The Management of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park for Sustainable Ecotourism Development: Perceptions and Participation

LINDISIZWE M. MAGI* and THANDI A. NZAMA**

*Lindisizwe M. Magi, and **Thandi A. Nzama, Department of Recreation and Tourism, University of Zululand, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The Isimangaliso Wetland Park, formerly known as the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, is a renowned World Heritage Site in South Africa, which is founded on sustainable ecotourism management principles. Participation of tourists, custodians of the park, tour operators and community members is central to establishing a viable and sustainable development programme for the wetland park. This paper explores the existing relationships between natural and socio-cultural attributes of Isimangaliso Wetland Park, mainly how these relationships are planned for and managed by the park authorities, as well as how local communities participate in the park activities. The paper explores the way in which the intrinsic value of the park as a World Heritage Site in KwaZulu-Natal can be sustainably developed and protected as a tourist resource for the benefit of future generations. The findings of the paper indicate that a majority of Isimangaliso Wetland Park communities understand the importance of ecotourism as a human activity. They also show that not all the communities participate actively in promoting sustainable ecotourism development in the area. In addition, that existing ecotourism management practices are perceived as not adequately promoting sustainable ecotourism development principles.

KEYWORDS: Tourism, Outdoor Recreation, Ecotourism, Perceptions, Cultural and Heritage Park, Community Perspectives, Tourism Management, Sustainability and Development.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the new democratic order in South Africa in 1994, was brought about many and varied changes in the country (Magi, 2007; Magi & Nzama, 2002). One of these changes is the need to protect the natural heritage of beauty and pristine environments of South Africa. Currently the country has eight World Heritage Sites, two of which are located in KwaZulu-Natal, and are Isimangaliso [Previously Greater St Lucia] Wetland Park (1999) and Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg National Park (2000). The remaining six World Heritage Sites are: Robben Island (1999); Fossil Hominid Sites of Sterkfontein also known as the “Cradle of Mankind” (1999); Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape (2003); the Cape Floral Region Protected Areas (2004); Vredefort Dome (2005); and Swartkrans, Kromdraai and Environs (2005) [http://www.southafrica.net (2008); Rogerson & Visser, (2004)]. Many international tourists consider these sites to be important ‘not-to-be-missed” tourist attractions. Isimangaliso Wetland Park is seriously challenged to retain its world heritage status by protecting and maintaining its ecological integrity. The main focus of this paper is to discuss the degree to which existing Isimangaliso Wetland Park ecotourism management techniques are practiced, as well as how local communities perceive and participate in activities that promote sustainable ecotourism development in the study area.
OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study constitutes a section of a broader study investigating the management of natural recreation and tourism resources as well as community participation patterns, in some areas of KwaZulu-Natal (Magi, 2008, 2007). This particular study focuses on the Isimangaliso Wetland Park as a leading World Heritage Site in KwaZulu-Natal. The objectives of this study are therefore five-fold: (a) To describe the natural features and attributes of Isimangaliso Wetland Park as well as related tourism practices in the area. (b) To reveal the extent to which Isimangaliso Wetland Park communities understand the importance of ecotourism as a human activity in the study area. (c) To determine the degree to which Isimangaliso Wetland Park communities participate in activities that promote sustainable ecotourism development in the area. (d) To assess whether the perceived ecotourism management practices are in line with accepted sustainable ecotourism development principles. (e) To investigate the perceived value of the local community as an important ecotourism attribute of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park.

The broad intention of this paper is to assess community participation patterns in the management of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park, as well as to reveal community relationships with the wetland park. It seeks to find out how these relationships are planned for and managed by the parks authorities, as well as how local communities perceive the meaning and importance of these attributes. In support of this notion Derwent and Porter (2003) argued that the policies of Ezemvelo-Wildlife KwaZulu-Natal, an organisation responsible for managing all natural parks and conservancies, seek “to ensure that the intrinsic value of the parks, wild life, land and seascapes of KwaZulu-Natal are sensitively protected as a source of spiritual and long-term sustenance for future generations”. The policies are also seen as seeking to ensure the sustainable conservation of biodiversity in partnership with people of KwaZulu-Natal. Furthermore these policies advocate that for sustainable tourism development to thrive in the area, all stakeholders should be viewed as equally important, hence the inclusion of local people and traditional leaders in the parks boards and councils (McKercher and Du Cros, 2002; Derwent and Porter, 2003).

