

## Protected Area-Based Tourism as a Catalyst for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

### Abstract

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In many countries, achieving sustainable tourism development is crucial to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as tourism activities have both direct and indirect impacts on sustainable development. This study examines the role of protected area-based tourism in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in southern Africa, with a focus on Lake Malawi National Park in Malawi and Etosha National Park, along with its adjacent conservancies (King Nehale and Ehi-Rovipuka) in Namibia. Using a qualitative exploratory design within an interpretive paradigm, data were collected through in-depth interviews with diverse stakeholder groups and observation. The findings reveal that protected area-based tourism supports SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by generating employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by removing all socio-economic barriers. It also advances SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) through biodiversity conservation and sustainable tourism practices. Progress is also evident in SDG 4 (Quality Education) through skills training and environmental awareness, and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through greater residents' participation in tourism, fostering local capacity and skills in tourism and conservation. In both countries, community participation emerged as central to equitable benefit-sharing and conservation success. The study highlights the need for stronger community engagement, inclusive employment strategies, sustained investment in training and education, effective conflict resolution mechanisms, and continued government and policy support. Protected area-based tourism in these regions demonstrates significant potential in promoting integrated environmental, social, and economic sustainability. With the right enabling conditions, it can serve as a strategic tool for advancing the SDGs and enhancing long-term resilience in communities and ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Protected area-based tourism; SDGs; Namibia; Malawi; Southern Africa

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### Introduction

As countries continue with the search for more sustainable ways of addressing socio-economic challenges, tourism has been earmarked as an option. Tourism in many countries is seen as the driver of economic growth, employment, and a booster of other industries such as agriculture, textiles, and manufacturing (Lekaota & Ngidi, 2024; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). This makes countries consider tourism, more especially protected area-based tourism, as key in addressing sustainable development challenges facing the local communities. It has been argued that local communities surrounding protected areas in Africa endure hardships caused by park activities, predators, yet do not adequately participate in tourism development. The overarching United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda advocates that any form of development should not leave anyone behind, especially in the programmes which assist in poverty alleviation, hunger, and economic opportunities, and tourism can be used as an important tool in all these (Boluk & Rasoolimanesh, 2022). Evidence suggests that understanding the role of tourism in protected areas can help in devising and shaping better practices and programmes that can contribute to achieving both sustainable tourism development and SDGs. As noted by Liu et al. (2023), tourism development can be an important endeavour that can help realise SDGs targets in many countries. For instance, tourism can directly reduce poverty through the provision of employment in hotels, lodges, restaurants, and the provision of goods and services. Indirectly, tourism can benefit the community through the development of social services such as infrastructures (roads, water system, health), stimulate local industries such as agriculture, craft, and creative industry. The tourism industry tends to employ women who are highly marginalised in other sectors (Connell, 2020; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). This reduces gender imbalances, which has for the last decades been a global concern. The SDGs envision that by 2030, women should be at the centre of development aspirations and all forms of gender imbalances should be removed. Achieving gender equality opens doors for women to participate in economic and social development. However, the concern for many scholars has been the positions occupied by such women.

Dobrea et al. (2023) point out that countries should devise policies that seek to achieve eco-friendly behaviour and practices in order to reduce environmental impact. As an economic activity, tourism activities can have adverse impacts on both social, economic, and physical ecosystems, consequently on sustainable development (Berbeka et al., 2024; Boluk & Rasoolimanesh, 2022). Sustainable consumption and production of tourism products requires proper planning and involvement



of key stakeholders such as tourists, service providers, government, facilitators, local communities, and key development partners.

Evidence suggests that protected areas' key role is to preserve ecosystems, promote peaceful coexistence of nature and local communities (Liu et al., 2023). In terms of growth prospects, both protected area visitation shows that protected areas are becoming vital to achieving the SDGs (Trišić et al., 2023; Dudley, 2008). Despite nature-based tourism and recreation in protected areas positioning tourism as a key driver of rural and community development, studies have pointed out that the contribution of protected areas to SDGs is misunderstood (Dudley, 2008; Moyo & Cele, 2021; Trišić et al., 2023). This paper explores how tourism in protected areas works as a catalyst to achieve the SDGs by examining the relationship through the lens of sustainability dimensions, social, economic, and environmental. This study focuses on Lake Malawi National Park (LMNP) in Malawi and Etosha National Park and the adjacent conservancies (King Nehale and Ehi-Rovipuka) in Namibia.

