

Small-scale, nature-based tourism as a pro-poor development intervention: Two examples in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

Tourism is widely acknowledged as a key economic sector that has the potential to contribute to national and local development and, more specifically, serve as a mechanism to promote poverty alleviation and pro-poor development within a particular locality. In countries of the global South, nature-based tourism initiatives can make a meaningful impact on the livelihoods of the poor, in particular the subsistence based rural poor. Taking two examples in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa, where small-scale tourism initiatives were developed recently in response to existing natural attractions in the context of coping with local economic crises, this paper broadly assesses the modest benefits to date, as well as drawbacks, in improving conditions of life.

Introduction

Tourism today is a high-growth sector, driven by enhanced affluence and increasing leisure time. In many countries of the global South, this very growth has served as an effective mechanism to promote local and national development in terms of job creation, infrastructural improvements and the general enhancement of marginal economic areas. Tourism, as [Reid \(2003: 67\)](#) observes; 'has become the development sector of choice for many developing countries'. Indeed, the capacity of the tourism sector to promote pro-poor development is an issue that has attracted recent attention and positive recommendations in policy and academic circles ([Ashley & Roe, 2002](#); [Dann, 2002](#)).

The tourism industry comprises a diverse array of products and services whose boundaries for inclusion are not clearly defined but manifest in a wide variety of forms such as cultural, alternative, business and, of increasing significance in the South, nature-based tourism. In South Africa, abundant and diverse ecosystems, together with well-developed conservation areas and ease of access, have made nature-based tourism a logical path for addressing economic growth and poverty alleviation. Moreover, the potential of such tourism-based development meshes well with a series of contextual considerations, prominent amongst which is the significant devolution, with the dismantling of minority rule after 1994, of administrative and developmental responsibilities, primarily to local governments. This, together with the encouragement of community and private sector initiatives in general, has stimulated local action to address development and unemployment through locality-based development initiatives ([Rogerson & Visser, 2004](#)). But, as [Allen and Brennan \(2004: 8\)](#) note: 'although the empowerment of the disadvantaged . . . is commonly regarded as a prerequisite for sustainability, eliciting such commitment is not as straightforward as might be expected'. In this broad context, the potential for tourism to serve as an important component in national development strategy is being emphasized ([Rogerson & Visser, 2004](#)).

This paper focuses on recent pro-poor tourism initiatives developed around nature-based attractions in two localities in KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa. While the focus in the two examples of small-scale tourism development in Utrecht and Matatiele are consistent with the current national focus on local administration and community-based initiatives to promote poverty alleviation ([Rogerson, 2001](#)), they were selected for being somewhat different in their foci, strategies and

leadership. The experience of Utrecht provides an example of how a municipal-led partnership pursued nature-based tourism to revive the local economy, after having defined the pro-poor implications in and around the town. In Matatiele, a community-based tourism initiative has been spearheaded by a local NGO (nongovernmental organization) and a private environmental consultancy. Based on previously conducted research on Utrecht's 'town within a game park' (see [Binns & Nel, 2003](#)) and Matatiele's Mehloding Trail (see [Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2004](#)), the paper reflects on the evidence of updated findings from a pro-poor perspective.¹

The pro-poor approach to tourism-based development

is reputed to be the world's largest and fastest growing 'legitimate' industry. On the one hand, hailed by many academics, international organizations and governments (in both the North and South) as a 'smokeless' corridor to economic regeneration and diversification, direct foreign investment, job creation and boosting gross national income ([Williams, 1998](#)). On the other hand, notwithstanding the numerous benefits touted and that 'tourism has become the development sector of choice for many developing countries' ([Reid, 2003](#): 67), the emergence of and emphasis on tourism are also associated with certain significant costs ([Mowforth & Munt, 1998](#); [Sharpley & Tilfer, 2002](#)). For instance, the industry has been deplored for endorsing capitalist values and Western consumerism in previously self-reliant economies. It has been blamed for the comodification of culture, displacement of people from traditional habitats, exclusion or limited participation of host communities in planning and decision-making as well as uneven distribution of benefits, fashioning tourists-as-guests and host communities-as-servants types of relationships and destruction of the natural environment ([Odendaal & Schoeman, 1990](#); [Mowforth & Munt, 1998](#); [Fennel, 1999](#); [Tisdell, 2001](#); [Keyser, 2002](#); [Scheyvens, 2002](#); [Reid, 2003](#); [Rogerson & Visser, 2004](#)).