CHARACTERISTICS OF ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK

As mentioned earlier, the new name Isimangaliso Wetland Park was introduced on 1 November 2007 from what was known as the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, with an intention of placing emphasis on its unique African identity of the natural resource. Isimangaliso Wetland Park is South Africa’s third-largest park, spanning 280 kilometres of coastline, from the Mozambican border in the north to Mapelane [Refer to Figure 1]. The park takes in a 60-kilometre river mouth that creates a huge estuary, Lake St Lucia, running parallel to the coast and separated from the sea by the world’s highest forested sand dunes. The lake is part of the St Lucia estuarine system, the largest estuarine system in Africa. Isimangaliso Wetland Park is therefore made up of around 328 000 hectares of pristine natural ecosystems - including swamps, lake systems, beaches, coral reefs, wetlands, woodlands and coastal forests.

Besides the unique 38 000ha expanse of St Lucia Lake, islands and the estuary, the Isimangaliso Wetland Park incorporates a variety of...
habitats ranging from the Lebombo mountain ranges to grasslands, forests, mangroves, dune forests, massive stretches of unbroken white beaches (nearly 200km) and off-shore coral reefs. Four sites of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park are registered as wetlands of international significance under the Ramsar Convention. The Isimangaliso Wetland Park can also be referred to as a 'geopark'. Accordingly, Tanabe (2007) sees or prefers to see the term 'geopark' as referring not only to the geology of a natural park, but mainly to the geo-science and nature-based attributes of a park, hence the term 'geo-science park' or a much wider meaning 'natural park'. The term geopark seems to be open to several interpretations. Due to its diverse terrestrial and aquatic features, Isimangaliso Wetland Park can also be described as a hydro-geopark.

Isimangaliso Wetland Park was the first in South Africa to receive the world heritage status in July 1999 because of its unique ecological processes; superlative natural phenomenon and scenic beauty, exceptional biodiversity and a large number of threatened and endangered species. In proclaiming the Isimangaliso Wetland Park a World Heritage Site in 1999, Unesco has stated that "The interplay of the park's environmental heterogeneity with major floods and coastal storms, and a transitional geographic location between sub-tropical and tropical Africa, has resulted in exceptional species diversity and ongoing speciation. The mosaic of landforms and habitat types creates superlative scenic vistas. The site contains critical habitat for a range of species from Africa's marines, wetland and savannah environments" [www.southafrica.info/stlucia.htm, (2008)].

Interestingly, Isimangaliso Wetland Park is one of the last remaining areas in the world that still supports its original plant and animal populations in pristine habitats.

ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK AS AN ECOTOURISM RESOURCE

The attributes mentioned above have made Isimangaliso Wetland Park one of the prime tourist destinations in South Africa for both domestic and international tourists. Isimangaliso’s uniqueness lies in its remarkable diversity, particularly its combination of a subtropical coastline and an African game park. In order for these attributes to be protected from degradation by tourists, emphasis has been placed on creating a balance between the use and protection of the resource. This combination of activities requires specific management strategies that are directed at satisfying the needs of tourists and the protection of the resource. The management of Isimangaliso Wetland Park is therefore underpinned by two philosophies, that is, biocentric (promotes ecological processes to operate as freely as possible – protect the integrity of the ecosystems) and anthropocentric (use and enjoy – maximisation of direct human use) in nature (Cooper et al. 2000).

Ecotourism has been seen as a form of tourism, which allows the interplay of these principles and also would achieve the long term goals of the government and those of the local communities which seek to ensure that the resource is used in a sustainable way. As such Isimangaliso Wetland Park is perceived as an important ecotourism resource and is supported by the decision that was taken in 1996 when conservation and ecotourism were deemed to be the best land use option for the park (Zaloumis, 2007). Unfortunately, like many parks in South Africa, Isimangaliso’s biological and cultural diversity are threatened by unsustainable land-use practices (Magakgala, 2003). As an ecotourism resource, Isimangaliso Wetland Park has a mandate to protect its world heritage values while supporting economic development of local communities, restitution and social justice (Zaloumis 2007). According to Zaloumis (2007) since the establishment of the Park Authority in 2000, local people have been given priority in business opportunities, jobs, training and development projects. The involvement of local people is in line with the vision of both the government and the local communities that seeks to promote ecotourism and nature conservation. Ecotourism would undoubtedly promote low impact tourism that benefits conservation and economic development. Ecotourism has been defined in a number of ways. A general definition of ecotourism suggested by Ceballo-Lascurain (1996) states that it is by its nature environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to
relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations. In supporting a relationship between nature and tourism, Hall and Lew (1998: 44) aver that ecotourism is "Purposeful travel to natural areas, to understand the culture and natural history of the environment; taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing economic opportunities that make conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people".

