park authorities were identified as key informants, given their comprehensive knowledge on rules, regulations and guidelines that are related to park management, guided and self-guided safari, as well as enforcement thereof. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then used for thematic, content analysis, using Atlas.ti software.

## RESULTS

### Tourists' awareness of protocols

Data collected regarding tourists' awareness of protocols is varied as some of the participants reported that the tourists they guide seem to understand the policies, whereas others reported encountering tourists who do not seem to understand the protocols. Importantly, participants agreed that the level of awareness was better in the private reserves, which resulted in low levels of non-compliance. Conversely, there were lower levels of awareness in the national reserves, mainly amongst

self-guided tourists. One of the tour guides conducting his game drives in a private game reserve cited the following about his tourists who appeared to know and respect the protocols:

“I have on many occasions driven with guests that will say to me, let’s not go where there are other vehicles, let’s just find other animals away from everyone because they are so sensitive about the issue of overcrowding on a sighting” – R 29

The following is what some of the participants expressed when it comes to tourists’ awareness level:

“One of the causes of this non-compliant behaviour, is that tourists just do not understand the risks associated with non-compliant behaviour.” – R 26 (Park Authority)

“In the case of the Kruger there is no one that asks you before you enter if you know and understand the regulations, not even when you pay and sign the indemnity no one asks. So tourists are so excited to start their adventure in the park, they do not bother to read and understand.” R6 (Tour Guide)

#### **Non-compliance due to lack of knowledge by tourists**

The results revealed that several of the non-compliant behaviours that took place was as a result of a lack of knowledge on the tourist’s part. Although there were reports of non-compliance due to a lack of knowledge in the private game reserves, it became evident from the interviews with participants that this was mainly the case in the national reserve. Some of the participants attributed this to the lack of induction at the main gates into the park, including tourists not allocating time to familiarise themselves with and understand the rules and regulations before entering the park. One of the participants had the following to say when asked about non-compliance due to lack of knowledge:

“Ah, totally. They're not aware because you find tourists who are first time in the Kruger National Park not knowing anything about the wilderness. So, some of their behaviour is as a result of not knowing” – R13 (Tour Guide)

Another guide felt that it was mainly international tourists who would engage in non-compliance due to a lack of knowledge: “I think, when it comes to tourists locally and internationally, this is influenced by various things. I would say, let's start with international tourists, I feel in most cases it's a situation where they are not aware of the rules, so when they engage in non-compliant behaviour, they are not fully aware that they are breaking the rules” – R 14

Other participants indicated that some tourists did not fully comprehend the dangers of being on safari viewing wild animals. Below is an example of what one of the managers had to say about this:

“I think most tourists don't grasp that this is in the wild and these animals are wild. They don't get it; they watch National Geographic and what they see is, you know is animals hunting out there in the bush” – R23 (Lodge Manager)

#### **The role of tourism stakeholders in raising regulations awareness to tourists before travel**

Interestingly, most of the participants reported a lack of regulation awareness for tourists before they embark of their safari. Some of the participants suggested that it would be helpful for key stakeholders in the tourism industry, such tour operators and many others, to invest in awareness campaigns to educate tourists about the importance of rules and regulations adherence before travelling. As an example, one of the Park Authorities said: “We could also maybe do similar campaigns to our international market through trade shows such as Indaba, which is held annually in Durban, but I think we should target South Africans and this could start even from school, just to teach them about the importance or the role that safari plays and I am talking about both the wild animals and the environment” – R 12 (Park Authority)

His sentiments were also supported by one of the lodge managers from a private game reserve in the Sabi Sands, who said:

“If anything, I think the industry just needs to maybe invest in a lot more education that is targeted at prospective tourists just to ensure that when the tourists arrive at our lodges, they are already aware of some of the issues that might arise from non-compliance behaviour” R20 (Lodge Manager)

Though this research did not include tour operators as key informants, it was interesting to observe that majority of the participants felt that there were no campaigns aimed at the prospective tourists on the awareness of the regulations.

#### **Information sharing before arrival**

The results revealed that no or very little information was being shared by booking agents and tour operators with their tourists about the destination they were visiting. The participants opined that was a lack of engagement with tourists on protocols and regulations, at the time of booking, which resulted in most of the tourists arriving at the game reserves with little or no knowledge. Thus, because of lack of information sharing with tourists before arrival, there is increased pressure for the participants to go through everything with their tourists on the ground, which at times, was a lot for the tourists to absorb in a short period of time before embarking on their safari. Although most of the participants would like to share information such as the regulations and general information about the destination, they did not have access to these tourists until they arrived for their safari. As an example, one of the Tour Guide conducting his safari in the Kruger said:

“We do not do a lot before they arrive, I mean, most of the international tourists that I get, I only have contact with them when they are here. Even the tourists that I get directly, most of whom I meet for the first time at the gate or at their overnight accommodation” – R13

Another tour guide mentioned below when it comes to Tour Operators sharing information:

“We do however encourage our booking agents when they make a booking for tourists that do not speak good English to share some of this information in advance so that we can prepare accordingly from our side.” R16

#### **Communication with tourists**

A key theme that emanated from the data was communication with tourists, where it shown that there was no

communication with self-guided tourists once they entered the Kruger National Park, due to a lack of law enforcement in the park. Some of the tour guides that conducted their game drives in the park reported that they would try to reprimand tourists that they come across engaging in non-compliance behaviour, but because they do not have the authority to penalise them, most of the tourists ignored their reprimands and continued to with their non-compliant behaviour. As an example, a tour guide noted: “I mean, personally, when I see these things taking place, I try to reprimand the culprits although it’s not easy” – R13 (Tour Guide).

