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# **Adventure tourism in South Africa: Challenges and prospects**

## **Abstract**

There is great potential for the development of adventure tourism in Southern Africa for a number of reasons. One is the variety of landscapes provided by South Africa's natural environment that are suitable for adventure tourism activities, many of which remain relatively pristine. In addition, the development of adventure tourism has significant potential to uplift local communities through local economic development strategies due to the relatively low capital needed to establish many activities considered adventure tourism. However, very little research exists on this important industry in the South African context. This research note, therefore, highlights three important aspects of adventure tourism development in South Africa. First, the challenges facing the adventure tourism industry are addressed. Three of the most significant challenges to its development are the need for specific skills among staff, the use of adventure tourism as a pro-poor development strategy, and environmental management concerns associated with adventure tourism. Next, an overview of existing research is given, much of which has focused on specific adventure activities and destinations in South Africa. Finally, and most importantly, a detailed outline is offered of further research that would assist in the management and development of adventure tourism in South Africa in the future.

**Key words:** adventure tourism; tourism development; nature-based tourism; South Africa

## **Introduction**

Adventure tourism has become one of the fastest growing tourism industries worldwide (Buckley, 2010). A tourism experience is considered adventure tourism if it includes some element of risk, whether real or perceived (Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie & Pomfret, 2003). Although an evolving industry, the majority of adventure tourism and recreation consists of activities that occur in outdoor natural settings (Hall, 1992). In the South African context, there has been a major increase, in recent years, in adventure tourism operations and in 2016 was named the number one global adventure destination (Belles & Winternberg, 2015). There are many reasons for developing South Africa as an adventure destination, including the possibility for local economic development, the low cost of South Africa for international tourists and the relatively established infrastructure when compared with other developing countries. However, the most significant component that allows adventure tourism to thrive in South Africa are the vast, diverse, and relatively pristine natural landscapes that provide the opportunity for new and unique adventure tourism experiences. Current research on this topic, nevertheless, is limited. In order to effectively develop adventure tourism in South Africa, a deeper understanding is needed of the many dynamics involved in the industry.

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## Challenges facing adventure tourism in South Africa

Only two studies have analysed the many challenges to developing adventure tourism in South Africa (Mckay, 2013; Rogerson, 2007). One of the most significant challenges is related to the management and regulation of the industry as whole. In South Africa, aside from very specific sectors of adventure tourism (e.g. scuba diving, and river sports), there is little regulation of the industry. Risk management is one of the primary concerns associated with regard to inefficient regulation industry-wide (Mckay, 2013). This poses a major problem as there are serious dangers associated with adventure tourism. Linked to safety consideration is also the necessity of highly skilled and trained staff for the successful operation of adventure tourism business which is often lacking in South Africa (Rogerson, 2007).

The second significant challenge of developing adventure tourism, is the need to increase the pro-poor benefits of the industry, which are currently minimal due to the that many adventure tourism entrepreneurs in South Africa are enthusiasts and recreation practitioners in the respective activities rather than local entrepreneurs (Mckay, 2013). In addition, the need to employ staff with specific skills and abilities, often limits the number of local community members who can significantly benefit from the operations (Mograbí & Rogerson, 2007).

Another noteworthy challenge facing South African adventure tourism is a lack of adequate and organised marketing strategies, partially due to the fact that most adventure tourism operations are relatively small and run by enthusiasts with little business experience. It is also a result of inefficient organisation of the industry as a whole. One important tactic that has not been implemented is marketing South Africa as an adventure tourism destination (Rogerson, 2007).

The final, major challenge for sustaining and developing adventure tourism in South Africa is protecting the natural environments in which the activities take place, with two primary obstacles. First, there is a need for increased regulation and enforcement of conservation practices within these unique and often fragile environments (Mckay, 2013). Second, and more importantly, there must be an increase the awareness of owners and staff members as to best practices when operating in specific environments. This would be easier if they are also made aware of the importance of the environment for the viability of their business.

## Adventure tourism research in South Africa

Some of the existing research on adventure tourism in South Africa has been mentioned in the previous section, particularly that pertaining to issues surrounding the development of adventure tourism in the country. Some additional work, however, has covered other aspects of the industry.