Figure 2: Part of Isimangaliso: The St Lucia Boat Launch and Estuary Areas

The tourism and recreation activities [Refer to Figure 2] at the Isimangaliso Wetland Park include fishing in the lake and sea, swimming only at the beach (the lake is infested with crocodiles and hippos), canoeing, game watching, snorkeling, scuba diving or watch migrating whales and dolphins. The leatherback and loggerhead turtles nesting along the beach in summer adds to the Park's attractions. Loggerheads and leatherback turtles which were once almost extinct have been revived through the efforts of Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife. These turtles crawl onto the beaches at night to lay their eggs, from the end of October through to January. In January and February their babies break out of their eggs and crawl back into the sea. The rangers based at Cape Vidal take visitors onto the beach during the breeding season. Due to its physiographic attributes, the Isimangaliso Wetland Park lends itself to what has come to be known as the hydro-geosciences park. This park has a collection of natural features most of which are encouraged by the wetland. The popularity of these natural features has made Isimangaliso Wetland Park one of the popular tourist destinations for both domestic and international tourists. Participation by tourists in the above mentioned activities includes the following: swimming; picnicking at the beach; fishing; scuba diving; boating at the lake; game watching; snorkelling and walking at the beach. Without doubt Isimangaliso Wetland Park has been described as an important ecotourism resource, which is underpinned by two philosophies, that is, biocentric (promotes ecological process to operate as freely as possible – protect the integrity of the ecosystems) or anthropocentric (use and enjoy – maximisation of direct human use) in nature (Cooper et al. 2000).

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier this paper represents a section of a larger study covering an investigation of management patterns of outdoor recreation resources in pristine areas of KwaZulu-Natal. This paper therefore reports on the findings of ongoing research that is conducted at various sections of Isimangaliso Wetland Park. In establishing the empirical basis of this study, data were collected at three sections of Isimangaliso Wetland Park known as the St Lucia beach, the St Lucia launch area and the St Lucia estuary. These three areas are core-centres of activity and were actual areas of sampling. The categories of individuals
interviewed included the wetland park officials, tour operators, tourists and local communities. A stratified random sample size of 400 respondents was targeted or aimed at. Finally, a sample of 303 respondents categorised into four groups was surveyed using a person-to-person interview schedule. The sample-size of respondents was as follows: 11 wetland park officials, 18 tour operators, 98 tourists and 176 local community members. The data was mainly collected during the summer period, which is the peak season of the year. The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences [SPSS] computer programme. These data sought to reveal the understanding and management of existing relationships between natural and socio-cultural attributes, as perceived by the communities and other stakeholders in the study area.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF ECOTOURISM AS A HUMAN RESOURCE

The respondents in the Isimangaliso Wetland Park were asked to reveal their understanding of the importance of ecotourism as a human activity in the study area. On the whole, a majority [49%] of the respondents (Refer to Figure 3), mainly the local community members, indicated that they were not conversant with meaning of ecotourism. On the other hand, only 36 percent of the respondents showed good understanding of the concept, whereas 15 percent were not sure of what ecotourism means.

A significantly large percentage of the negative response [64%] may be accounted for in that the majority of local community is not sufficiently educated [54%] and informed about tourism activities and facilities in the hydro-geopark. This is notwithstanding that the wetland area is endowed with water-based natural facilities. It should be noted that more than half of the total number of Ezemvelo Wildlife officials, tour operators and tourists interviewed, were conversant with the concept of ecotourism. Indeed, the communities around the Isimangaliso Wetland Park see it as a resource for their survival through tourism development. The Ezemvelo authorities, as the custodian of geopark, have focused on promoting sustainable ecotourism development and nature conservation. This promotion encompasses the wise use of natural and outdoor recreation facilities, and mainly the water-based activities in the area. In this paper the term 'local community', refers to what Lubbe (2003), regards as people living in relative proximity to the tourist destination, product or activity, and who should benefit from activities. It could be argued that if tourism is wisely planned, the communities can enjoy the benefits while experiencing ownership of and control over the development. In this regard, the perceptions of local community members would assist in identifying the expectations of communities residing next to Isimangaliso Wetland Park as a tourist destination. The paper supports the view of Gartner (1996) that members of the community should form tourist organisations that will represent them in all matters pertaining to tourism development in their areas. There was no evidence of such community involvement around hydro-geopark. It is therefore the view of this paper that the
community’s understanding of the importance of ecotourism and sustainable tourism development, would mark the beginning of better tourism planning, management and delivery systems in the study area.

**STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

The official policy of Isimangaliso Wetland Park as a World Heritage Site seeks to promote sustainable ecotourism development. Ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development and conservation of the natural and recreation environments demands that the local community should be involved in planning, development and management of the hydro-geopark (WTO 2004). Good management policies should contribute to the well being of local communities. It should be noted, however, that participation of the indigenous communities in the ecotourism development activities in the hydro-geopark has for a long time been very contentious. This is because the park was taken over by the parastatal organisation and local communities were removed from the park and subsequently deprived of benefits accruing from the use of the natural resources. Hence, there has been an invasion of the neighbouring indigenous natural forests by the local communities, and uncontrollable use the endangered plant species to make cultural artefacts. This study also sought to establish the degree to which the local communities participate in activities that promote sustainable ecotourism development [Refer to Figure 4].

![Graph: Level of Participation of Stakeholders in Sustainable Ecotourism Development Activities]

*Figure 4: Level of Participation of Stakeholders in Sustainable Ecotourism Development Activities*

In this regard wetland park officials, tour operators, tourists and local communities were asked to give their views regarding their level of participation in the activities of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park. The emerging responses show that Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal officials [62%] and tour operators [58%] participation more in sustainable ecotourism development activities. The majority of the local community [56%] were not sure of their level of participation. It is not surprising that 63 percent of the officials felt that their participation in ecotourism development activities were high and positive, since it is their mandate to promote sustainable tourism development in the area. The tour operators on the other hand, perceived their participation in ecotourism development activities to be high [58%]. The majority of tour operators [58%] were interpreting their business involvement in hydro-geopark as equivalent to tourism development, whereas this was not necessarily so.
A significant number [34%] of the tour operators were not convinced of any sustainable development being achieved. Finally and importantly, the majority [38%] of the local communities at three sections of the hydro-geopark indicated that their participation was low. About 55 percent of the community were non-committal, by indicating that they were ‘not sure’ about their level of participation in sustainable development activities in the geopark. Only 7 percent of the community members indicated a high participation rate. The main reason for these negative responses was that many of the local communities were not well educated about and adequately exposed to participation in tourism planning, management and development of ecotourism activities in the geo-science park.

In an effort to reveal the relationship between educational qualifications and the level of participation in ecotourism development, the cross-tabulation analysis was performed. With the chi-square analysis of: $x^2=8.706; \text{df}=3 \text{ and Asymp. Sign.}=0.033$, the critical value of the chi-square was 7.82 under the level of confidence 0.05. The calculated level of significance was 0.033 and was less than 0.05. The calculated chi-square value $x^2=8.706$ was higher than the tabled chi-square value of 7.82. The findings indicated that there was a moderate, yet significant relationship between educational qualification and the level of participation. Furthermore, that the relationship between these two variables was not a matter of chance. This relationship was revealed by [13%] of the official respondents with technical diplomas who felt that the hydro-geopark was not well participated in as compared to [11%] of the tour operators respondents with similar qualifications who felt that the geopark was well participated in. The relationship may be attributed to the fact that the respondents with technical diplomas may have a better understanding of the concept of participation in tourism activities. Therefore, in concluding this section, the overriding question which is: ‘what causes the lack of participation of the local communities in this destination?’ needed to be addressed. Accordingly, Lubbe (2003) argues that host communities avoid participating in development activities where the infrastructure and services are not owned by them and there are minimal opportunities to participate in the decision-making process. Arguably if the facilities in Isimangaliso Wetland Park are amenable to community participation, it is logical to conclude that innovative management strategies are necessary to make local communities to have a sense of ownership in order for the to participate fully at all levels of ecotourism development. There is therefore, a dire need for an innovative development that embraces the local community of Isimangaliso Wetland Park. Finally it may be concluded that the level of participation of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park local communities and tourists in sustainable ecotourism development activities, needs to be given more attention for purposes of improvement.