Communication with tourists in the private reserves seems to take place on a regular basis, with the participants noting this to be an important aspect of a safe and successful safari. This was noted below by one of the tour guides in the private reserve: “And communication is also very important with your guests/tourists. As guides we must always be communicating with our tourists during a safari” – R10 (Tour Guide)

## **DISCUSSION**

Tourists embark on their journeys to explore tourism destinations, and their choices often hinge on their knowledge and comprehension of the protocols established by park and game reserve authorities. The degree to which tourists grasp the intricacies of these protocols and guidelines profoundly influences their overall experience and their inclination to revisit or recommend the destination to others. Therefore, the responsibility of ensuring the accessibility of these existing protocols and guidelines falls upon the game reserves and park authorities (Goh, 2023). Nevertheless, tourists also bear the responsibility of ensuring their thorough understanding of these regulations.

The results alluded that the majority of tourists exhibit awareness of the policies in place. However, some nuances within these policies may escape the notice of certain tourists. For instance, while many tourists may be well-informed about regulations such as refraining from feeding animals or littering, others may remain unaware of rules regarding appropriate viewing distances from wildlife. According to Goh (2023), tourists are more likely to comply with regulations when the information is readily accessible and correctly understood. To illustrate, one participant reported that tourists sometimes engage in non-compliance in the Kruger National Park due to their lack of awareness regarding the consequences of their actions. Additionally, some terms or concepts contained within these protocols may prove perplexing. Language barriers can be a significant hindrance to tourists' comprehension of existing protocols (Lusby, 2021). Thus, tourists should be afforded the opportunity to seek clarification on any terminology or concepts that may appear convoluted before finalizing their decision to embark on the trip; linking to the notion of having inductions for all tourists before they embark on safari (Abrams et al., 2019). Furthermore, park and game reserve authorities can employ relevant technology to translate protocol content into languages understood by tourists.

A lack of clear understanding regarding the content of existing protocols can yield consequences ranging from a subpar overall trip experience to accidents stemming from non-compliance (Brannstrom et al., 2015). Awareness of protocols can be bolstered through the adoption of plain language to convey the meaning of the regulations, explicit explanations of the repercussions resulting from non-compliance, and highlighting the benefits of strict adherence to established guidelines. The significance of tourists' awareness lies, in part, in the complexity of the interactions between tourists and wildlife. In certain situations, animals may perceive tourists as intruders posing a potential threat to their habitat and comfort, or, conversely, animals may change their behaviours as they become accustomed to people, approaching them for food, thus creating a false perception of domestication to tourists. This could consequently sway tourists into making dangerous decisions about interacting with wildlife, and therefore being non-compliant with the safety regulations (Abrams et al., 2019). In this context, adherence to protocols established by relevant authorities and management fosters a peaceful and harmonious temporary coexistence between visitors and wildlife.

Effective information sharing is of paramount importance. Szott (2019) suggests that, to enhance the positive safari experience, ensure visitor safety, promote wildlife welfare, and facilitate harmonious interactions, information exchange should occur between both visitors and game reserve management. Management should gain insights into visitors' backgrounds, past safari experiences, and expectations through informal discussions, aiming to gather comprehensive information about visitor expectations that may not have been outlined explicitly in the formal agreements between park management and tourists. To increase the likelihood of tourist compliance with existing protocols, effective communication between park or game reserve management and tourists is indispensable, with this approach being supplemented with signage and pamphlets (Ward et al., 2011). Poor or absent communication among stakeholders can lead to disconnection between the parties, jeopardizing tourist safety and negatively impacting wildlife welfare and harmonious cohabitation between visitors and wildlife. Leveraging technology can enhance communication, covering aspects such as the game reserve's location, types of animal species present, and emergency procedures (Abrams et al., 2019).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has contributed valuable insights into the awareness and compliance of tourists with game drive protocols in South Africa following the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings reveal a nuanced landscape where awareness levels vary among tourists, with distinctions also observed between private game reserves and national parks. On one end of the spectrum, non-compliant behavior occurs actively, while on the other end, it occurs passively - some tourists demonstrate a good understanding of the protocols, while others exhibit a concerning lack of awareness. Furthermore, lack of pre-travel awareness campaigns and limited communication from booking agents represent missed opportunities to educate tourists on the significance of adhering to game drive protocols.

To address these challenges, there is a need to improve communication strategies while tourists are on safari, particularly in national parks where self-guided tourists may lack guidance and oversight. Effective communication channels can facilitate better compliance and mitigate the risk of non-compliant behavior (Gessa and Rothman, 2021). Furthermore, it is imperative to leverage technological innovations, to educate tourists and empower them to enjoy game reserves experiences safely. Whilst there have been many studies conducted within the South African context on wildlife reserves (see Smith and Fitchett, 2020; Lee and Du Preez, 2016; Sims-Castley et al., 2015; Ferreira and Harmse, 2014), much of this research is focused on issues related to conservation, visitor preferences and perceptions and tourism development. The current paper is therefore significant, as it provides an insight into the complexities surrounding tourists' awareness and compliance with game drive protocols, laying the groundwork for future research and practical interventions aimed at enhancing tourist safety and wildlife welfare in South Africa and beyond.

The study acknowledges its limitations, particularly regarding the subjective nature of stakeholder perceptions, on tourists' compliance-related behavior. The perspectives of stakeholders like lodge managers, park authorities, and tour guides were considered, but the study did not include the viewpoint of tourists themselves. Future research is therefore suggested to address these limitations by directly exploring tourists' perspectives and attitudes toward safety protocols in game reserves. Additionally, comparative analyses across different game reserves, including those located beyond the Greater Kruger National Park, are recommended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of safety policies and compliance behavior, potentially uncovering regional variations and best practices.

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