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Tourists' Perceptions of Ecotourism: A Case Study of Waterberg Plateau Park, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Objective – This study investigates tourists' perceptions of ecotourism at Waterberg Plateau Park in Namibia, a destination noted for its biodiversity and conservation commitment (Kasiringua, E., Proches, C., & Kopij, 2020). Despite its increasing popularity, there is a lack of research on visitor perceptions and tourism statistics (Baporikar, 2022). According to (Harianto, Y., Walid Masruri, M., Winarno, H., Tsani, I., & Santoso, 2020) Understanding these perceptions is crucial for effective park management and conservation efforts.

Methodology – A quantitative approach was utilised, combining surveys, observations, and content analysis to gather data on respondents' perceptions of ecotourism settings. The quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Findings – The findings aimed to enhance the ecotourism experience at Waterberg Plateau Park and contribute to the development of sustainable tourism.

Novelty – This paper explores tourists' perceptions within the specific context of Waterberg Plateau Park, a unique ecotourism destination in Namibia. While ecotourism studies have been conducted globally, this research fills a gap by addressing how tourists perceive and interact with a less-explored African ecotourism site. It offers fresh insights into the factors influencing visitor satisfaction, highlighting key aspects such as cultural expectations, environmental awareness, and the influence of local amenities. This study contributes to a localized perspective on ecotourism that can be applied to similar destinations in sub-Saharan Africa.

Type of Paper: Empirical

JEL Classification: Z32, Q01, Q26, Q53, Q57.

Keywords: Conservation, Ecotourism, Tourist Motivation, Tourist Perception, Sustainability, Community Involvement, Visitor Experiences

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1. Introduction

The focus of ecotourism is on the natural environment. Ecotourism involves responsible tourist mobilities to nature-sensitive destinations, while supporting the well-being of the local communities and promoting visitor awareness of nature conservation (Junus, M., Wibowo, R. A., Sudarmiatin, W., & Dwi, 2020).

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Therefore, the motivation for writing this paper stems from the growing significance of ecotourism in promoting environmental sustainability while also supporting local economies. As ecotourism continues to expand globally, understanding tourists' perceptions becomes crucial for enhancing the effectiveness and appeal of these destinations. Waterberg Plateau Park in Namibia is a prime example of a unique ecotourism destination, offering rich biodiversity and a rich cultural heritage. However, the success of ecotourism is deeply influenced by how visitors perceive and engage with the destination. This paper aimed to fill a research gap by examining the perceptions of tourists visiting Waterberg Plateau Park, providing insights into their experiences, expectations, and the factors that influence their overall satisfaction. The findings can help guide policymakers, conservationists, and tourism operators in enhancing the park's ecotourism strategies and ensuring its long-term sustainability while benefiting local communities.

2. Literature Review

Ecotourism emerged in the 1980s as a sustainable tourism practice, rapidly becoming one of the fastest-growing sectors, with an annual growth rate of 5%. Initially encompassing all tourism related to natural environments, ecotourism emphasizes environmentally sustainable behaviors and the shared responsibility of all participants (Ren et al., 2021). The importance of natural areas in managing stress and promoting mental health has gained attention, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chi & Pham, 2024). In Namibia, tourism is a key economic sector, supported by various conservation models that integrate private ranchers, agencies, and local communities. These models provide valuable insights for other regions, like the Great Plains (Nieland, 2017).

The literature review focuses on several key themes relevant to this research, including the conceptual framework of ecotourism, tourists' motivations, the ecological significance of ecotourism, and factors influencing decision-making.

Ecotourism is defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and supports local communities, while also promoting education and interpretation (Constantin et al., 2021); (Jayasekara et al., 2024). This approach integrates conservation efforts with sustainable travel practices.

Motivations for travel stem from psychological needs that create a desire for balance, often addressed through ecotourism experiences (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021). Tourists in this sector are not homogeneous; their motivations vary widely, including physical activity, learning about nature, and connecting with like-minded individuals. Ecotourists tend to prioritise environmentally conscious activities and experiences that contribute to sustainability (Carvache-Franco et al., 2023). Their desire for authentic experiences often includes supporting conservation efforts and exploring both natural and cultural sites (Rivera, M., Weaver, D., & Lawton, 2022) (Wang, H., & Chen, 2021).