## Literature review

### *The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*

The Brundtland Commission's 1987 report marked the official conceptualization of the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development envisages that development balances three key dimensions: economic, environmental, and social (Goh et al., 2020). Environmental sustainability seeks to conserve and sustain land, sea, and water resources, and their inherent biodiversity. Social sustainability aims at reducing adverse impact on social fabrics, including cultural heritage, inclusion, norms, values, and lifestyles. Economic sustainability seeks to reduce inequality, improve access to economic resources, ensure sustainable use of resources, raise standards of living, and ultimately, improve wellbeing. The concept of sustainable development has undergone various developmental phases since its introduction. The historical development of the concept saw the participation of various organizations and institutions. The notable phase is the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), sanctioned in 2008, which consisted of 8 goals to be implemented by businesses to help eradicate poverty by 2015. Recently, the United Nations set 2030 as the final year to achieve what is called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda has 17 SDGs and a total of 169 subsequent targets. These goals are designed to help people prosper, bring an end to poverty, and protect the planet. This agenda promotes sustainable development by advocating for the responsible use of natural resources, supporting conservation efforts, creating employment opportunities for local communities, preserving local cultures and products, and sustainably utilizing marine resources to enhance economic benefits for developing and underdeveloped countries (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). The SDGs are essential for eliminating poverty, reducing hunger, improving health and education, preserving the environment, and promoting social equity, serving as a global guide for achieving sustainable development by 2030 (Liu et al., 2023). It is argued that sustainable development can be advanced through sustainable tourism, which promotes responsible tourism that supports conservation and benefits local communities economically without degrading the environment (Hutchison et al., 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, protected areas have been key tourist attractions, and the tourism development associated with these areas has been crucial in supporting both conservation and local development.

### *Mandate of protected areas*

Globally, the number of protected areas has grown exponentially, signifying their relevance and significance to environmental, social, and economic development (Liu, 2003; Moyo & Cele, 2021; Xu et al., 2009). The IUCN defines a protected area as a geographical space that is managed and recognized through legal or other effective means in order to achieve long-term conservation of nature, including related environmental services and traditional beliefs (Leung et al., 2018). Fundamentally, protected areas have become a tool for biodiversity and climate change mitigation, promoting greater financial support for protected areas, and expanding international cooperation in the finance, development, and management of protected areas (Watson et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2009). Three main areas can be discerned from the literature to explain the core mandates of protected areas.

Conservation refers to the in-situ maintenance of ecosystems and natural and semi-natural habitats and of viable populations of species in their natural surroundings, and, in the case of domesticated or cultivated species (Dudley, 2008). Conservation is the main goal for all protected areas activities (Dudley, 2008); as such, protected areas are critical to the sustainability objectives of worldwide ecosystems and marine life. They protect nature and provide a variety of environmental services such as water, social and religious services (Juffe-Bignoli et al., 2018). As Vina & Lu (2017) point out, protected areas are biodiversity pools. They act as points of reference or ecological baselines to explain the impact of human activities on the planet (Arcese & Sinclair, 1997). The mandate of protected areas goes beyond conserving animals, forests, and aquatic life, and extends to the conservation of cultural values, terrestrial reserves, inland waters, and coastal and marine areas. As Dudley (2008) points out, protected areas are the cornerstones of national and international conservation strategies, set aside to maintain functioning natural ecosystems, to act as refuges for species, and to maintain ecological processes that cannot survive in most intensely managed landscapes and seascapes. According to Imboma (2022), the idea of conservation in protected areas extends to forests, savannahs, woodlands, grasslands, scrublands, deserts, and mangroves. It has been noted that conserved places, such as protected areas, also help in carbon sequestration (Melillo et al., 2016). Melillo et al. (2016) estimate that protected areas currently sequester about one-fifth of the carbon sequestered by all land ecosystems annually. Adom et al. (2018) point out that protected areas have greatly improved the conservation of biological diversity worldwide, and hence, many nations recognize protected areas as an important tool for preserving their natural resources. Conservation of forests plays a vital role in mitigating climate change impacts. Protected areas are regarded as irreplaceable assets and are to be conserved for future



generations. This makes protected areas inseparable from SDGs and their targets, implying that achievements on one may improve or affect others (Singh et al., 2018).

