

# ‘Greening’ Gweru urban tourist lodges: low levels of ecoliteracy, green awareness and actions

D. K. Nyahunzvi  
Midland State University  
P. Bag 9055  
Gweru  
Zimbabwe  
[nyahunzvidk@msu.ac.zw](mailto:nyahunzvidk@msu.ac.zw)

## Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of an exploratory study on the level of environmental awareness and engagement among Gweru urban lodges. The study’s data collection instruments were a survey questionnaire, personal observations, follow-up interviews and document analysis. The key finding of the study was that there were low levels of ecoliteracy and environmental awareness and consequently, limited ‘green actions’ undertaken by lodge managers. It was also found that not a single tourist lodge had a formal written environmental policy whilst the lodge managers expressed a need for the provision of information and education around green tourism. A conclusion is reached that this study’s findings are consistent with studies elsewhere that bemoan the limited nature of green actions undertaken by tourism Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs). The study ends with recommendations and an indication of future research priorities.

**Key words:** SMMEs, lodges, green tourism, environmental management, sustainable development

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is widely regarded as the only prudent approach to the numerous environmental problems that confront society today. Indeed, Vernon *et al.*, (2003: 49) posit that “the attainment of sustainable development has emerged as one of the main challenges for society and the economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” The construct of sustainable development postulates that development interventions should aim to preserve both intra- and intergenerational equity of access to resources (World Economic Commission on Development (WECD), 1987); a proposition that “has been endorsed by many organizations concerned with tourism, such as the World Travel and Tourism (WTTC), the World Tourism Organization...” (Vernon *et al.*, 2003: 51). Following on this, there have been varied attempts across the globe to operationalise the sustainable development concept and hence realize a new form of tourism. Numerous terms such as sustainable tourism, intelligent tourism, soft tourism, green tourism and ecotourism, to name a few, have been coined to describe this new form of tourism. This study will hereinafter, use the term ‘green tourism’ to refer to environmentally-friendly tourism i.e. tourism that does not result in negative socio-cultural and environmental externalities but rather enhances environmental resources and humanity’s well-being. It is worth noting that the premise of the argument for green tourism is appealing in that environmental resources

underpin most tourist attractions hence it seems only prudent that care must be taken to ensure that the resources are not damaged or irretrievably lost (Youell, 1997).

At a tourism industry level, there have been a proliferation of green voluntary initiatives or environmental accreditation schemes such as the International Hotels Environmental Initiative (IHEI) and the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) that seek to encourage the adoption of the green tourism concept and to ultimately transform tourism businesses into 'green businesses' (Middleton & Hawkins, 1998; Vernon *et al.*, 2003). In this study, a green business is defined as "one that deliberately chooses to incorporate environmental and sustainable development considerations into its business plan and operations" (Peattie, 2005: 25). In this connection, it has been found that the need to ensure legal compliance and to achieve cost savings are the major drivers of greening initiatives among most large tourism businesses (Goodall, 1995; Knowles *et al.*, 1999). In addition, it has been observed that hotel chains have been at the forefront of implementing the sustainable development concept because they possess the requisite financial resources and expertise (Hobson & Essex, 2001).

However, green voluntary schemes such as the IHEI and the GTBS often exclude the small independent properties mainly because of resource constraints and the high levels of fragmentation of the subsector (Vernon *et al.*, 2003). The exclusion of the small independent properties from such green voluntary initiatives means that a big challenge remains to bring these properties on board as they are the largest subsector of the industry (Morrison, 1998; Vernon *et al.*, 2003). To illustrate, Nazmiye (2007: 1124) notes that "studies in Australia and the United Kingdom have found that between 95-99% of all tourism enterprises are small independently owned firms" whilst in the European Union, 96% of the 1.3 million hotel and restaurants are small firms that employ less than nine employees (Smeral, 1998).

Elsewhere, Horobin & Long (1996) report low levels of awareness of the need to embark on green initiatives among small firm owners. It has also been identified that stakeholder pressure determines levels of adoption of green policies with smaller firms exhibiting limited environmental performance (Ytterhus & Aasebo, 1996). Furthermore, it has been observed that many small firms exhibit low levels of ecoliteracy and perceive environmental responsibility as peripheral to their core business (Tilley, 2000; Chan, 2011). The above examples point to some of the barriers that have been noted as affecting the large-scale adoption of green policies among tourism Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs).