For host communities, participation and empowerment are essential objectives in any tourism initiative that seeks to address issues of poverty ([Scheyvens, 2002](#)). Nature-based tourism (also referred to as resource-based tourism) refers broadly to tourism built on or around the attractions of the natural environment. Owing to the potential costs and the fact that some forms of nature-based tourism are essentially reliant upon unspoilt environments and a diversity of cultures and people, it follows that the industry bears both a responsibility for and a need to invest in sustainable approaches to community development and environmental management ([Wahab & Pigram, 1997](#); [Honey, 1999](#)). [Turner \(2001\)](#) suggests some reasons why nature-based tourism can play a leading role as a rural development strategy. First, it can generate more revenue per area than other possible land uses. Second, the proactive participation of already existing conservation agencies presents the opportunity of fostering a sound environmental management plan for a region, including surrounding communities (that often suffer from the stigma of previous discrimination and removal). Third, it benefits areas that have such potential but otherwise insufficient infrastructure to be attractive enough to investors. And last, the industry is labour intensive which is attractive to rural areas where unemployment/underemployment may be high. For tourism to succeed as part of rural development, however, the local agents involved need unambiguous land rights. This issue is borne out by the theory of common property resource management and the more general practice of community-based natural resource management ([IIED, 1994](#)). In South Africa, as in many other countries, one needs to take cognizance of the complex land ownership claims that need to be resolved in anticipation of effective natural resource management.

Literature on the developmental impacts of tourism, particularly nature-based tourism, in the global South has sought to identify if tourism can become part of a 'pro-poor' development strategy ([Binns & Nel, 2003](#)). [Mahony and van Zyl \(2002](#): 83) define this as 'an approach driven by State, private sector or the community, which generates both economic and non-economic net benefits to the poor'. Thus, pro-poor tourism refers not to a particular product or niche sector but to an approach to tourism development and management which aims to enhance the linkages between tourism businesses and

poverty reduction (see, for example, 'What is PPT' and 'PPT Principles' at <http://www.propoortourism.org.uk/>). In recognizing the critical links between poverty, environment and development, supporters of this approach maintain that in a world of mounting inequality, poverty reduction needs to be the principal feature in the sustainable development agenda ([Roe & Urquhart, 2001](#)).

However, there is some confusion between the pro-poor approach and concepts such as ecotourism, sustainable tourism or community-based tourism. In an attempt to clarify the situation, [Ashley et al. \(2001\)](#) explain that the interdependence of development and environmental protection is the core focus of sustainable tourism, which also tends to focus on mainstream destinations. The pro-poor approach, however, focuses on tourist destinations in the South and on promoting good practices that are particularly relevant to conditions of poverty. To sum up, nature-based tourism is primarily concerned with attractions in the environment, whereas pro-poor tourism-based development aims to deliver net benefits to the poor. This involves more than just a community focus; it requires mechanisms for unlocking opportunities for the poor at all levels and scales of operation ([Ashley & Roe, 2002](#)).

Tourism and development in the South African context

In 1994, the Economist Intelligence Unit country profile for South Africa estimated the value of the country's tourism to be no more than 2 per cent of total GDP (gross domestic product) (<http://www.economist.com/countries/SouthAfrica>). Related to this, the 1996 White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa (<http://www.info.gov.za/whitepapers/1996/tourism.htm>) recognized how apartheid policies had constrained the scope of the domestic industry and its attractiveness as a destination. More specifically, given the resultant 'woefully protected' state of the industry, tourism development in South Africa was a 'missed opportunity' (White Paper, Part 2.1), having for the most part catered to 'a largely homogeneous and predictable clientele, that is, the easily identifiable needs of the privileged class'. Framed in the context of the post-apartheid government's Reconstruction and Development Programme geared towards eliminating the legacies of inequitable governance, the White Paper identified tourism as having significant potential to serve as a tool for socioeconomic upliftment, including the key principles of community participation and the sustainable management of resources – ideals that are also embedded in the notion of nature-based tourism ([Hallows, 2002](#); [Spenceley & Seif, 2003](#)). It further envisaged that South Africa has the political stability, natural assets, marketing and infrastructural technology to make its mark in the highly competitive arena of international tourism. Indeed, according to the latest available statistics, in 2002 tourism contributed ZAR 72.5 billion (roughly USD 12 billion) or 7.1 per cent to South Africa's GDP and accounted for one in eight jobs, if one includes the informal sector ([Moosa, 2003a](#)). In fact, not only is the tourism industry the fastest growing, the country is also among the world's 'hottest' destinations ([Moosa, 2003b](#)).