Tourist perception is crucial for the sustainability of ecotourism destinations. Increased environmental awareness has led to the emergence of green marketing and purchasing perceptions and behaviour (Lee & Jan 2018). Tourists' intentions, such as willingness to return or recommend destinations, are key indicators of satisfaction. According to Teeroovengadum, (2019), a willingness to pay premium prices for eco-friendly services also highlights the importance of perceived value in ecotourism. Additionally, the rise of mass tourism influences consumer choices, pushing destinations to cater to health-conscious travelers (Nwokorie & Adeniyi, 2020). Tourist perceptions play a crucial role in shaping the overall success of a destination and its offerings. Understanding how these perceptions are formed can provide valuable insights for tourism stakeholders aiming to enhance visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

According to (Sana et al., 2023), it is essential for service providers to understand factors influencing tourist experiences in ecotourism settings. (Chan, 2021) suggests that experiences can be categorised into

four realms: entertainment, education, escapist, and esthetics. Each realm contributes differently to how tourists perceive their journey and the destination. For instance, educational experiences, such as guided tours that explain local ecological practices, can significantly enhance a tourist's understanding and appreciation of ecotourism (Moscardo, 2008). (Quynh et al., 2021) indicated that positive experiences correlate with increased profitability, customer retention, and loyalty. Destination operators must create positive experiences to avoid negative feedback that could harm their appeal (Li et al., 2021). Quality experiences in ecotourism often arise from well-maintained environments, effective interpretive programs, and meaningful local interactions. Guided tours and educational activities enhance visitors' understanding and appreciation of ecological and cultural heritage (Garcia & Marquez, 2023) (Lee & Jan, 2020).

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach to collect data, utilising surveys, observations, and content analysis. The observational methods provided an in-depth understanding of ecotourism dynamics within Waterberg Plateau Park, while content analysis was applied to review relevant literature on ecotourism.

3.1 Study Area

Waterberg Plateau Park, located in north-central Namibia, is a protected area spanning approximately 405 square kilometers. It is renowned for its natural and historical significance, boasting geological formations that date back 300 to 500 million years. The park is a key destination for ecotourism in Namibia, offering accommodation, food, and beverages, as well as guided tours, and showcasing a diverse ecosystem that includes over 500 species of flowering plants and 25 animal species, such as the endangered black rhino and both white and black rhinos.

3.2 Population and Sampling

A simple random sampling method was used to select tourists visiting Waterberg Plateau Park during the data collection period. According to the Namibian Wildlife Resorts (NWR) tourist statistics report for the period 2022-2023, the average occupancy rate is 315 tourists per week. Due to time constraints and the study period, only 12% of the 315-occupancy rate was utilized as the sample population for this study. This approach minimized sampling bias, allowing for the results to be generalized to the broader tourist population.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected from tourists through surveys, as detailed in Table 3.3.1 below:

Table 1. Research Instruments Distribution

Respondent	Questionnaire respondents	Total sample
Tourists	39	39

Source: Own Compilation

The survey consisted of closed-ended questions designed to capture quantitative data on tourists' demographics, perceptions, preferences, experiences, and satisfaction levels. Additionally, observational

techniques were employed to assess tourist behaviors during various activities within the park, providing a complementary layer of insight into the survey data.

3.4 Data Analysis and Findings

This study analysed tourist perceptions, understanding, and experiences of ecotourism at Waterberg Plateau Park using quantitative methods. SPSS was used to conduct hypothesis testing, which helped identify the underlying factors influencing tourists' perceptions and behaviors regarding ecotourism activities in the park (Pallant, 2020).