This study extends the above cited literature by critically examining the level of awareness and adoption of green tourism policies among Gweru urban lodges. In doing so, this study shifts attention to an oft-neglected sector of the tourism industry; most of the extant literature focuses on the environmental performance of large tourism businesses especially hotel chains (Vernon *et al.*, 2003; Mensah, 2006; Nazmiye, 2007). On this note, Vernon *et al.*, (2003: 52) make the telling observation that "only a small number of studies have attempted to examine the responses of micro-businesses (fewer than ten employees) to environmental sustainability." It is worth noting that Gweru urban lodges are independently-owned properties run by either individuals or families that cater for a range of accommodation and food catering options from the budget to the premium market. To illustrate, in terms of pricing the budget lodges charge on average US\$50 per night per person, bed only whilst up to US\$150 is charged in the more spacious and luxurious lodges. The other aim of this study was to explore the challenges faced by Gweru urban lodges in implementing green tourism and to suggest possible solutions.

The study setting, Gweru city is located in the central part of Zimbabwe but outside the country's main international tourist destinations (Figure 1). To illustrate the later, Gweru city is situated in the Midlands Province some 500 kilometers from the country's main tourist destinations namely, Victoria Falls and Kariba. Thus, Gweru urban lodges mainly cater for the domestic tourist market. In this connection, the study therefore shifts attention to spatial locations (i.e. non-main international tourist destinations) that rarely receive attention in the international literature, yet are equally important, if sustainable tourism to be realized. Indeed, this is true if we consider that sustainable development should be every organization's concern. In terms of structure, after this introduction, the next section provides a review of the literature. Thereafter, the methodological procedures adopted are articulated followed by the presentation and analysis of the findings in the penultimate section. The final section provides concluding remarks and the paper's recommendations in terms of both theory and practice.

**Figure 1** Map showing the relative location of GweruSource: <http://www.google.co.zw/imgres?imgurl=http://www.southern.africa.arroukatchee.fr/maps/zimbabwe-map.>



## LITERATURE REVIEW

As alluded to above, since the 1990s a lot of attention has been directed towards the response of large tourism businesses to the calls for sustainable development (Vernon *et al.*, 2003;

Viviers, 2009). As Vernon *et al.*, (2003: 50) observe: "...micro-businesses... have largely been ignored in the research agenda." This situation is counterproductive "given the preponderance of owner-managed enterprises in tourism and the potential damage they may inflict on the environment" (Sampaio *et al.*, 2011: 1). It has also been observed that the adoption of Environmental Management Systems (EMS) and environmental accreditation schemes such as the IHEI and GTBS that offer awards on the attainment of pre-determined environmental targets to tourism operators have been the main response by large tourism businesses (Chan, 2011). However, these schemes require businesses to pay annual and audit fees that are usually beyond the reach of small independent operators (Vernon *et al.*, 2003; Chan, 2011). In addition, SMMEs may lack the skills required to implement the schemes (Clover & Darroch, 2005).

Generally, studies on tourism SMMEs' response to calls for sustainable green operations have been limited (Viviers, 2009; Chan, 2011) whilst this sparse literature is dominated by accounts that establish that owners/managers are reluctant to 'green' their operations (Hendry, 1992; Welford, 1994; Palmer, 2000). In this respect, Horobin & Long's (1996) study of small tourism operators in the United Kingdom found low levels of awareness of the possible response strategies the operators could adopt and low motivation to act. In their study of the hospitality sector in Guernsey, Stabler & Goodall (1997) observed low levels of adoption of formal

environmental management tools that were traceable to the owners' belief that the operations had negligible impact on the environment. In a similar study, Hjalager (1998) traced the low levels of environmental management in Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom's accommodation sector to *inter alia*, the lack of robust environmental regulation and the absence of taxation incentives and investment subsidies. In addition, it was also established that only a small number of SMMEs' operators undertook 'green actions' and most did so in an *ad hoc* manner (Hjalager, 1998). Interestingly, a more recent study by Dahlmann *et al.*, (2008) found that more United Kingdom firms, including SMMEs were greening their operations and that this was driven by the need to achieve cost savings and to ensure compliance with environmental legislation.