PERCEIVED ECOTOURISM MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

The perception of the local community regarding the existence of ecotourism management principle in relation to tourism practices around Isimangaliso Wetland Park can be viewed utilising two approaches. First, there are views of the previously disadvantaged communities, which largely comprise residents with no formal education, no profession and who are employed as labourers in the agricultural and timber plantation sectors. Their perception of ecotourism management principle seems to be that there is a degree of disparity in ecotourism practice in the study area, because it is a playground of those people who can afford holidaying at game resorts, guest houses, game parks, horse-rides, fishing, canoeing and mountain-hiking. Secondly, there are views of the previously advantaged communities, which tend to be well educated, resourced and privileged, possibly from the previous apartheid dispensation in South Africa. This group tends to be the commercial and entrepreneurial leaders of the tourism industry and hold tourism-officer positions and tour-operator businesses. Their perception of ecotourism management principle seems to be underscored by the existence of abundant business opportunities and therefore the need to ‘protect’ the natural resources in the geopark. To a large degree, the tourists as visitors may
be regarded as comprising a privileged group, which has financial resources to visit and enjoy the outdoor recreation resources available at Isimangaliso Wetland Park.

Notwithstanding, the tourist attractions have to respond to the changing market trends, competition and sustainable management approaches. It is for these reasons therefore, that the respondents (tourists, park officials, tour operators and community members) were requested to furnish their perceived ecotourism management practices and development needs which they consider appropriate for Isimangaliso Wetland Park. In this regard, Figure 5 depicts the responses obtained from the various stakeholders. In order to investigate whether or not management practices of Ezemvelo Wildlife authorities were understood and appreciated by the stakeholders, the respondents were asked to indicate their views. It should be born in mind that the Ezemvelo authorities responsible for the planning and management of Isimangaliso Wetland Park, are the custodians of the conservation statutes and related legislative frameworks meant to protect the natural environment in Isimangaliso Wetland Park area. The stakeholder perceptions [Figure 5] were based on practices such as, land and resource acquisition, visitor management, establishment of accommodation facilities, safety and security of tourists, and park and estuary preservation. Whether these practices enhance management and development processes in the study area, is the most important question. The responses of the subjects, comprising tourists, officials, tour operators and communities are reflected in Figure 5. The benefits of ecotourism management practices to all stakeholders are an important vehicle for socio-economic advancement, not only to the local communities, but to the KwaZulu-Natal community as a whole.

Figure 5: Perceived Benefits of Ecotourism Management Practices Are Enhancing Development

![Figure 5: Perceived Benefits of Ecotourism Management Practices Are Enhancing Development](image)

[n = 303. Some of the subjects gave more than one response for each statement]

The Tourism White Paper (DEAT 1996) had advocated for the upliftment of the previously disadvantaged communities through participation in ecotourism ventures or initiatives. In this regard the stakeholders were asked to indicate their perceived benefits of ecotourism management practices towards enhancing development in the study area. On the whole [Refer to Figure 5] the tourists and officials [above 60%] perceived most of the practices to be highly beneficial for ecotourism development and management in the study area. More specifically, the majority of tourists [72%] and officials [75%] felt that the visitor management system in the hydo-geopark was well established and contributes to the
general management of the park. Second in preference, was that tourists [68%] and officials [66%] considered the practice of establishing good accommodation facilities to be beneficial for ecotourism development within the study area. The main justification for these findings was that tourists were highly appreciative of the state of Isimangaliso Wetland Park and the efforts of local communities and park officials in marketing the resource. They therefore tended to describe the park in glowing terms. On the contrary, the majority of tour operators and community members [all below 50%] perceived most of the practices to be less beneficial for ecotourism development in the study area. More specifically, only 48 percent of the tour operators and 42 percent of the community perceived the practice of visitor management to be somewhat beneficial for local economic development. Similarly, the practices of tourism safety and security as well as park and estuary preservation, were seen by tour operators [42% and 41%] and the community [41% and 45%] to be relatively beneficial for local development initiatives. The practices of land and resource acquisition were perceived by a minority of tour operators [38%] and the community [20%] to be less relatively beneficial for local development systems in the study area. Possible reasons are that the tour operators and the community do not adequately participate in decision-making exercises that relate to ecotourism development in the Isimangaliso Wetland Park. There were also indications during the investigation that tour operators and community members think there is room for improvement in the management of the park.