In addition to increasing this sector's contribution to the national economy, the central iterated themes in a number of policy objectives aimed directly at boosting tourism are poverty alleviation, economic development and job creation ([Mahony & van Zyl, 2002](#)). In line with global trends of measuring economic performance through a 'triple bottom line' gauge of social, economic and environmental sustainability, the White Paper proposes a primary focus on:

Responsible Tourism. Tourism that promotes responsibility to the environment through its sustainable use; responsibility to involve local communities in the tourism industry; responsibility for the safety and security of visitors; and responsible employees, employers, unions and local communities.

In short, that all stakeholders involved in the tourism industry take a proactive approach in developing, marketing and managing tourism initiatives such that they comply with the three pillars of sustainable development: striving towards greater social responsibility, environmental sensitivity and economic sustainability (see also [Spenceley et al., 2002](#)). However,

strong emphasis is placed on tourism development driven by the private sector with the government's role being limited to providing a facilitating contextual framework for its development. As Speirs (2000) has indicated, the White Paper lacks a practical framework within which to implement its proposed guidelines.

The impact of tourism development in South Africa has been studied generally (Rogerson & Visser, 2004) and in relation to small enterprise development (Kirsten & Rogerson, 2002), rural livelihoods (Mahony & van Zyl, 2002), social responsibility (Allen & Brennan, 2004), the poor (Ashley & Roe, 2002), black communities (Goudie et al., 1999) and regional development (Saayman et al., 2001). While clear benefits for development have yet to be seen, government and development agencies are nonetheless seeking to capitalize on the country's rich natural and cultural heritage (Binns & Nel, 2002). The enhanced role of local authorities in development forms an important contextual backdrop in terms of on-the-ground tourism-based development. The 1996 Constitution, specifically Act 108 (RSA, 1996), and the Local Government Municipal Systems Act No.32 (RSA, 2001) have devolved significant developmental responsibilities to local government (in South Africa referring to municipalities). Within this context, tourism-led development is an emerging theme in the literature on South Africa's Local Economic Development (LED) programmes (Rogerson, 1997; 2001; 2002) and tourism promotion geared towards community and locality based development is regarded increasingly as a viable growth option (Goudie et al., 1999; Kirsten & Rogerson, 2002; Mahony & van Zyl, 2002). As a direct result, as the experience of Utrecht illustrates, local governments are emerging as key agents of tourism-based development, especially as a poverty relief strategy.

Utrecht: 'A town within a game park'

The municipality of Utrecht (Figure 1), with a resident population of some 5500 people in 2001, was once a prosperous coal mining centre (Demarcation Board, 2004). When the mining industry collapsed during the early 1990s, Utrecht, like the other mining towns in the district as well as elsewhere in South Africa and the world, suffered the consequences of this overdependence. A substantial drop in the number of permanent jobs in mining – from 10 000 in the early 1980s to 140 in 2002 (E. Madamalala, Utrecht tourism officer, pers. comm., April 2002) – saw some local ex-miners who had stayed in in-mine housing return to subsistence farming, but in most cases out-migrating to other, most often their home, districts. Although this reduced the extent of the local crisis, there remained the need to reorientate the town's economy, especially as unemployment levels exceeded 41 per cent of the potentially economically active population (Demarcation Board, 2004). It was in this situation that the novel idea was conceived of promoting Utrecht as a 'town within a game park' that could become its new key economic resource (Binns & Nel, 2003).