It is worth noting that in most of the developed country context, several tools that tourism micro-businesses can use to green their operations have been designed (Vernon *et al.*, 2003). These include self-help guides, checklists, codes of conduct or good practice and awards that have been developed by local authorities, tourist associations and agencies (WTTC, 1995; English Tourism Council (ETC), 2000). In spite of these developments, the uptake of the green tourism concept has been limited owing to a range of factors. For instance, Hobson & Essex (2001) found that few lodging properties in a British city had heard of the Green Audit Kit (a self-help guide) or purchased it. In this connection, a steadily growing literature since the 1990s has attempted to understand the barriers faced by tourism SMMEs prompted largely by the realization that "improved understanding of the barriers to the adoption of sustainable practices within [SMMEs] is critical to extending the concept within the tourism industry" (Vernon *et al.*, 2003: 53)

With regards to the developing country context, research on tourism SMMEs' response to the calls for sustainable development has not been forthcoming. Namziye's (2007) study of the environmental performance among SMMEs in one of Turkey's main tourist destinations represents an exception. This study found a shallow integration of environmental management principles in business operations and facility managers who had "never thought of monitoring their water consumption... ..none of the facilities use modern energy or water saving measures..." (Namziye, 2007: 1127) The above was attributed to *inter alia*, the reality that small hotels in Turkey lacked the business culture and financial resources needed to implement environmental management programmes with, for example, "none of the managers... ..[had] an interest in or [possessed] technical knowledge about environmental management" (Namziye, 2007: 1129).

Of much relevance to this paper, the review of the international literature revealed very little research efforts directed at understanding how tourism lodging companies have responded to the sustainable development theme across Africa. In this respect, only Mensah's (2006) study of environmental management practices of hotels in the Greater Accra Region (GAR) of Ghana was found. Mensah (2006) found that the implementation of environmental management principles differed with the size of the hotel with smaller hotels believing that environmental management should be the priority of larger hotels. In a similar study, which however, was not focused solely on the tourism sector, Viviers (2009: 30) found that SMMEs owners/managers in the Nelson Mandela bay region, South Africa, were "becoming more aware of the impact of their actions on the natural environment and engaged in actions to reduce electricity, ...recycle paper and replace hazardous materials."

Findings from the survey questionnaire also revealed that most of the SMMEs owners/managers viewed environmental management as a costly undertaking and considered tax incentives, stricter environmental legislation and enforcement as measures that could lead to the widespread adoption of green practices in South Africa (Viviers, 2009). Here, it is interesting to note that the South African context provides several incentives for firms to adopt environmental management programmes such as increasing pressure from banks and consumers, the availability of environmental tax incentives, a reconfigured and better enforced environmental legislation, the availability of carbon credits market and the growing number of 'green' funds (Shange, 2008).

With specific reference to the present study's broader setting, namely, Zimbabwe, there has not been as much attempt to understand how not only tourism SMMEs but also large tourism businesses are responding to the calls for sustainable development. This study is poised to address this research gap. It is worth noting that Zimbabwe represents an excellent study area because of the unique political and macroeconomic instability that affected the country from 2000 to 2008 after the launch of the country's controversial land reform programme. The country experienced a raft of problems including hyperinflation, brain drain, disinvestment, fuel, foreign currency and food shortages, *albeit*, the formation of a Government of National Unity in early 2009 between the country's two main political parties resulted in a significant recovery of the economy.

Thus, Zimbabwe presents a tourism destination that is yet to recover from the peak international tourism arrivals of some 2 million tourists that was reached in 1999; during the decade long political and economic meltdown, tourist arrivals sharply declined. In this connection, this study can be interpreted as drawing attention to how

tourism SMMEs in 'crisis destinations' are negotiating calls for sustainable development interventions.