3.4.1 The Socio-Demographic Profile

The socio-demographic profile of respondents provides a vivid snapshot of the sample population. A notable majority are female, with a strong representation of young adults aged 18-25, reflecting the perspectives of a dynamic youth demographic. Many participants possess advanced degrees, particularly at the postgraduate level, indicating a highly educated group. Additionally, a significant proportion are self-employed, showcasing their entrepreneurial spirit. The diversity of nationalities enriches the study, with Namibians making up the largest group, followed closely by Dutch and French respondents, creating a rich tapestry of cultural backgrounds as shown in the table below

Table 2: Socio-Demographic characteristics of the Respondents

Variables	Description	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	16	41.03
	Female	23	58.97
Age	18-25	18	46.15
	26-35	9	23.08
	36-45	2	5.13
	46+	10	25.64
Qualification	High School Certificate	10	25.64
	Tertiary Diploma	9	23.07
	Tertiary Degree	3	7.69
	Tertiary Postgraduate and above	11	28.21
	Other	6	15.38
Occupation	Unemployed	4	10.27
	Retired	3	7.69
	Self Employed	28	71.79
	Other	4	10.26
Nationality	Namibian	10	25.64
	Angolan	1	2.56
	South African	6	15.38
	German	5	12.82
	Netherlands	8	20.51
	Italian	1	2.56
	French	8	20.51

Source: Own Compilation

3.4.2 Understanding and Experiences of Ecotourism

In ecotourism settings, the concrete experience of interacting with nature, such as hiking through a protected area or participating in wildlife conservation activities, provides a tangible foundation for learning. These experiences allow tourists to observe ecosystems directly and understand the importance of biodiversity and conservation efforts (Moscardo, 2008). The reflective observation phase is critical, as it encourages visitors to consider the implications of their experiences for their understanding of ecotourism.

The data in Table 3 below reveal that a majority (69.23%) of respondents rated their understanding of ecotourism positively (combining "Good" and "Very Good"), while about one-third (30.77%) expressed uncertainty. Importantly, no respondents rated their understanding as poor or very poor, with the highest concentration (51.28%) falling into the "Good" category.

Table 3: Rate the understanding of ecotourism and experience of activities

Variables	Very Poor %	Poor %	Unsure %	Good %	Very Good %
Understanding of ecotourism	0	0	30.77	51.28	17.95
Experience of activities in Waterberg Plateau Park	0	0	10.26	76.92	12.82

Source: Own Compilation

Furthermore, the gap between tourist expectations and actual experiences is a crucial factor in shaping perceptions. Satisfaction occurs when expectations are met or exceeded. Conversely, negative experiences, whether due to service failures, unmet expectations, or poor environmental conditions, can lead to disillusionment and unfavorable perceptions (Baker & Crompton, 2000). For example, if a tourist arrives at an ecotourism site expecting pristine natural environments but encounters pollution or overcrowding, their perception of that site will likely diminish. In contrast, positive experiences, such as engaging with knowledgeable local guides or witnessing wildlife in its natural habitat, can enhance perceptions and lead to strong emotional connections with the destination (Weber, 2001). An overwhelming majority (89.74%) rated their experience positively, combining "Good" and "Very Good" ratings. Only 10.26% were unsure about their experience. No negative experiences were reported, as evidenced by the absence of "Poor" or "Very Poor" ratings. The "Good" category dominates, accounting for 76.92% of responses, as shown in Table 3 above. Overall, both aspects show predominantly positive ratings, with no negative ratings in either category.

People are more decisive about their experience at the park (only 10.26% unsure) compared to their understanding of ecotourism (30.77% unsure). The high concentration of "Good" ratings (76.92%) for activities suggests consistent quality of experience at the park.

The more distributed ratings for understanding of ecotourism indicate varying levels of knowledge about ecological tourism concepts. The presence of “Unsure” responses in both categories suggests a need for enhanced educational programs about ecotourism and improved communication about the park’s activities and their ecological significance. This data suggests that while Waterberg Plateau Park consistently delivers a good visitor experience, there may be opportunities to enhance visitors' understanding of ecotourism principles through educational initiatives and awareness programs.