The process

Faced with the very real prospect of becoming a ghost town in the mid-1990s, the town's publicity officer, together with the town engineer and town clerk, appealed to its residents help identify ways in which the shrinking local economy could be diversified. In anticipation of mine closures, there had been efforts to develop tourism, with significant cooperation between the international Anglo Coal, the municipality, the local business and community, as well as the local black community elders. A municipality community survey in 1998 revealed that most citizens thought the best way to create jobs was through enhancing the tourism-based potential of the region (R. Stannard, environmental consultant, pers. comm., July 2003). The municipal government successfully secured grants from the national Local Economic Development (LED) Fund to facilitate the necessary infrastructural development for nature-based tourism initiatives – including the establishment of a game reserve on former mine land – to stimulate job creation, entrepreneurship and overall growth within the local economy (M. Koekemoer, deputy manager, engineering services, Utrecht, pers. comm., April 2002).

Simultaneously, to cater for the needs of the town's population and surrounding rural communities, the Utrecht municipal government set aside a second area in 1998 for the development of the Utrecht Community Game Farm and Wildlife Products project. With the backing of the community and traditional authorities and approximately ZAR 6 million of LED funds as an establishment grant (E. Madamalala, Utrecht tourism officer, pers comm., June 2003), the municipal game farm project provided training for employment in tourism, game management and craftwork. Advice from a local conservator on how to manage herd size and a viable animal population within the demarcated reserve ensured that sound scientific principles were followed and the generation of revenue through supplying to a ready market ensured good economics. Subsequently, when the two game projects were combined, effectively surrounding the town, the municipality launched a marketing campaign to promote 'Utrecht: the town within a game park' as a destination like none other. With the addition of new facilities for accommodation (there is capacity for over 100 visitors) and access, the number of visitors started to grow from 2000.

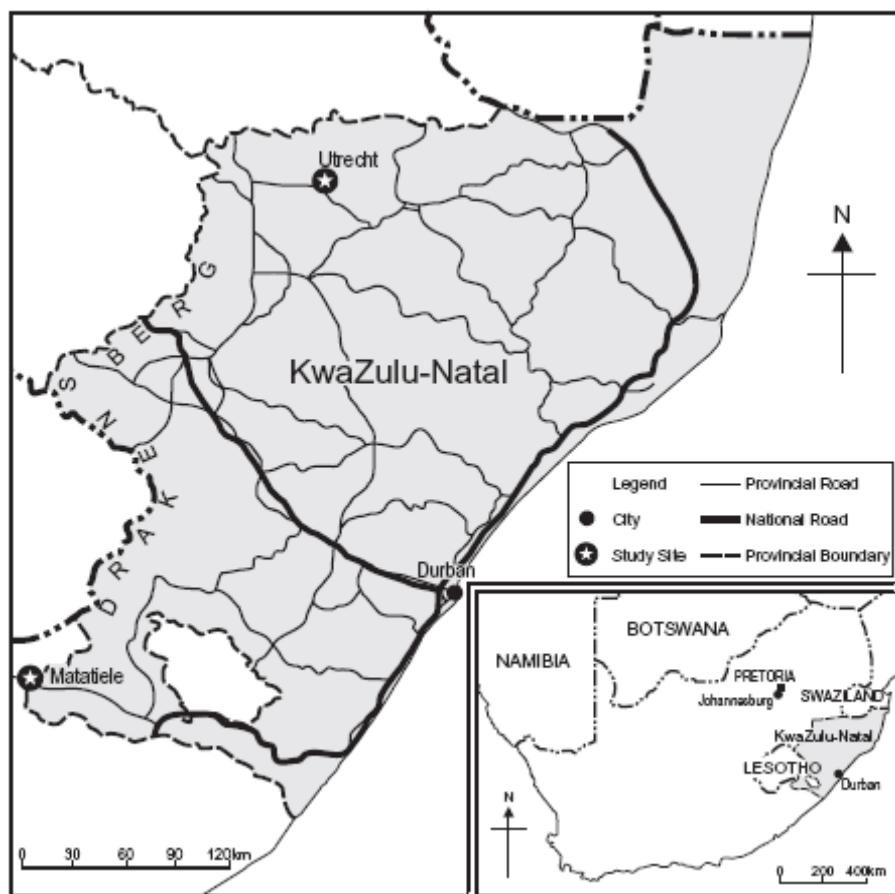


Figure 1. Location of Utrecht and Matatiele in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa.