With increasing population densities and crowded places, natural areas are becoming rare (Lacy & Whitmore, 2006). Globally, there is a growing demand for places for recreation activities in natural settings, and protected areas have become beneficial to humankind by providing tourism and recreational activities (Lacy & Whitmore, 2006; Pickering et al., 2018). Both people living in or near protected areas and others from further away gain from the opportunities for recreation and renewal available in national parks and wilderness areas (Dudley, 2008). Most tourism activities, such as ecotourism, nature tourism, rural tourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism, take place in protected natural areas (Halawayhi et al., 2025; Hornoiu et al., 2014). Visitors to protected areas prefer photography, landscape painting, studying the flora and fauna, cultural sightseeing, and special guided hikes. However, managers need to be careful in balancing conservation and recreational activities, as recreation may not be compatible with biodiversity protection (Reed & Merenlender, 2008).

Protected areas cannot be divorced from the concept of development. They are forms of territorial management that embrace development that is ecologically and socially responsible. Bricker et al. (2022) argue that protected areas are linked to the concept of sustainable development. The economic dimension includes infrastructure development, facilities, employment, financing, and revenue-generating functions. Protected area managers and owners have the mandate to develop proper facilities, infrastructure, and services in the protected area and its surrounding places (Dudley, 2008; Leung et al., 2018). One of the key development activities is fence construction to control animal movement and reduce human-wildlife conflict (Leung et al., 2018). Fences restrain dangerous animals from crossing into local communities in the periphery. Human-wildlife conflict happens when animals threaten human life and their activities. Another aspect of development is the provision of accessibility by constructing road networks and airstrips for visitors, local people, and the monitoring of park animals. Transport infrastructure and facilities, such as roads, help both visitors and communities with accessibility to the activities and park resources. Such infrastructure development changes the general economic outlook and enhances economic growth and employment opportunities (Ojijja et al., 2024). Some of these developments have long-term benefits to the people surrounding the protected areas. Protected areas contribute to livelihoods by creating jobs, supporting businesses, and enhancing social services (Onnoghen et al., 2025; Stone & Nyaupane, 2016; Zhang et al., 2025). Protected areas are crucial for environmental sustainability, housing endemic species, and offering opportunities for tourism, research, and recreation (Belsoy et al., 2012). However, managers face difficult choices in balancing conservation, tourism development, recreation, and community needs (Dudley et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2025). Studies confirm a positive link between protected area tourism and sustainable development (Trišić et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025), but researchers emphasize the need for more participatory approaches to ensure community involvement and poverty reduction (Bello et al., 2017; Moyo & Cele, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025). An integral aspect of the sustainability framework is the fair distribution of social costs and benefits associated with conservation among various stakeholders. Sustainable development in protected areas should ensure equitable benefit-sharing can foster positive community attitudes toward conservation initiatives, thereby increasing support and reducing resistance. Hutchison et al. (2021) argue that decision-makers must ensure that development benefits are equitably shared across society, considering both current and future generations.

## Methodology

The study was conducted in two national parks, Lake Malawi National Park (LMNP) in Malawi and Etosha National Park (ENP) in Namibia. While Etosha National Park, including the adjacent Ehi-Rovipuka Conservancy and King Nehale Conservancy, provides valuable information on the terrestrial aspect, Lake Malawi National Park enriched the study with both terrestrial and aquatic wildlife conservation and experiences. This study employed a cross-sectional exploratory qualitative interpretative design. It is a research design that seeks to understand the diversity and uniqueness of individual perceptions, interpretations, and experiences of their surrounding (Crossman (2017)). It is ideal for exploratory studies seeking opinions from different individual perspectives and lived experiences (Lim, 2023). The interpretivism approach was used to analyse how different viewpoints (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), as it accommodates diverse perspectives on complex phenomena. The sample was drawn from the target population consisting of the protected area management agency staff, tourism operators, and local communities in and around LMNP and ENP. Study participants, presumed experts, experienced, and knowledgeable about tourism and conservation initiatives, were selected following non-probability purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. As Bhardwaj (2019) points out, purposive sampling is suitable when specific individuals possess essential knowledge about the phenomenon under study. Purposive sampling allowed us to target only participants who would provide valuable and relevant information (Campbell et al., 2020). Snowball sampling utilised networking and referrals. The sample size for the study was 60 (30 for each park). Data saturation was reached after 50 interviews (30 from LMNP and 20 from ENP), representing an 83.3% response rate. Cobern and Adams (2020) suggested that 11 or 12 interviews achieve 95% saturation, while Hennink & Kaiser (2022) recommended 9 to 17 interviews for data saturation. Two sets of interview guides were developed and used, with one set focusing on park management agency staff and tour operators, and another set for local community members. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data and involves identification, analysis, reporting themes, and interpreting various aspects of a research topic (Attride-Sterling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a six-phase guide to performing thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). The themes and sub-themes were predetermined based on the three sustainability dimensions and relevant SDGs.



