



COVID-19 impacts on tourism: Southern Africa's experiences

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EDITORIAL



COVID-19 impacts on tourism: Southern Africa's experiences

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has negatively affected the tourism sector globally. Its impacts left destinations, organisations and communities in a distressed state, a situation which led to calls for new approaches that ensure the resilience, continuity and growth of distressed tourist destinations in a crisis environment. Most of the Southern African destinations have been in a distressed state due to the long-existing social, economic and political challenges. High urbanisation, environmental injustices, inequalities, social ills, corruption and unbalanced development policies are manifestations of these challenges. These were exacerbated by COVID-19. In Southern African countries afflicted by the pandemic, there is a high level of economic uncertainty, with sectors like tourism particularly hard hit. Nevertheless, the region has a number of positive tourism developments. The region hosts vast flora and fauna, including the big five wildlife, two of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Victoria Falls and Table Mountain. The region is a key player in the global tourism sector, from transportation, accommodation, and restaurants to recreational facilities. A significant number of people in the region depend on the sector for their livelihood. To examine COVID's impact on tourism, this issue brings together five dynamic articles and one book review on the impact of COVID-19 in Southern Africa. To set the tone of the current issue, at the onset of COVID-19 in the region, Musavengane, Leonard and Mureyani, in their article titled 'Doing tourism in Southern Africa amid the coronavirus pandemic: Navigating political, socio-economic and environmental inequalities', provided pointers on possible areas that were to be affected heavily by COVID-19. Developing strategies for recovering from the damages caused by the pandemic will require a clear understanding of the relationship between the coronavirus and tourism. This article focused on five themes: (1) market potential, (2) health-related considerations, (3) social impacts, (4) environmental impacts, and (5) issues related to politics that could impact on regional integration. It concluded by posing critical questions for further research. For example, can Africa develop or provide medical solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic? What is the role of faith-based solutions to COVID-19 and economic growth? Is domestic tourism the best avenue to start opening up the tourism sector? What are Africans' perceptions of foreign tourists in light of an imported or foreign disease? What is the way forward to promote good tourism governance in a crisis? Would virtual tourism be beneficial to the industry?

To answer the question on virtual tourism, in their article, 'Application of virtual reality technologies in the Comrades Marathon as a response to COVID-19 pandemic', Woyo and Nyamande identified the challenges and analysed the runners' readiness to participate in virtual marathons post-COVID-19. The results' analysis showed that participants are keen to have the Comrades Marathon race organised in a hybrid model: in-person and virtually. However, a number of challenges of using virtual reality technology were identified. These challenges chiefly include poor connectivity, limited Wi-Fi access, high cost of data and electricity load shedding. As a result, the adoption of VR technologies will never fully replicate the tourist experience in physical environments. Nevertheless, the article recommends that government and private sectors increase investment in ICT infrastructure as a way to address the challenges of connectivity. Moreover, COVID-19 affected the accommodation sub-sector as demonstrated by Sucheran in her article, 'The COVID-19 pandemic and guesthouses in South Africa: Economic impacts and recovery measures'. It specifically assessed the economic impacts of the pandemic on


guesthouses in South Africa. The article revealed that the main challenge for guesthouse was how to meet the fixed costs as this is the main cost for the accommodation sector. Continual lockdowns and travel restrictions brought uncertainty to guest house owners. The article emphasized that COVID-19 could have a significant impact on the accommodation sector long term in the form of reduced employment opportunities and potential closures of guest houses. Nevertheless, the article showed that there are high chances for guest houses to be fully functional. To generate new business opportunities, the article recommends restructuring and diversifying business models by deconstructing and reconstructing existing products. As a result of the complexities surrounding COVID-19, the article suggests that the recovery period for guest houses will be longer than for other pandemics or disasters.

In Southern Africa, nature is an integral part of tourism. National parks, game reserves and surrounding communities were not spared by COVID-19. Hambira, Lesego and Pagiwa in their article, 'Botswana nature-based tourism and COVID-19: Transformational implications for the future', demonstrated the impact of the pandemic on society, the economy and the environment. Furthermore, the paper revealed that COVID-19 rendered the hunting quotas unmarketable, adding to the usual challenges caused by the pandemic, including losing employees and not having enough income to meet operational costs. It also showed that due to restricted movements, wildlife strayed to areas in which it was not found before, increasing chances of Human Wildlife Conflict. In the same vein, Mudzengi, Gandiwa, Muboko and Mutanga in their article titled 'Innovative community ecotourism coping and recovery strategies to COVID-19 pandemic shocks: The case of Mahenye', showcased four main COVID-19 shocks. The proposed management framework for community ecotourism to cope and recover from COVID-19 shocks suggested short term strategies grouped in three themes; aggressive marketing, capacity building and development of an international hunting code. Kamuti concludes the issue with his book review titled 'Counting the cost of COVID-19 on the global tourism industry' and notes the presentation of the hard facts about the pandemic and tourism, interpreting them within the context of the various international and national processes involved. Overall, the articles presented in this volume present a rich analysis of the state of tourism in Southern Africa due to the pandemic, and provide some insightful recommendations and ways forward in terms of navigating the pandemic's impacts. We hope this volume will spark further debate and research about COVID-19's impacts on tourism in Southern Africa and how the continent may further navigate political, socio-economic and environmental inequalities to deal with the crisis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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