Outcomes

Through the place marketing and development of the town as a game-related tourist destination, the economic base of Utrecht has begun to shift from mining to tourism. These efforts have included reskilling people from the poorer communities in particular, which is crucial in achieving the success of the tourism industry. The influx of visitors has contributed to an 80 per cent occupancy rate during most weekends and full-occupancy when special events are hosted (M. Beneke, Utrecht tourism officer, pers. comm., January 2005). However, while 2619 temporary jobs in building and fencing were created, only

11 permanent positions in game management were in existence by 2003 (E. Madamalala, Utrecht tourism officer, pers. comm., June 2003). Indirect job creation in the service sector will follow only when the potential for expansion in the tourism sector is realized.

As emphasized in an earlier study ([Binns & Nel, 2003](#)), the partnership and cooperation between the three key stakeholders – the municipality, mine and local residents – has been instrumental in driving the tourism development process. Within this context, local government took the lead in canvassing public opinion, seeking state funds and collaborating in project implementation through informal partnerships. Most noteworthy is the transparent manner in which planning meetings have been conducted. Unlike the conventional protection of the biodiversity model, which often leads to conflict between conservation agencies and surrounding communities, the planning process in Utrecht was inclusive of the community who were residing in the area and conservation has involved the coexistence of both nature and human communities.

Although Utrecht has successfully shifted the base of its economic mainstay with the necessary infrastructure to support a growing tourism industry, the question remains whether or not it will be successful in attracting sufficient numbers of visitors to fully realize the potential of such infrastructure in order to positively impact the livelihoods of the majority of the poor. Furthermore, there is still the very real possibility that if and when the tourism industry in Utrecht does take off, only a few more select members of the community will truly benefit. Despite concerns relating to the sustainability of the game projects, the initiatives have contributed to reviving the economic vitality of the area and promoted, to some degree, pro-poor local economic development through nature-based or game/wildlife-related tourism.

Matatiele: The Mehloding Hiking and Adventure Trail

In contrast to Utrecht, with its mining heritage and established urban population, Matatiele ([Figure 1](#)) is the service centre for a predominantly rural township of over 16 000 people living in some 23 villages scattered in the foothills of the Natal-Drakensberg range. A rate of unemployment in excess of 30 per cent and partial reliance upon subsistence farming had led to economic dependence on state welfare, creating the urgent need for income supplementation ([Demarcation Board, 2004](#)). Situated close to the border with Lesotho and a pristine mountain range rising up to 3000 m asl, the core tourism project positions Matatiele as the gateway to an innovative hiking trail through terrain with a high level of biodiversity. The key stakeholders include the local NGO Environment and Development Agency (EDA) and a private consultancy firm, Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS), which identified the nature-based tourism potential of the area as a means for addressing poverty, by generating employment if not sustainable livelihoods and by improving the use of the natural resource base as well as skills levels.

The process

Together with the community-backed tourism association (CTO) dealing with eco-tourism, EDA and ERS successfully lodged an application to the national Poverty Relief Fund and obtained ZAR 850 000 for 2001–02. This was used to develop the Mehloding Hiking and Adventure Trail and to build a series of guesthouses sited in local village communities along the route. EDA offered leadership and strategic support, ERS lent support in management and marketing and the CTO, made up of democratically elected village members, ensured the involvement and participation of communities. Funding will be spread over many years to cover running costs through the projects' initiation, but on a depreciating scale, so that the efforts to reach break-even are not burdened by debt. Encouraging success through such a process will lay the basis for building confidence, pride and a willingness to be more committed to the project in the longer term and in times of hardship, especially as the project is envisioned to be more wholly community-owned and driven in future.