## Findings and discussion

The guiding research question explored how protected area-based tourism in Etosha National Park (including the adjacent two conservancies) in Namibia and Lake Malawi National Park contributes to the achievement of SDGs. Specifically, the research sought to examine the impacts of protected area-based tourism on direct economic, social, and environmental aspects of the SDGs.

### *Direct economic contributions*

#### *SDG 1 (No poverty)*

Protected area-based tourism in both countries contributes significantly to poverty reduction, which is a step in addressing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The study has established that both ENP and LMNP provide diverse employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. For example, the increase in tourist visitation has led to upgrading works in Etosha, which has made it possible for local people to find employment opportunities in the construction projects. Furthermore, the parks offer other employment opportunities in both the tourism and hospitality and conservation sectors. At LMNP, about 25% of revenue is spent on community projects such as building schools and bridges, repairing roads, and providing healthcare. Earnings from tourism provide vital funding for infrastructure, education, and healthcare in nearby villages. The construction of a paved access road and electrification of Chembe Village, an enclave village in the park, have notably improved living standards and accessibility, fostering economic activity through better links to markets and services. Apart from the primary outputs and outcomes, such projects provide secondary benefits, including employing locals in non-key or unskilled roles, thereby increasing household earnings. One participant noted "... As a community association, we consider development project proposals from the local community through VNRCs [Village Natural Resource Committees]. We then allocate revenue received from DNPW to fund the projects." (LMNP - Participant 10). Both LMNP and ENP support business and entrepreneurship activities by sourcing products from the local community. As narrated by one of the tourism operators, "... We buy eggs and chicken from local farmers... tourists buy locally crafted products in their curio shops, benefiting artisans from neighbouring communities." (ENP – Participant 13). It was gathered that local farmers and fishermen at LMNP generate income by supplying produce and fish to lodges and restaurants. At Chembe Village, a local organisation by the name Sustainable Cape Maclear, supports local artisans, including glass cutters, designers, and craft vendors, to collaborate and share profits. Thus, tourism enterprises within the park enhance local earnings and create a positive multiplier effect within the surrounding communities and beyond: "... we source all our food items from local shops, ... the vegetable seller, being invaluable to us. I also support local fishermen by purchasing fish from them." (LMNP - Participant 12).

Additionally, King Nehale Conservancy is also actively working to reduce poverty by creating economic opportunities tied to tourism. The conservancy enables residents to benefit through activities such as working at the King Nehale Lodge, producing crafts, and offering cultural tours. This suggests that tourism at both ENP and LMNP stimulates broader economic activity across lodging, transportation, recreation, dining, and retail sectors, as noted by Asa et al. (2022). These findings demonstrate that protected area-based tourism activities in Namibia and Malawi are significant contributors to SDG 1 by diversifying income sources, generating employment, and encouraging local entrepreneurship, a finding consistent with Zhang et al. (2025) and Moyo & Cele (2021). Katila et al. (2019) argue that SDG 1 seeks to eradicate all forms of impediments that halt access to economic resources, equitable distribution of income and economic opportunities, gender sensitivity, and build resilient communities, and development of policy frameworks supporting pro-poor and gender sensitive strategies. Tourism at ENP and LMNP creates employment and supports entrepreneurship, thereby improving local livelihood. Tourism indirectly supports the achievement of SDG 1 by generating park fees, tax revenues, voluntary contributions toward poverty alleviation, and investments in infrastructure development. However, at both parks, the results do not clearly indicate that there are comprehensive policy frameworks that advance pro-poor and gender-responsive strategies, nor do they provide evidence that community resilience has been fully achieved. Persistent challenges, such as limited employment opportunities, unequal benefit distribution, and unresolved human-wildlife conflicts, suggest that some key elements of SDG1, as described by Katila et al. (2019), remain only partially achieved.