Table 4: Understanding ecotourism levels across different Nationalities

Case Processing Summary						
	Validity		Cases missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Understanding Ecotourism Nationality	39	29.80%	92	70.20%	131.00%	100.00%

Source: Own Compilation

Table 5: Nationality Cross tabulation

Understanding ecotourism* Nationality Crosstabulation										
Nationality			Namibian	Angolan	French	South African	Netherlands	Italian	German	Total
Understanding ecotourism	Three	Count	4	1	2	1	4	0	0	12
		% within Nationalit	40.00%	100.00%	25.00%	16.70%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	30.80%
	Four	Count	3	0	6	4	2	1	4	20
		% within Nationality	30.00%	0.00%	75.00%	66.70%	25.00%	100.00%	80.00%	51.30%
	Five	Count	3	0	0	1	2	0	1	7
		% within Nationalit	30.00%	0.00%	0.00%	16.70%	25.00%	0.00%	20.00%	17.90%
Total		Count	10	1	8	6	8	1	5	39
		%within Nationalit	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: Own Compilation

A significant number of respondents across various nationalities rated their understanding of ecotourism as a solid "Four," reflecting a commendable level of self-assessed knowledge. Notably, French tourists stand out, with an impressive 75% confidently rating their understanding at this level.

This insight underscores the strong awareness and appreciation for ecotourism among these travelers, highlighting their readiness to engage deeply with their experiences. Understanding levels vary significantly among different nationalities, with certain groups, such as Angolans and Italians, represented by a limited number of respondents. This scarcity can lead to skewed interpretations, highlighting the need for a more balanced representation to ensure accurate insights for all nationalities involved.

Table 6 and 7 below provides an indication that Waterberg is effectively establishing itself as a premier ecotourism destination in various national markets. However, there is a significant opportunity to enhance communication and marketing strategies specifically targeting French tourists, who exhibit a notable level of uncertainty compared to other nationalities. By refining our approach to this key demographic, researchers aim to unlock the full potential of Waterberg's appeal and drive greater engagement from French travelers through the study recommendations.

Table 6: Ecotourism destination across different Nationalities

Case Processing Summary						
	Validity		Cases missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Is Waterberg an Ecotourism destination* Nationality	39	29.80%	92	70.20%	131.00%	100.00%

Source: Own Compilation

Table 7: Nationality Crosstabulation

Is Waterberg Plateau Park and Ecotourism Destination										
Nationality			Namibian	Angolan	French	South African	Netherlands	Italian	German	Total
Is Waterberg Plateau Park an Ecotourism Destination	Yes	Count	9	1	5	6	7	1	5	34
		% within Nationalit	90.0%	100.0%	62.5%	100.0%	87.5%	100.0%	100.0%	87.2%
	No	Count	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
		% within Nationality	10.0%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	2.6%
	Maybe	Count	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	4
		% within Nationalit	0.00%	0.00%	3.75%	0.00%	12.5%	0.00%	0.00%	10.3%
Total		Count	10	1	8	6	8	1	5	39
		%within Nationalit	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00%	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %

Source: Own Compilation

According to the data collected Waterberg Plateau Park stands out as a premier ecotourism destination, a fact that resonates strongly across various nationalities.

While French tourists expressed a wider range of opinions, reflecting a notable level of uncertainty, the majority of visitors from other countries exhibit unwavering confidence in Waterberg's exceptional appeal as an ecotourism hotspot. This collective endorsement underscores Waterberg's unique allure, making it a must-visit for those seeking an authentic and enriching nature experience.

The infrastructure of an ecotourism site, including accommodations, visitor centers, and interpretive trails, is fundamental to shaping perceptions. Well-designed facilities can enhance the visitor experience by providing comfort, convenience, and educational opportunities. According to (Beeco & Brown, 2013), quality infrastructure positively influences tourists' satisfaction and perception of the site's management and

commitment to sustainability. The eco-friendly facilities data in table 8 reveals a compelling landscape of sustainable amenities that resonate with environmentally conscious respondents.