The Mehloding initiative also received assistance from the KwaZulu Natal provincial tourism board in planning and marketing, as well as in training tour guides, the CTO and small village-based businesses. In addition, the NGO Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (see 'Masakala Guesthouse' at <http://fairtourismsa.org.za/fairtrade>) assisted in advertising and marketing. Overall, the Mehloding trail project has evoked a high degree of participation and decision-making by the beneficiaries that has the potential to lead to responsible ownership and management of the project (N. McLeod, environmental consultant, pers. comm., August 2003). Thus, Scheyvens' (2002) caution that communities can be disempowered by externally driven tourism projects is not applicable in the case of Matatiele, where there has been 'a strong emphasis on pro-poor planning which seeks explicitly to maximize the benefits that flow from tourism development to local communities' (Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2004: 448).

Certainly, too, the trail has catalyzed recognition of the rugged tourism potential in the area and its potential in promoting locality-based economic development. The attractions of this relatively remote region of the Drakensberg range – with no tarred road access but ideal for extreme hiking and biking in still unspoilt rural habitats – and its unique ancient rock art have been capitalized upon. Thus, the success of the trail is/will be inextricably linked to the conservation and protection of those 'natural' resources and sound scientific management must remain key guiding principles to prevent their overutilization, such as through overgrazing in a fragile system susceptible to soil erosion or comodification of unique rural cultures.

Outcomes

Within the first year (October 2003–October 2004) of operation, 50 hikers had walked the whole route (in eight groups) and another 50 had walked part of the route. Although a total of 23 villages are involved in the Mehloding project. The immediate beneficiaries have been people in the four villages traversed by the trail who derived income through providing services such as catering, maintenance and cleaning of the guesthouses, as well as through selling craft and supplying fresh produce to guests. The revenue from tourists using the trail is spent on wages and maintenance according to the discretion of the Mehloding Hiking and Adventure Trail Trust. There is also potential for a levy to be raised that will subsidize community facilities. Thus, the well-being of local rural communities is made an integral and essential part of the nature-based tourism development process (S. Lesia, Trust member, pers. comm., August 2003). The creation of jobs and skills development through tourism is also expected to spur the growth of wholesale and retail sectors in the town that rely on trade from the rural communities. Of course, because tourists have to pass through the town to get to the trail, local businesses (especially of supplies) have enjoyed a spillover of economic benefits.

The most obvious outcome of the trail project resulted from employment: the construction phase created an estimated 800 temporary jobs (Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2004). Eventually, when it becomes fully operational, a maximum of 160 permanent jobs are envisaged (S. Lesia, Trust member, pers. comm., August 2003). At present, direct returns accrue to five households within each of the four participating villages along the trail, providing accommodation and food, guiding and maintaining facilities. Understandably, many have already expressed feelings of exclusion as the initial employment opportunities have been limited (G. Manyathi, guesthouse hostess, pers. comm., August 2003). Certainly, the local pro-poor impact of tourism development initiatives may extend beyond that of job creation in terms of offering business opportunities for local entrepreneurs or small businesses. For example, the extension of local linkages in the provision of supplies is critical in enhancing the economic impacts of tourism development.

It is important to note that although the Mehloding Hiking and Adventure Trail is currently dependent on the administrative and financial know-how of EDA and ERS as facilitators, the trail initiative originated from and is run entirely by the rural

village communities. This situation has its strengths and weaknesses; while it draws on the advantages and mix of skills brought about by partnerships, it also means that the community is not wholly in charge or self reliant.

Reflecting on the evidence

In both Utrecht and Matatiele, not unlike so many small towns across the global South that remain marginalized from large cities and formal markets, unemployment and underemployment remain high and many people are living in conditions of poverty. The natural resource base has been identified as a catalyst for tourism development that can promote development and lead to poverty alleviation. Although both tourism projects are in their incipient phases and fundamental differences between the economies of the two locations prevent a direct comparison, certain key issues can be extracted.

The Utrecht experience illustrates the potential of tourism-based development to drive the reorientation of a local economy and reflects a number of features that have been recognized as instrumental in successful development, such as the use and marketing of locally available resources; strong local leadership; the collaboration of a number of key stakeholders; partnership formation; local, regional and national government support; and overall community unity ([World Bank, 2001](#)). Although the number of permanent jobs created has been limited, with areas identified for the creation of further employment opportunities, it must be acknowledged that the initiative has not compensated the loss of jobs following the closure and downscaling of the mines. Internationally, attempts at economic diversification in former mining towns have shown that not all jobs lost can be replaced but that employment should be created by developing a new economic orientation to avoid single-sector reliance ([Neil et al., 1992](#)).