#### *SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth)*

Evidence from both parks indicates that tourism significantly contributes to local economic development by expanding employment and business prospects. The presence of lodges, campsites, and related amenities has increased job opportunities within surrounding communities. Participants noted that tourism supports a broad range of employment at both managerial and operational levels, with community members working as lodge managers, accountants, waiters, bartenders, housekeepers, chefs, gardeners, security personnel, lifeguards, and tour guides. Nearly 30 hospitality establishments are operating in LMNP, primarily in Chembe Village, with more under construction, reflecting rising demand for local labour and skills. This growth not only enhances household incomes but also strengthens the local economy at large. Additionally, community-led tourism ventures, including homestays, village tours, fishing excursions, traditional meals, and the sale of handicrafts, provide supplementary income while helping to preserve cultural heritage: "... As tour operators, we have a very good relationship with the local community. Here, most of the tour guiding services and hospitality services are provided by local people from the surrounding villages." (LMNP - Participant 21). Similarly, Etosha National Park and the adjacent conservancies provide job opportunities to women and youth. ENP hospitality establishments also support local entrepreneurship by purchasing various products from nearby communities. In addition to selling their products to the hospitality establishments inside and outside the park and conservancies, local people also sell various merchandise to visitors, fostering economic emancipation and



aligning with SDG 8's goals of decent work and economic growth (Dube & Nhamo, 2021). Furthermore, it was noted that Namibia Wildlife Resorts, the only tourism operator with accommodation facilities in ENP, provides decent accommodation for its employees at its staff quarters for each facility within the park. Collaboration with local communities to sell products and promote entrepreneurship further amplifies economic diversification, particularly in rural areas, as noted by Saarinen (2010). This community-based tourism model strengthens local economies and reduces poverty, aligning with SDG 8. This is confirmed by one of the participants: "... In our lodges, we prioritise employing people, including women and the youth from the surrounding communities. As you know, our industry is labour-intensive, and people work on shifts, so we have so many people working in our lodges. We also provide good housing for our employees at the staff quarters." [ENP - Participant 15].

King Nehale and Ehi Rovipuka Conservancies also engage many youths in their operations, thereby supporting SDG 8's target 8.6, which focuses on increasing youth employment. These findings underscore tourism's role as a catalyst for economic growth and social stability in Namibia and Malawi, though ongoing policy support and investment are needed to sustain and scale these impacts. However, Dudley et al. (2022) note that ensuring access to broader benefits, particularly for disadvantaged groups, and promoting equitable benefit-sharing among community members are also crucial, though often challenging to achieve. The findings highlight tourism's significant contribution to economic growth and job creation in and around the parks, directly supporting SDG 8, which aims for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full employment, and decent work for all, as noted by Dobrea et al. (2023) and UNWTO (2023). The initiatives by the protected areas demonstrate a multifaceted approach to achieving SDG 8 by integrating tourism with community development and sustainable economic growth. The tourism industry, as highlighted by Asa et al. (2022) and Humavindu (2024), generates jobs, resident income, corporate earnings, and tax revenue, directly supporting the SDG 8 aim of decent work. However, in both parks, lack of educational attainment and skills affects local people's ability to engage with new initiatives, including ecotourism, potentially limiting the achievement of SDG 8's employment goals (Bello & Lambulira, 2024; Bello et al., 2017).

#### *SDG10 (Reduced inequalities)*

The study found that both ENP and LMNP contribute significantly to SDG10. Participants from ENP and LMNP confirmed that the parks reduce inequalities through their efforts to engage local communities in tourism and conservation activities within the park. They do this by offering job opportunities to residents in various roles, including park management, tourism, and hospitality. As explained by the participants: "...the park and the two conservancies provide several employment opportunities to people from our villages, both those who are skilled and unskilled. This is the case with all the national parks here in Namibia." [ENP - Participant 2] and "... Local people from Chembe village and surrounding communities are the largest group of people employed in the hospitality sector in this park. We provide equal opportunities for all people based on their skill set." (LMNP - Participant 8). These employment opportunities help alleviate poverty and reduce economic inequalities in the region, aligning with the spirit of SDG 10 as observed by Bricker et al. (2022). By providing local communities with income and livelihood prospects, parks and conservancies contribute to the goal of reducing inequalities. However, it's important to note that there is room for improvement in terms of involving local communities more directly in decision-making processes and benefit-sharing within the parks, which could further enhance the parks' contribution to SDG 10.

