

Gijsbert Hoogendoorn

# Water (In)Justice and Tourism in South Africa: No Quenching of Thirsts

## Abstract

The South African tourism industry has grown tremendously since the fall of apartheid and is one of the few economic sectors with consistent growth, providing desperately needed employment. However, South Africa will face a 17% water shortfall by 2030, severely affecting water justice. The South African tourism industry should not wait for 'water-shedding' before implementing adaptation plans to ensure business continuity. This short communication advocates for urgent research in the South African tourism industry to be part of the solution, not the cause of water injustice.

**Keywords:** water, justice, injustice, tourism, South Africa

## 1. Introduction

Water justice and tourism are rarely investigated in the South African tourism research context despite being a significant problem. South Africa suffers from severe unjust water distribution and maintenance concerns, requiring urgent research focus. This topic of investigation is necessary over and above the impending impacts of climate change already impacting the country (Hoogendoorn & Fitchett, 2018).

## 2. Water (in)justice and tourism in South Africa

Labba Khaneiki et al. (2023, p. 1) define water justice "...as water distribution based on political agendas that prioritize certain regions in reorganizing water resources...". Even though Gössling et al. (2012) state that global tourism is not directly responsible for significant water usage (1% of global consumption), they underline the importance of understanding the regional consequences of water usage in tourism. South Africa is one of the countries where tourism can potentially harm water justice. For example, South Africa receives, on average, 456mm of rain annually, half the global average, which makes it among the driest 21% of countries. Indeed, 50% of the country is considered arid to semi-arid (The World Bank Group, 2021).

According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2022a), South Africa's population is projected to reach 70 million by 2032 from the present population of 62 million, rapidly increasing water demand. Even though household access to water progressed from 84.4% in 2002 to 88.7% in 2021, water access is decreasing in parts of the country. Sanitation remains a problem, with only 73.5% of households that have access to water to wash. In contrast, the agricultural sector uses more than 50% of the country's water (partly to support producing food for the tourism industry) (StatsSA, 2022b). It is also common for major cities in South Africa to have persistent water restrictions due to drought. For example, Gqeberha, a major city in the Eastern Cape province, recently went through one of its worst droughts in recorded history and faced severe water restrictions (Gcanga et al., 2022). According to the National Water and Sanitation Master Plan (NWSP, 2018), South Africa will face a 17% water deficit by 2030. The country's economic center, the Gauteng province (home to 15 million people), is already overshooting its supply and demand. In part because the per capita usage is well above global averages and because of delays in the completion of new dams by the Lesotho Highlands

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Gijsbert Hoogendoorn, PhD, Corresponding Author, Full Professor, Department of Geography, Environmental Management and Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7969-7952>; e-mail: [ghoogendoorn@uj.ac.za](mailto:ghoogendoorn@uj.ac.za)

Water Project (GCRO, 2019). South Africa's water resources have also experienced mass environmental destruction, with over 50% of wetlands being entirely lost, and of the remaining wetlands remaining, 33% are in a critical state (NWSA, 2018). In addition, water treatment infrastructure is failing, as witnessed by recent cholera outbreaks, and significant investment is necessary to improve infrastructure more broadly (Ruiters & Amadi-Echendu, 2022). Thus, water justice has yet to be achieved despite the preamble of The National Water Act of 1998, which promotes equal access to water and the use of water resources for all South Africans (see Rodina et al., 2017 for a more extensive discussion on water justice).

South Africa has experienced sluggish economic growth since the financial crisis in 2008, crippling corruption coupled with the devastating impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent rolling power blackouts from the failing state-owned energy provider, Eskom (Booyens et al., 2023). Despite the dire economic situation, tourism in South Africa has been incredibly lucrative and one of the few industries with sustained growth. Towards the end of apartheid in 1989, South Africa received 472 076 tourists (Grundlingh, 2006). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, South Africa hosted 10 228 593 tourists (Tourism, 2019). Tourism contributed 6.4% to South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019, with predictions of 7.4% by 2032, while providing 1.5 million desperately needed jobs in 2019 and 1.9 million in 2032 (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2022). Tourism is the 'goose that lays the golden egg' relative to other economic sectors. However, increasing tourism growth and growing population put pressure on South Africa's available water and access.

### 3. Future research needs

Gössling et al. (2012) point out that the indirect effects of water usage and tourism are poorly understood while at the same time, there have been studies in South Africa on the 'greening' of tourism infrastructure (Saarinen et al., 2022). An urgent and broadscale systematic intervention is necessary, especially from the water justice perspective. There is a critical need to understand the indirect effect of water usage in the tourism industry, especially in a hot and sunny country like South Africa, where use will be higher than the global average. It is imperative that the tourism industry does not contribute to water injustice while maintaining its economic benefit to the country.

At present, no information is available on a national level regarding how much water is used by the tourism industry or how much water is collected through rainwater harvesting systems for use in the tourism industry. The government, the private sector and research should urgently address this data shortfall.

The 'Day Zero' drought (2015-2017) in the Western Cape province should be South Africa's wake-up call regarding water usage, access, and justice (Wolski, 2018). For example, even though the worst-case scenario was avoided in the Western Cape because of early seasonal rainfall, the future reality of the increasing severity of drought under climate change poses serious questions about water justice in South Africa (Prinsloo & Fitchett, 2023).

Many South African households and tourism businesses have rapidly adapted to the country's energy shortfalls by installing solar panels to deal with so-called 'load-shedding'. Therefore, tourism businesses must not wait for 'water-shedding' but install rainwater harvesting systems as soon as possible and encourage a rapid reduction in water usage. Rainwater harvesting systems have seen limited implementation in the South African tourism industry and, while helpful, should not be seen as the only intervention in this regard.

### 4. Conclusion

Many South African citizens have suffered the consequences of water injustice because of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid and unfortunate mismanagement and planning in the post-apartheid era. The tourism industry and those researching tourism should urgently shift their focus towards contributing to solutions to this rapidly growing problem.

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