While recognizing that the crisis in the local economy warranted action on the part of the municipal authorities, it would seem however that in playing such a decisive role in driving the process, the community has not been as fully engaged as could be expected. Clearly, the pro-poor benefits resulting in a town amidst a game reserve are limited, not only because of the limited involvement of local people ([Sharpley, 2002](#)) or that only menial jobs are available for them ([Ashley, 1998](#)).

In Matatiele, by comparison, clear vision by a rural community, strong leadership from a local NGO, financial support from both the national and provincial governments and a good relationship with a private consultancy were instrumental in driving the development of tourism. A key positive finding has been the degree of rural community involvement and their proactive participation at all phases of the project, facilitated through variously focused community-backed organizations (e.g. tourism, water projects or church activities). The high levels of participation and empowerment achieved accord with [Scheyvens's \(2002\)](#) criteria for poverty alleviation. Although many of those involved in the Mehloding project remain poor, living conditions have improved to some extent. Although benefits are spread unevenly, the earnings of the few are dispersed widely across extended family households and are spent locally, generating local multiplier effects.

However, there are concerns about the lack of consensus about the potential benefits of tourism among some members of the rural communities involved with the Mehloding Trail, apart from the fact that the jobs created by such a project are limited. The trail project was envisaged to exploit the natural and unique historic environment but at the same time as a means to improve livelihoods and alleviate poverty among rural host communities, who had remained focussed primarily on traditional and subsistence herding and farming. Given that they have had no previous exposure to tourism development, the establishment of the trail and guesthouses might be also construed as paving the way for cultural intrusion, at least of a different economy.

In drawing the experiences of both locations together, certain key findings can be noted with respect to the economic, employment and training and livelihood impacts. Both projects have endeavoured to involve and/or empower members of

the local rural communities who were marginalized or had not been directly involved in the formal economy in the town centres. The successful acquisition of government funding that has underpinned the development of the game farm as well as hiking trail projects, while noteworthy, does however raise the issue of grant dependence. Although this is too early to ascertain in either of the cases, projects that have relied heavily on external funds in their start-up phase all too often are unable to become financially self-sustaining in their operations. However, it is important not to be too critical, because merely providing a start-up grant and expecting projects specifically targeting poverty alleviation and longer term skills development to become sustainable in the short-term is unrealistic.

The number of permanent jobs created and consequently skill levels have been limited. While benefits might have accrued from short-term employment opportunities, only those employed on a permanent basis demonstrate positive impacts on livelihood. Overall, the most positive gains of the projects include skills development, sustainable employment in some instances, the promotion of community interests and stimulating economic activity through tourism. In addition, a clear role for the private sector and other outside agencies has been identified and, in both examples, it is seen that local partnership arrangements can play a key role in driving the development process through the sharing of resources, skills and information.

Another major reservation/concern is that issues of land access and tenure that have yet to be given due consideration by the projects (and serious redress by government) may well hinder significant livelihood improvements among poor disempowered communities. In light of both the Utrecht and Matatiele experiences, it can be argued that small-scale tourism development can only have limited implications for poverty-relief, economic regeneration, employment and livelihoods and that they could become grant dependant. It is also clear that there is a limit to the number of jobs and benefits such nature-based projects may provide before a saturation point is reached. This is simply a reality of many small-scale projects and indicates the necessity for pro-poor tourism development to be sustained by initiating several other small-scale projects – either spin-offs of the existing initiatives or new approaches for a market as yet unidentified but spawned by the present outcomes. Still, local agents need to be aware that just as mining proved to be a finite economic base, nature-based tourism may become reliant on a resource base that might also experience limitations and declining demand, requiring conscious efforts to continually identify new growth alternatives.