Furthermore, the Beach Village Committees working with Sustainable Cape Maclear at LMNP, alongside the King Nehale and Ehi Rovipuka Conservancies in Namibia, illustrate ongoing efforts to promote equitable participation in the management and governance of protected areas. As one participant observed: "...as the VNRCs, everyone is involved in VNRCs' activities, leadership, and governance... we all participate in tree nursery preparation and distribute seedlings to households, enabling each family to plant its woodlot. This effort helps to reduce reliance on natural resources in the park." (LMNP - Participant 1). King Nehale Conservancy, on the other hand, actively involves local communities in decision-making, benefit-sharing, and the overall management of the conservancy. This level of engagement empowers residents economically by providing them with a direct stake in the revenue generated from tourism and other conservancy activities. By promoting a sense of ownership and participation, King Nehale contributes to reducing inequalities, a core objective of SDG 10. Such inclusive practices strengthen community identity, foster stewardship of cultural and natural resources, and ensure that tourism contributes directly to equitable economic opportunities consistent with SDG 10.

#### *Environmental sustainability*

##### *SDG 14 (Life below water)*

At LMNP, tourism supports biodiversity conservation by safeguarding cichlid (Mbuna) fish and discouraging illegal tree cutting that threatens the ecological balance of the lake. The cichlid serves both ecological and recreational roles, enhancing activities such as snorkelling, diving, and photography. Conservation efforts are strengthened through VNRC patrols, supported by tourism operators and the DNPW. Sustainable Cape Maclear complements these initiatives by promoting waste management, beach clean-ups, and artificial breeding sites for cichlids, while also training local guides as divers to remove underwater waste, thereby advancing both ecosystem health and tourism sustainability: "...one of the mandates of the DNPW is to protect the cichlid fish, an endemic species found only in Lake Malawi National Park, which attracts tourists from around the world." (LMNP - Participant 4) and "...Sustainable Cape Maclear helped us set up cichlid fish sanctuaries to boost the population of these unique fish species, a major attraction for tourists." (LMNP - Participant 6). Marine resources are essential for global well-being and economic progress, with conservation being particularly crucial for coastal communities (UNWTO, 2023). Tourism in LMNP supports SDG 14 by reducing marine pollution, protecting the ecosystem, and encouraging sustainable fishing. Measures aimed at reducing or eliminating illegal fishing are consistent with SDG 14, target 4, whereas reducing



pollution through organised beach clean-ups reflects SDG 14, target 1. In addition, the establishment of breeding sites supports biodiversity conservation while generating added value for tourism development. As noted by Bello (2021) and Kuseni et al. (2024), conservation-focused tourism provides significant benefits to biodiversity and local economies.

#### *SDG 15 (Life on land)*

Life on land underpins sustainable development in protected areas through habitat conservation, restoration, and biodiversity protection. At LMNP, the DNPW has facilitated the creation of VNRCs, which cooperate in patrols and promote sustainable practices such as household woodlots. These initiatives reduce dependence on park resources and strengthen ecological preservation, with tourism revenues providing the required financial support. Both LMNP and ENP have rich wildlife and rich biodiversity, contributing to SDG 15 by protecting their natural environment and biodiversity through sustainable tourism practices. The study found that environmental management practices in both parks include disposing of all hazardous waste material in an ethical manner that does not harm the natural environment. The parks have anti-poaching and anti-wildlife crime units that protect and safeguard animals from wildlife crimes. The Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programme in Namibia has earned recognition for its role in fostering the revival of numerous species, including the African lion, and for driving economic enhancements across diverse conservancy communities through the establishment of these community benefits (Zhang et al., 2020). Local communities at LMNP in Malawi, supported by tourism operators and Sustainable Cape Maclear, actively engage in conservation through waste management and recycling initiatives, such as converting glass bottles into usable items and producing organic manure. Community-based organisations, including the Beach Village Committees, have further improved park hygiene by constructing restrooms along the beaches. These efforts enhance both environmental quality and community well-being, reinforcing the connection between sustainable tourism and local stewardship: "...we have established tree nurseries and distributed seedlings to residents, enabling each family to have its woodlot. This effort helps to reduce reliance on natural resources. Instead, locals use trees from their woodlots for both household use and smoking fish, ensuring that visitors to the park can continue to experience the unique natural beauty of our community, and our children can enjoy the same resources in the future." (LMNP - Participant 1).

Tourism operators and related organizations support local communities in establishing household woodlots, reducing dependence on protected area resources. This practice aligns with SDG 15, target 1 on conserving and restoring terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems. Complementary measures such as waste management, recycling, and alternative livelihoods like vegetable farming further advance these objectives. However, as Loos (2021) notes, the effectiveness of protected areas in conserving biodiversity is often constrained by insufficient funding, limited staffing, inadequate management capacity, human pressures, and poor spatial representativeness. In both parks, sustainable resource use is strengthened by local organisations, which attract diverse stakeholders and foster key conservation principles, as noted by Campos-Silva et al. (2021).