The findings highlight a robust array of eco-friendly features that tourists expect at Waterberg Plateau Park, particularly in renewable energy solutions such as solar panels, outdoor engagement opportunities like camping sites, and effective waste management systems with recyclable bins, as indicated in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Eco-friendly facilities of the Respondents

Variables	**Description**	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**
Eco-friendly facilities	Solar panels	22	56.41
	Wellness/Fitness Centre	3	7.69
	Information Centre	9	23.08
	Cultural Souvenir Shop	1	2.56
	Internet connectivity	5	12.82
	Camping site	25	64.10
	Private cabins/Tents	5	12.82
	Biodegradable materials	19	48.72
	Recyclable dustbins	21	53.85
	Local Cuisine Restaurant	12	30.77
	Warning and Instruction signs	14	35.90
	Other specify	0	0

Source: Own Compilation

Additionally, there is a commendable need and commitment to using biodegradable materials and championing local cuisine. However, the scarcity of wellness centers, reliable internet connectivity, and cultural souvenir shops at Waterberg Plateau Park, as indicated in Table 9, points to significant opportunities for growth and enhancement in eco-friendly offerings. By addressing these gaps, this study can elevate the overall experience and satisfaction of eco-conscious consumers, paving the way for a more sustainable future.

The findings of this study align seamlessly with the research conducted by (Constantin et al., 2021), which explored the connections between visitor profiles, satisfaction levels, and intentions to revisit a Romanian ecotourism destination.

Their study highlights the significance of various attributes, including attractions, information services, and amenities, in shaping visitor experiences. This consistency highlights the significance of these factors in enhancing visitor satisfaction and promoting repeat visits, thereby making a compelling case for further investment in these areas.

Further insights from the data on facilities at Waterberg Plateau Park reveal a treasured trove of amenities and attractions designed to enhance the visitor experience. The study findings showed that the park excels in offering a diverse range of outdoor activities, from exhilarating camping adventures to captivating animal viewing opportunities, alongside rich cultural experiences that showcase heritage sites and tantalizing local cuisine. However, the current landscape highlights a gap in eco-friendly practices, with limited wellness centers and a scarcity of biodegradable materials and recyclable dustbins. By addressing these areas for improvement, Waterberg Plateau Park can elevate its commitment to sustainability, ensuring a more enriching experience for nature lovers and eco-conscious travelers alike.

Table 9: Facilities experienced at Waterberg Plateau Park

Variables	**Description**	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**
Facilities experienced at Waterberg Plateau Park	Solar panels	8	20.51
	Wellness/Fitness Centre	0	0
	Information Centre	14	35.90
	Cultural Souvenir Shop	1	2.56
	Internet connectivity	17	43.59
	Camping site	29	74.36
	Private cabins/Tents	8	20.51
	Biodegradable materials	2	5.13
	Recyclable dustbins	7	17.95
	Local Cuisine Restaurant	15	38.46
	Warning and Instruction signs	16	41.03
	Animal viewing	17	43.59
	Heritage site	18	46.15

Source: Own Compilation

These findings resonate strongly with (Thompson, 2022) research, which highlights the captivating allure of ecotourism and emphasizes the critical need to evaluate the competitive landscape for ecotourism development in the Philippines. This alignment underscores the importance of a thorough analysis to harness the full potential of ecotourism, ensuring sustainable growth and a vibrant future for the tourism industry

4. Conclusion

This study explored tourist perceptions, understanding, and experiences related to ecotourism at Waterberg Plateau Park through a quantitative lens, utilizing surveys, observations, and statistical analysis. In conclusion, the facilities at ecotourism sites play a pivotal role in shaping tourist perceptions. From infrastructure that enhances comfort and education to sustainable practices and recreational opportunities, each facility contributes to the overall visitor experience. By effectively integrating educational components, promoting sustainable practices, and fostering community engagement, ecotourism facilities can enhance tourists' understanding and appreciation of ecological principles.

Waterberg Plateau Park has strong potential as an ecotourism destination; however, it requires addressing knowledge and perception gaps across different visitor demographics. Tailoring strategies to meet the unique preferences of diverse tourists can enhance their experience and solidify the park's status as a top ecotourism site in Namibia. The paper recommends implementing biodegradable materials, installing renewable energy solutions, improving signage visibility, establishing a wellness center, incorporating local cuisine, providing ecotourism training for staff, and upgrading road infrastructure to improve sustainability and visitor satisfaction. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of facility-based experiences on tourists' perceptions and attitudes toward sustainability. Gaining insights into how these perceptions lead to actionable commitments to conservation can inform the development of effective and sustainable ecotourism strategies.

5. Research

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