## METHODS

This qualitative and exploratory study utilized a survey questionnaire as its main data collection instrument in line with some of the prior research (e.g. Viviers, 2009; Chan, 2011). The survey was conducted from early May to the end of June 2013 and involved distributing questionnaires to the ten registered Gweru urban lodges as well as undertaking direct observation of the facilities and activities at the lodges. The lodges as with any tourism businesses are licensed and registered by the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA); the National Tourism Organization (NTO). The questionnaire targeted lodge managers because they were responsible for the planning and implementation of various aspects of the lodges including an environmental management strategy.

The questionnaire was developed in line with the literature review that was conducted. The first section of the survey captured the respondent's profiles including professional qualifications, age and working experience. The second section of the survey that consisted of both open and closed questions solicited information regarding the green actions the lodge managers had implemented including the benefits derived and challenges faced. The green actions that were implemented were confined to four categories namely pollution prevention, waste management, water and energy management in line with prior research (e.g. Viviers, 2009) so as to facilitate cross-case analysis.

This section also sought to understand managers' perceptions around how the

adoption of the green tourism concept could be enhanced. To address the problems of low response rate associated with surveys, the questionnaires were personally delivered to the lodge managers; an opportunity that was also utilized to carefully explain the nature and purpose of the study. Of the ten questionnaires that were distributed, all were completed and retrieved from the managers although this took a lot of persuasion, several visits and phone calls. The data obtained from the survey was complimented by personal observations, follow-up interviews and document analysis.

To illustrate, where respondents indicated certain ideas that seemed vague, the researcher made follow-up telephonic or face-to face interviews and visual inspections of the facilities. The managers' responses were closely studied to reveal the main themes that emerged as reflected in the next section.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Profile of respondents

As indicated in Table 1, all the lodge managers were males reflecting the male-dominated nature of managerial positions in Zimbabwe's tourism and hospitality sector. Nearly all the managers (80%) held a post-secondary school certificate or diploma whilst 20% had a university degree. The majority of the lodges employed less than fifty employees (90%) with at least three lodges having a staff compliment of less than five employees.

All the managers except two had between five and ten years working experience at the lodges and all the managers fell above the 30 year age-group.

**Table 1.** Selected indicators of the profile of the respondents

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	10	100
Female	0	0
<b>Highest level of education</b>		
Post-secondary certificate or diploma	8	80
University degree	2	20
<b>Age-group</b>		
Less than 20 years	0	0
20-29	0	0
30-39	4	40
40-49	4	40
50-59	2	20
Above 60		
<b>Managers' work experience</b>		
Less than 1 year	0	0
1 > 5 years	2	20
5 > 10 years	6	60
More than 10 years	2	20
<b>Number of full-time employees</b>		
1 – 4 employees (micro)	3	30
5 – 50 employees (small)	6	60
51-100 employees (medium)	1	10

### 1. The level of environmental awareness and adoption of environmental measures

Interactions with the lodge managers revealed that the majority were not aware of the concept of green tourism and related terms such as ecotourism and sustainable development. The managers also perceived the lodges as having limited impact on the environment because of the small-scale nature of their operations. This finding corresponds with Vernon *et al.*, (2003) study in Caradon District Council, United Kingdom, which reported limited awareness of both the individual and collective environmental impacts of tourism small businesses among managers. Pressed further on whether the lodges had a formal environmental strategy, most managers indicated that all they did at the lodges was to ensure that they complied with the country's environmental laws and the Gweru city by-laws in their efforts to survive

what they deemed a difficult trading environment. Thus, awareness that the use of energy-efficient bulbs that most lodges used was also part of a larger global effort to save resources was unknown to most managers, for instance. The managers were also of the view that green tourism was a new concept that had not been properly explained. To resolve this, the managers expected local universities to provide educational and awareness seminars.