#### *SDG 13 (Climate action)*

The goal of SDG 13 is to combat climate change, which is one of the challenges affecting the tourism sector. It calls for a new interaction between humans and nature. There has been concern about increasing greenhouse gases and CFCs due to reduced vegetation and the burning of fossil fuels. Climate change poses a threat to biodiversity that supports the tourism sector, particularly in Africa (Dube & Nhamo, 2021). Both ENP and LMNP, in particular, have made some efforts to reduce, adapt, and increase resilience to the effects of climate change. Both parks have vast landscapes, encompassing a range of diverse ecosystems that act as a formidable carbon sink. They can absorb and store substantial amounts of carbon dioxide and serve as an essential tool in climate action by mitigating the greenhouse effect. They both promote sustainable tourism practices, such as controlled vehicle access and efficient waste management, effectively reducing the carbon footprint associated with their tourism activities, a critical aspect of climate mitigation efforts. Furthermore, both parks have climate education initiatives that aim at educating visitors about climate change's implications for the park's natural habitats and wildlife, fostering heightened climate awareness and action. The parks' dedication to habitat restoration and protection complements its climate action endeavours, as healthy ecosystems sequester carbon and enhance climate resilience. Both parks contribute to climate research and monitoring, providing valuable data to inform broader climate mitigation and adaptation initiatives. The study found that both protected areas' role in preserving carbon sinks, promoting biodiversity and climate resilience, adopting sustainable tourism practices, conducting climate education, conservation, and research activities collectively positions them as significant contributors to the global endeavour of addressing climate change and achieving the objectives of SDG 13.

#### **Social sustainability**

##### *SDG 4 (Quality education)*

Quality education is vital for the socio-economic development of any country. The research findings demonstrate that both ENP and LMNP are pivotal in advancing SDG 4. The benefit-sharing model at LMNP supports community development projects, including school and bridge construction, road maintenance, and the provision of medical supplies for communities in and around the park. Infrastructure improvements, such as the construction of a bituminous road to the park and the electrification of Chembe Village, have significantly enhanced living conditions and accessibility, facilitating economic activities by improving access to markets, healthcare, and education. The funds from the revenue-sharing model are also used to provide educational sponsorships for underprivileged students. The Tulongeni Craft Centre in King Nehale Conservancy offers a compelling case study of how conservation-driven interventions can foster educational empowerment, particularly for women, through targeted skills-based training. This initiative not only enhances participants' economic status by equipping



them with marketable craft-making skills but also embeds principles of sustainable resource utilisation. In Malawi, DNPW also provides environmental education and skills training in various income-generating activities to local communities with the support of various stakeholders, including tourism operator: "... As a park, we provide training to several stakeholders, including school children, on conservation issues. We also have a research unit that hosts scholars working on wildlife management and environmental conservation. The surrounding local communities are also trained in environmental management and sustainable agricultural practices. Several other partners have provided training to local communities to build their capacity in tourism and other income-generating activities." [LMNP - Participant 17].

Such initiatives directly align with SDG 4, target 7 - mandate to promote education for sustainable development and global citizenship, fostering critical competencies that enable learners to navigate and address complex socio-environmental challenges. By grounding educational efforts in practical, context-specific applications, the parks and conservancies exemplify how conservation can function as a conduit for transformative learning, challenging traditional educational paradigms that often prioritize theoretical over applied knowledge. Moreover, the community engagement strategies deployed by the protected areas encompass informational meetings, participatory workshops, and educational talks, which constitute critical non-formal educational platforms that significantly enhance environmental literacy. These initiatives facilitate the dissemination of specialized knowledge on wildlife protection and sustainable conservation practices, cultivating a community-wide ethos of environmental stewardship. Mufune (2015) posits that CBNRM in Namibia ensures a localised control over natural resources, which eventually fosters sustainable rural development by creating synergistic opportunities for socio-economic and educational advancement. The non-formal educational channels established by the parks and the conservancies not only democratize access to environmental knowledge but also empower communities to actively participate in conservation governance, thereby reinforcing the social capital necessary for sustained educational progress. This participatory model challenges top-down conservation approaches, highlighting the efficacy of inclusive, community-driven strategies in achieving both ecological and educational outcomes. Drawing on UNESCO's conceptualization of education for sustainable development, the integrated approach adopted by the parks and conservancies exemplifies how conservation can transcend its ecological remit to become a catalyst for holistic community development. By fostering synergies between environmental stewardship, economic resilience, and educational quality, these protected areas emerge as dynamic hubs for sustainable development, where the interplay of ecological and human capital generates transformative outcomes.