The proposed plan of establishing accommodation facilities as a management principle in the Isimangaliso Wetland Park had been positively viewed by tourists [658%] and officials [65%]. On the other hand, the tour operators [46%] and communities [35%] thought this practice was less beneficial to the stakeholders. The possible reason for this view is that most of the existing accommodation facilities are owned by the Ezenvelo KZN Wildlife and big business and not by local tour operators or community members. Notwithstanding the existence of lapses in safety and security, which have been regarded as a threat to tourism development in many parts of South Africa, the respondents around the Isimangaliso Wetland Park were sounded out on the state of safety and security as an ecotourism management practice in the area. In this regard, the majority of officials [58%] felt that safety and security practices were reasonably well managed. On the contrary, tourists [44%], tour operators [42%] and local communities [41%] were not happy with the practice as it exists, mainly because tourists, operators and communities are the ones that experience the lapses in safety and security. It has been argued that lapses in safety and security are increasing because of high levels of unemployment is KwaZulu-Natal.

In conclusion, the Isimangaliso Wetland Park has management strategies for both the park and the visitors to the facility. The site management strategies are meant to protect the socio cultural and the physical environment such as the turtle nests on the beach. The protection of the park and estuary environments in the study area, are important for sustaining Isimangaliso Wetland Park as a World Heritage Site. Ecotourism management practices in the hydo-geopark emphasise the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (WTO 2004). Even though this world heritage site has embraced ecotourism as a strategy for job creation and poverty alleviation, it has unique problems to deal with. Isimangaliso Wetland Park has to deal with the conservation of the delicate ecosystem involving flora, fauna and large bodies fresh water lakes that could be affected by overexposure to tourists and the inclusion of local communities in the decision making practices.

**PERCEIVED COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PARK MANAGEMENT**

The notion of community involvement in ecotourism development decision-making is one which is advocated for by the Tourism White Paper (DEAT, 1996) in South Africa. Furthermore, the concept of community participation or involvement is defined by Paul
(1987:2) as an active process by which beneficiary client groups influence the direction and execution of a development project with a view to enhancing their well being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance or other values they cherish. Accordingly, Paul (1987) argues that there are three aspects of development, which determine community involvement. These are:
(a) Initiatives, which include empowerment, capacity building, effectiveness, sharing of costs and project efficiency.
(b) Intensity, which includes information sharing, consultation, decision-making and initiation action.
(c) Instruments, which include fieldworkers of the project agency, community workers/committees, and user groups.

Any one of these aspects can be combined in terms of the situation existing in each community. Each element in an aspect can also influence how a particular community perceives development and related problems.

In this regard the Isimangaliso Wetland Park is meant to promote sustainable ecotourism development. Sustainable ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development and conservation of physical and socio-cultural environment demands that “local community” should be involved in planning, development and operation, should contribute to their well being. Involvement of local communities has been very contentious in the Isimangaliso hydro-geopark. The hydro-geopark essentially was lost to indigenous communities in the 1890s when the British Crown annexed the land and later the Apartheid government forcibly removed the communities to give way for the protected area. Some of these people have come back to reclaim their original land, hence the invasion of the Dukuduku forest, which is located on the fringes of Isimangaliso Wetland Park, by the local community. In other areas of the hydro-geopark the Isimangaliso Wetland Authority in 2006 had signed a co-management agreement with the Mbuyazi Community, which included the development of a cultural heritage site, acquiring a percentage of the gross gate revenue and access for natural resource harvesting and to job opportunities (Ryan and Ndlovu, 2008).

In an attempt to test the involvement of the local community in ecotourism development in the area, the respondents were asked to reveal how they perceived this practice. As shown in Figure 6 the majority of the park officials [65%] indicated that there was high involvement of the local community in the management of the park. This management was indicated as indirect and involved consultations rather than actual participation in decision-making. On the other hand, the tourists [58%], the tour operators [65%] and the local community [68%]
all indicated that they perceive the involvement of the community in the management of the wetland park to be significantly low. Only an surprisingly small number of tourists [24%], tour operators [16%] and the local community [09%] indicated that there was a high level of community involvement in the management of the park. At the Isimangaliso Wetland Park local people especially those who support their livelihood by selling artefacts to the tourists have expressed that, even though they are at times consulted, their welfare is not the top priority of the custodians of the Park.