The lodge managers indicated that the measures they implemented to save energy included using energy-efficient bulbs and ensuring that electrical gadgets that were not in use were switched off. It must be noted that the main motivation here was to control the rising energy

costs rather than a concern for the environment as similarly found by Namziye's (2007) study in Turkey. Interestingly, some managers stated that in

the event of the frequent power outages in Zimbabwe they resorted to petrol or diesel powered generators; non-green forms of energy. On the same note, it was interesting to note that despite the abundance of sunshine in Zimbabwe, none of the lodges used the cheaper and 'greener' option of solar energy. Visual inspection of the lodges revealed that there were no efforts to educate the lodges' guests of the need to conserve energy or water through for example posters, intranet and notice boards as was the case with the employees. Furthermore, although the managers revealed that though they faced escalating energy bills, they had not made energy audits of their properties.

In terms of water conservation, most managers indicated that they attended to leaks and repaired them as quickly as possible and watered gardens at night. The findings here should be treated with caution as the Gweru City Council was failing to provide enough supplies of water hence much of the supplies were provided often in the late evening. Interestingly, some managers erroneously viewed their use of boreholes as a water conservation technique. It should further be noted that most lodges were forced to construct boreholes because of the erratic supplies of water provided by the Gweru City Council. Other measures that were mentioned included the provision of more guestrooms with showers instead of bathtubs and ensuring that vacated rooms' water taps were closed. Overall, it was discovered that there was no clear strategy to reduce water consumption and to audit its usage as was similarly found by Viviers' (2009) study of some SMMEs in South Africa.

The lodge managers further indicated that to prevent pollution they buried organic material in the ground around the lodges' open spaces and did not burn rubbish as dictated by Zimbabwe's Environmental Management Agency (EMA). EMA is a

parastatal that falls under the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resource Management and is charged with ensuring the sustainable utilization of Zimbabwe's environmental resources including instituting criminal proceedings for environmental crimes.

The managers further observed that efforts to dispose refuse were compromised by the erratic performance of the Gweru City Council's refuse collection department. It was reported that the city council usually collected the refuse after several weeks due to resource constraints. The large-scale context of this development is that following the post-2000 economic meltdown in Zimbabwe, many urban local authorities struggle to provide the requisite services (Gukurume, 2011). Here, it is interesting to note that Vernon *et al.*, (2003) study also found dissatisfaction with the Caradon District Council's performance among tourism micro-business owners. Other measures mentioned by the lodge managers included the donation of kitchen food waste to adjoining residential properties and sending some of the waste matter to a local glass recycling company.

In sum, Gweru urban lodge managers reported minimal measures that had been undertaken in terms of both pollution and solid waste management. This contrasts with the evidence emerging from studies elsewhere. For example, Viviers' (2009) study found a range of measures that were implemented by some SMMEs in South Africa. These included using plant insecticides to reduce reliance on insecticides, the use of lift clubs by employees to reduce the companies' carbon footprint, buying products in returnable or reusable or recyclable containers, buying products that use less packaging and reusing the reverse side of scrap paper and drafts of internal memos as well as adopting double-sided printing.



## 2. Perceived benefits and challenges

Most of the managers struggled to pinpoint the exact benefits the lodges derived from the limited environmental measures they had implemented.

A few managers saw themselves as having generated more customers than their competitors and attained an improved reputation although they could not provide tangible evidence in follow-up interviews. The rest of the managers either left the question unanswered as did most on how the lodges promoted green practices among their employees. Interestingly, all the lodge managers indicated that it was expensive for the lodge to undertake green business practices; a situation that was said to be worsened by the unavailability of low interest loans, the absence of tax incentives and the generally depressed trading environment obtaining in Zimbabwe. Similar perceptions were recorded in Revell's (2002) study in Japan and Viviers' (2009) study in South Africa, to cite a few.

The lodge managers further indicated that with most businesses in Zimbabwe struggling to survive and with unemployment at around 80% as well as most civil servants earning below the poverty datum line of US\$600, green tourism was a low priority. In addition, it was indicated that none of the lodges' customers had expressed environmental concerns or demands for green practices whilst the lodges' labor force had limited green tourism knowledge. The former sentiment gives credence to the observation that consumer pressure is one of the factors that determine the adoption of the green tourism concept among businesses (Ytterhus & Aasebo, 1996).