#### *SDG 5 (Gender equality)*

Gender inequality has been a source of many socioeconomic problems affecting our society. SDG 5 seeks to advance gender equality and empower women and girls worldwide. This study found that both parks have notable representation of women in positions of influence within the tourism and conservation sectors. Additionally, governments in both countries emphasize their commitment to promoting youth and women's employment as part of their SDG implementation efforts. While these gains may seem modest to some, female representation in leadership and decision-making roles can meaningfully shift perceptions of women in the workplace and represents a critical step toward achieving broader gender equality. As the one participant clarifies: "...as a tourism and hospitality company, I would say we are doing well in gender equality. There are several women in management and supervisory positions in most of our lodges. You have even seen it here. Even on the park side, you will see so many women in uniform from the gate to the offices here and in the field working in several positions." [ENP - Participant 19]. Gender balance in both parks' professional settings, as observed in this study, where women are in leadership roles, is consistent with feminist theories of structural change (Connell, 2005). According to Castro (2024) and Eagly et al. (2007), having visible female role models in technical and executive roles can challenge patriarchal conventions and promote a cultural change in how people view women's talents. In order to address systematic injustices, in Namibia, the Ministry of Environment, Forestry, and Tourism has implemented targeted employment policies that have the potential to improve women's social capital and economic agency. Nonetheless, these results need to be interpreted in light of more extensive structural limitations. Although the number of women in senior positions is noteworthy, it could not be indicative of national or international patterns, as women continue to be underrepresented in these positions (World Economic Forum, 2023). Long-term obstacles that could impede growth include cultural opposition to women in positions of power, gendered labour division, and unequal access to education (Kabeer, 2016). The results lend credence to the idea that protected areas are opening doors for women and other gender groups, but they don't show that gender equality has been fully realized, as suggested by Dudley et al. (2022), who contend that protected and conserved areas can be crucial in advancing social and gender equality.

#### *SDG11 (Sustainable cities and communities)*

This goal seeks to achieve more sustainable communities by creating economic opportunities, capacity, and resilient societies. The study found that governments in the two countries strengthened community participation in protected area-based tourism through the formation of conservancies and Village Natural Resources Committees (VNRCs). This has enhanced local communities' capacity in conservation and tourism initiatives. VNRCs and conservancies promote sustainable practices, such as planting household woodlots. Protected area-based tourism supports the protection of both natural and cultural heritage. The contribution of protected area-based tourism to SDG 11, target 4, has been discussed in detail under tourism's contribution to SDGs 14 and 15. Local communities play a diverse and significant role in protected area tourism and conservation, actively engaging in multiple initiatives. Their contributions, from guiding visitors and hosting homestays to promoting cultural heritage and sustainable practices, enhance the tourism experience while supporting the sustainability of cultural and natural resources.



Similar findings were found at Etosha National Park. The park integrates tourism with community development and sustainable economic growth.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the role of protected area-based tourism in achieving the SDGs in southern Africa. The study has demonstrated that tourism practiced in protected areas significantly contributes to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by advancing economic, environmental, and social sustainability. Economically, tourism has supported infrastructure, education, healthcare, and employment. Thus, tourism reduces poverty and inequalities, thereby aligning with SDGs 1, 8, and 10. Further, tourism contributes to environmental sustainability through the conservation of terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, climate change mitigation, and community-based natural resource management initiatives. Accordingly, tourism contributes to environmental sustainability related to SDGs 13, 14, and 15. From the social sustainability perspective, the parks support SDGs 4, 5, and 11 by promoting education, advancing gender equality, and preserving cultural and natural heritage. To strengthen the contribution of protected areas tourism to SDGs, the study recommends enhanced community involvement, inclusive employment opportunities, increased education and awareness programmes, and stronger public-private partnerships. Further, the study stresses the need for government commitment, cultural heritage preservation, and effective communication strategies, which are essential for maximising local benefits. By integrating these measures, the two countries can ensure that protected area-based tourism continues to foster sustainable livelihoods while safeguarding ecosystems.

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