Mckay (2016) takes a geographical approach to adventure tourism research, by examining the locational distribution of adventure tourism operations throughout the country. She found that adventure tourism activities are concentrated in specific provinces, most notably the Western Cape and KwaZulu Natal, but notes the potential for developing the industry in other destinations throughout the country including urban adventure opportunities. Existing research on adventure tourism in South Africa also includes some dynamics involved in specific activities considered adventure tourism using a number of different approaches. Mograbí and Rogerson (2007) assessed the successes of the dive tourism industry as a local economic development strategy in the town of Sodwana Bay. They found that although there has been increased job creation and some economic upliftment, the majority of revenue from dive tourism in Sodwana Bay is going towards wealthier, white owners and larger corporations rather than back into

the local community. Also in the case of dive tourism in Sodwana Bay, Lucrezi, Saayman, and van der Merwe (2013) assessed the perceptions of environmental impacts and management implications of dive tourism. In other sectors, McKay (2014b) developed a profile of white water tourism along the Ash River and found that it is an attractive and successful tourism industry which contributes to the local economy of the region. In addition, McKay (2014a) contextualised Southern Africa within the global bungee jumping industry and found that South Africa presents a globally competitive market for attracting bungee jumpers.

The other primary body of research has focused on human-environment interaction in the adventure tourism industry. This includes an assessment of the environmental values of adventure tourists, which found that adventure tourism participants in South Africa have relatively low environmental values when compared with other nature-based tourists in developed countries such as New Zealand (Giddy & Webb, 2016; Giddy, 2015). Giddy and Webb (2016) have also found that the environment plays an important role in both the motivations and experiences of adventure tourism, particularly in the context of specific types of activities. Furthermore, participants across the range of activities considered adventure tourism are drawn to the destination (South Africa) predominantly because of its natural environment (Giddy, 2015). In addition, Giddy (2015) found that participants in adventure tourism tend to perceive the activities as having minimal impacts on the environment.

## Suggestions for future research

The studies discussed above provide important insight into some aspects of the adventure tourism industry in South Africa. However, there are many areas that still need to be addressed.

The research discussed above has largely focused on specific locations or regions within South Africa. Due to the fact that adventure tourism activities are becoming increasingly prevalent throughout the country, it would be useful to compile a general overview of the adventure tourism industry in South Africa. From the supplier side, it would be worthwhile to further investigate industry dynamics including the nature of adventure tourism activities offered throughout the country to supplement McKay's (2016) overview. In addition, developing a profile of participants is crucial for management and marketing purposes. With respect to managerial issues, another important research topic could examine the extent and nature of injuries in adventure tourism in South Africa in order to develop risk management strategies and implement effective regulation, an approach which has been applied to adventure tourism in other parts of the world (Bentley & Page, 2008).

Tourism is becoming an increasingly important component of South Africa's economy and therefore it is necessary to understand the ways in which adventure tourism can contribute to the country's economic development. On a national level, there is a need to investigate how to market South Africa as an adventure destination. In addition, as mentioned by Mograbi and Rogerson (2007) the use of South Africa as a local economic development strategy has not yet been overly successful. It would, therefore, be of use to investigate this concept further, and determine how to more effectively operate adventure tourism activities to better uplift local communities.

In recent years a great deal of adventure tourism research, globally, has focused on the commodification of adventure caused by increasing commercialisation of adventure tourism (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Cloke & Perkins, 2002). This approach would be of use in South Africa due to increasing commercialisation and commodification of the environment in particular. One reason, pertinent to South Africa, is the implementation of commercial activities in environments that were once primarily utilised

by individual adventure recreation, which is relatively popular. As commercial operations, grow, these environments and activities become increasingly inaccessible to the local population.

As mentioned earlier, the natural landscapes are one of the primary draws for South Africa as an adventure tourism destination. For this reason, understanding the many dynamics of the relationship between adventure tourism and the environment in South Africa is critical and the current body of work on this topic is relatively limited. For example, research on the environmental threats to the South African tourism industry would be incredibly beneficial for policy planning and managerial purposes. Of particular concern is the recent increase in extreme weather related to global climate change due to the dependence of most adventure tourism activities on specific weather patterns.

As demonstrated above, there is great potential for South Africa to become a top destination for adventure tourism. However, a number of obstacles must be overcome in order to effectively develop the industry in South Africa. Although some issues have been addressed in research, their scope is relatively limited. Therefore, the author calls for increased research on the adventure tourism industry in South Africa to facilitate its growth.

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