Despite the perceived peripheral role of the green tourism concept among the surveyed lodges, the lodge managers were of the view that the existing environmental

legislation needed to be modified and enforced more effectively to control unsustainable practices. In addition, the government was perceived as a critical institution that should encourage the adoption of green practices among the lodges as similarly reported by several studies (e.g. Clemens, 2006; Shange, 2008; Viviers, 2009).

The suggested measures included the provision of environmental awareness programmes, the institution of periodic inspections of lodges, the reduction of duty on equipment meant to facilitate green practices and the awarding of tax incentives. One manager also suggested that lodge owners' commitment towards the adoption of green practices should be made a mandatory part of the business licensing requirements. This could be achieved by making it compulsory for all the lodges to join an approved green accreditation scheme before an operating license is awarded.

It should be noted that at the time of the present study, licensing requirements by the Gweru City Council and other relevant organizations such as the ZTA did not have any requirements encouraging the adoption of green practices. It was further pointed out that a major barrier was that most lodge owners and managers had not received any (eco) tourism training whilst sourcing for the relevant expertise was beyond the reach of the lodges. Finally, in light of the above, it was not surprising that not a single lodge had a formal written environmental management policy. Elsewhere, it is instructive that several studies (e.g. Hobson & Essex, 2001; Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003; Vernon *et al.*, 2003; Chan, 2011) report that many tourism SMMEs lack a coherent environmental strategy and a formal environmental policy.

## CONCLUSION

It was quiet evident that Gweru urban lodge managers took limited action towards implementing the green tourism concept due to a combination of internal and external barriers. Chief among the internal barriers was the perception that such an undertaking was costly and that it required to be implemented by experts. There was also limited ecoliteracy on the part of the lodge managers as well as an institutional environment that was not actively involved in supporting and encouraging the adoption of green tourism. In light of the above, the study's findings are consistent with several studies elsewhere (e.g. Hjalager, 1998; Vernon *et al.*, 2003; Chan, 2011) that bemoan the *ad hoc* and limited nature of green actions undertaken by tourism SMMEs.

It is also worth noting that Zimbabwe is a signatory to many international environmental treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity but is yet to establish proper mechanisms to ensure that these conventions are implemented. On this note, it should be emphasized that EMA is constrained by financial constraints (see e.g. The Herald, 2010) and limited legislative 'teeth' to either ensure that environmental polluters actually pay for their crimes or to impose custodial sentences. For instance, many urban local authorities in Zimbabwe received hefty fines of up to US\$15000 by EMA for pollution but failed to pay because of resource-constraints whilst the former has no legal options to enforce that the councils pay (see e.g. ZimEye, 2012). Thus, it is argued here that the broader context in which Gweru urban lodges operate needs to be addressed (e.g. the almost dysfunctional city council and a weak environmental law enforcement regime) in order to make the adoption of green tourism practices by tourism firms effective and meaningful.

This case study exposes an array of challenges and pitfalls that have to be tackled to ensure that sustainable development is realized. In this connection, there has to be *inter alia*, a supporting institutional environment that provides incentives such as tax breaks and a reconfiguration and stricter enforcement of the relevant environmental and licensing legislation by the Zimbabwean authorities. Furthermore, the provision of environmental education to lodge managers and employees as well as in the curricula of tertiary institutions seems vital in making lodges understand their individual and collective impact on the environment.

Much more importantly, it appears that lodge managers need to understand that the country's harsh trading environment should compel them towards adopting green tourism. This is because adopting green tourism practices provides opportunities to cut costs and improve the lodges' profitability, for instance. If this is understood, lodge managers might use the internet to access the freely available 'green' self-help guides as well as begin to look beyond their company gates for symbiotic green partnerships with suppliers, guests and local authorities, for instance.

In terms of future research, efforts must be directed at finding solutions to the wide range of internal and external barriers to the adoption of the green tourism concept identified in this study. Such efforts might lead to the development of environmental measures or accreditation schemes that are sensitive to the unique characteristics of tourism SMMEs operating in a developing country context or in tourism 'crisis destinations' as is the case with Zimbabwe. This study was confined to Gweru urban lodges hence there is need to extend the geographic scope of the study and unravel how other tourism SMMEs are responding to the calls for sustainable development.

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