These concerns were expressed after the implementation of the ban of 4X4 vehicles at the Isimangaliso beach area. The concerns were also expressed notwithstanding the attainment of the co-management agreements with some local tribal authorities, such as for example the Mbuyazi Local Tribal Council. It is also important to note that a significant number of community members [23%] indicated that they were not sure about the involvement of the local communities in the management of the Isimangaliso hydro-geopark. The majority of local community members in the area are not well educated and are of a low socio-economic level, hence their reliance on local employment from the park and selling of goods to the tourists. The findings also indicated that the majority of people who live and work around the Isimangaliso Wetland Park such as Exenvelo Wildlife KwaZulu-Natal Officials [55%] and tourists [68%] all agree that the implementation of the 4X4 vehicle ban regulation has a negative effect on their businesses. In conclusion, the findings above seem to answer the objective which sought to establish the degree to which Isimangaliso Wetland Park communities participate in activities that promote sustainable ecotourism development in the park and the actual management and decision-making about the wetland park.

LOCAL COMMUNITY AS CONTRIBUTOR TO SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM

Prior to the establishment of Isimangaliso Wetland Park the entire area was owned and occupied by several African communities. After the removal of the communities the parastatal organisation known today as the Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife has been the custodian of the hydro-geopark. Ezemvelo is therefore the ultimate planning and decision-making agent for the park. Local communities and other stakeholders have to go through this responsible authority for any developmental initiative they wish to contribute to the wetland park. Nonetheless, the stakeholders around the hydro-geopark have contributed in one way or another to the sustainable growth of the wetland park. This has been achieved through participation in ecotourism ventures, activities and service provision.

Figure 7: Perceived Contributions of the Local Community to Sustainable Ecotourism Development in the Study Area

![Figure 7: Perceived Contributions of the Local Community to Sustainable Ecotourism Development in the Study Area](image)

[n = 303. Some of the subjects gave more than one response for each sub-variable]
Pursuant to this situation, the stakeholders in the Isimangaliso hydro-geopark were asked to reveal their views about the contribution of the local community to the sustainable ecotourism development of the wetland park. Because of the lack of prominence and low key type of activities and services provided by the local communities, the sustainability of ecotourism development initiatives of the contributors have not been noticeable. In this regard, the views of stakeholders are indicated in Figure 7 below. On the whole the responses indicated that the majority of all stakeholders: tourists [51%], officials [68%], tour operators [58%] and the communities [69%], thought that there was full contribution of the local community to the sustainable ecotourism growth of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park. The main reason for this assertion or support was that all stakeholders seem to see the contributions of the community, be it small or large as vitally important for the sustainable development of Isimangaliso Wetland Park. The local communities have contributed various ideas, goods and services to the hydro-geopark. Some of these include: arts and artefacts; sustainable fishing methods; skilled and unskilled labour; fruit and vegetable produce; and cultural and political leadership. The tourists benefit from Zulu traditional cultural artefacts as well as that it was incorporated in the development planning of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park. Related to the responses shown in Figure 7, the stakeholders also indicate that the support for the local community’s contribution to the development of the Isimangaliso Park, and as a tourist attraction was encouraged by some community expectations. Some of these include: high level of unemployment, exposure to tourism projects, labour intensive activities, skills development, women empowerment, and other unspecified reasons. Many stakeholders selected the statement “high level of unemployment” because they expected the local community to increase tourists visiting the hydro-geopark, by ensuring safety and security of tourists, thus improving the climate for more job-creation. Some of the responses on contributions of the local community were stimulated by the fact that some respondents, mainly tour operators and community members, had been unemployed for a relatively long time in the area.

CONCLUSION
Notwithstanding that the declaration of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park as a World Heritage Site has assured more popularity and economic viability of the hydro-geopark, it has come to be recognised that its strongest attribute is that the park is both a natural attraction and cultural heritage. The sensitive relationship between natural and cultural attributes, particularly the creation of arts and crafts from local forests as well as the partnerships and co-management agreements between Ezemvelo Wildlife authorities and local communities, in the vicinity of Isimangaliso Wetland Park have to addressed regularly. These relationships have to be planned, developed and managed in a sustainable manner so that the resource could continue to benefit the communities of KwaZulu-Natal for a very long time to come.

REFERENCES


WEBSITES