On an encouraging note, both cases reveal a series of key themes, including (i) the important role played by partnerships between key stakeholders in initiating tourism based development; (ii) the ability of local government, as shown in Utrecht, to steer the development process, raise funds and encourage partnership formation; (iii) that there is no 'ideal' pattern or model of tourism-based development because the same goals can be sought through a variety of alternative approaches; (iv) that diversification is an important consideration; (v) that state support/funds can help to catalyze development; (vi) that the private sector can participate meaningfully in pro-poor tourism initiatives based on the use of natural resources; and (vii) that communities can become directly involved in pro-poor approaches to tourism development at quite a prominent level. This broadly endorses the perception that:

Community based tourism is a more sustainable form of development than conventional mass tourism as it allows host communities to break away from the hegemonic grasp of tour operators and the oligopoly of wealthy elites at the national level (Sharpley & Tfifer, 2002: 150).

In relation to the two cases in KwaZulu Natal, is nature-based tourism a viable poverty relief strategy? If a broader conceptualization of poverty relief is adopted to include issues such as empowerment, skills development, development, involvement and commitment to a process (Scheyvens, 2002), the two examples here can be said to have achieved some measure of success and, perhaps, laid the basis for longer-term development in a range of areas.

Conclusion

South Africa is a major participant in the current global tourist boom (Williams, 1998) and the country's rich natural resources are a key asset with significant tourism and development potential. Rogerson (2000: 402) argues that tourism is a key development strategy which can be 'an anchor for growing local economies . . . critical in South Africa's smaller urban centres'. Within KwaZulu-Natal, tourism is an important source of direct and indirect jobs. International evidence also reveals that tourism, particularly nature-based tourism, has become an important strategy for rural development (Turner, 2001). However, as Sharpley (2002) notes and the evidence examined here suggests, while the natural environment can serve as a base for a pro-poor approach to tourism development, it cannot be assumed to serve as a panacea or that widespread benefits will ensue. Issues such as the limited number of jobs created and the risk of grant dependence need to be balanced against the positive gains of development, partnership formation, the collaborative roles of a variety of key organizations and government funding to support community based projects. In many ways, the examples selected in this paper bear out the conclusion by Allen and Brennan (2004: 46) that tourism initiatives in the South African context 'have yet to prove that they can deliver sufficient economic benefits to radically improve the lives of excluded African communities'.

Despite the anticipated growth of the tourism industry globally, it is important to note that tourism as a development option should not be taken in isolation from other sectors, but incorporated into a holistic economic and development planning process if all members of host communities are to truly benefit. Besides having little access to formal employment, poor and marginalized communities also have to deal with the very real social issues of illiteracy, population pressure, HIV-AIDS, limited funds and resource control and education and housing shortages, to name a few (Scheyvens, 2002). Skills development is routinely cited as an essential prerequisite for the initiation of effective, community-based nature-based tourism projects. In their study of community-based tourism developments, which had included Matatiele, Ndlovu and Rogerson (2004) pointed out that communities will not always benefit if they do not have all the appropriate management skills. This raises the question of whether or not external agencies should tailor projects to suit local skills, or if reskilling should be part of any development intervention to allow for empowerment. Thus, although tourism is not the solution for all development challenges, tourism planning needs to look beyond narrow confines and incorporate broader economic, political, social, cultural and environmental issues.

In conclusion, it is worth noting the questions that Turner (2001) raises and which we think reflect the views of many other researchers facing rural community development initiatives: Why should we try to use nature-based tourism as a rural development strategy? How many communities can pursue the same growth path? How ready are poorer countries to make nature-based tourism an effective part of their rural development strategy? In partial response, there are limitations with respect to what can be achieved and that not all will benefit. There is also the danger that the market might become saturated and the environment may be overburdened. On a more positive note is the protection of biodiversity and increased environmental awareness, education and consciousness that results as communities see the tourism potential of their natural surrounds as capable of promoting rural development.

Endnote

1 Our follow-up studies followed a standard structured qualitative methodological approach to eliciting problem-oriented, field-based information from key stakeholders. These included direct observation, semi-structured and structured interviews (45 in total) and follow-up interviews and transect walks. Key interviews were undertaken at both locations over a 2-year period (2002–03) with a diverse array of project participants and beneficiaries, including the town mayor, councillors and municipal officials, community liaison officers, chambers of commerce and business, managers of tourism facilities, tourism

officers, members of community tourism organizations and community project participants. Anonymity has been observed in specific cases where it was requested.

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