

The development of a universal accessibility framework for National Parks in Zimbabwe and South Africa

Doctor of Philosophy

North West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Oliver Chikuta

Department of Tourism, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Email: chikutao@msu.ac.zw

Supervisor:

Lindie du Plessis

Tourism Department, North West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa

Email: Lindie.DuPlessis@nwu.ac.za

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Background

Access to tourism and recreation is a constitutional right as prescribed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006, Articles 3, 9&30). Just like anybody else in society, people with disabilities (PwDs) are entitled to entertainment, recreation and tourism, among other things. Prevailing western social norms and values recognise travel and recreation as a right and the contribution of tourism to the well-being of the disabled is well known in the developed world (Yates, 2007:34; Yau, Mckercher & Packer, (2004). Studies have suggested that travel companies have a social responsibility to meet the needs of the disabled since travel has been identified as an important aspect of the quality of life of the disabled (Darcy, 2002; Kinney & Coyle, 1992; Prost, 1992). It is however very unfortunate that in many countries, PwDs suffer discrimination, segregation and all sorts of social exclusion (Darcy, 1998; Burnett & Bender-Baker, 2001).

Providing opportunities and access to people with disabilities is not only an ethical issue, but also a business opportunity for operators in the tourism sector just like it is for any other sector (United Nations, 2009; APEC, 2003). In fact, the social model of disability argues that PwDs do not like to be treated as recipients of charity but as equals with the so called able-bodied, thus they are willing to pay as much for their holidays as their able bodied counterparts (Oliver, 1996:21). Furthermore, PwDs are not the weaker species, who should engage in the more docile and passive tourism, they are also interested in partaking in the challenging forms of tourism, especially outdoor adventure. According to Zeller (2008:15) and Jaquette (2005), PwDs feel much more satisfied when they visit natural areas and at times they engage in more challenging wilderness activities than the able bodied do. The latter could support the notion that it makes business sense to make tourism accessible to PwDs.

With the ongoing economic downturn globally, tourism destinations need to 'think outside the box' to utilize niche markets. One such market is that of PwDs, (Eichhorn & Buhalis, 2007). Further, the fact that nature-based tourism is the primary product for Southern Africa means that relegating PwDs could be forfeiting a potentially sustainable niche market for future competitive advantage. Despite the growing disability market, most countries and tourism service providers have still not yet recognized the importance of harnessing the market.

It is evident that PwDs and the aged are a growing market for nature based tourism (Zeller, 2008) and that the potential contribution of this market to tourism and national economies is enormous (Darcy, 2002). The mere fact that nature-based tourism (particularly national parks) is Southern Africa's major tourist draw card makes this even more pronounced (Snyman, 2000). Among Southern African countries, South Africa and Zimbabwe are among the best in terms of natural endowment, and have some of the largest and most renowned national parks. These countries, however, could be losing a great deal of tourism receipts and arrivals due to lack of efforts to make the destinations more universally accessible. This study therefore will significantly contribute to product development with the disabled tourist in mind.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of this research is to develop a universal accessibility framework for national parks in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. The achievement of the aim relies on the following objectives;

- To analyse the literature on universal accessibility in tourism. The theoretical framework in this literature study will be strongly oriented to product development as a management function. At the end of the day, the concepts of universal accessibility should be embraced in the development of new nature-based tourism products.
- To analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis) of national parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe in terms of universal accessibility.
- To collect data on the expectations of tourist with disabilities and the views of park management on the universal accessibility of Zimbabwe and South Africa's national parks.
- To develop a framework that will be used to draft a policy on universal accessibility of parks.

ENVISAGED CONTRIBUTION

From a literature perspective, the researcher envisages to contribute by coming up with more tourism oriented and park specific universal accessibility standards for Southern Africa. The contextual flair for Africa, specifically Southern Africa is not very loud in the existing literature so far. One would therefore want to know how southern African countries fair with regards to universal accessibility given the fact that nature-based tourism is Africa's major tourist draw card.

From a methodological point of view, this research will take a two-pronged approach to establishing a universal accessibility framework. Unlike many researches that are either supply oriented or demand oriented, this research will establish the actual expectations of tourists with disabilities and the views of the park authorities. This two-sided approach is expected to help in coming up with a mutually acceptable policy framework. Further, the research is going to take a cross dimensional approach, which cuts across several embodiments of disability. This is a rare approach and a great contribution since the majority of studies concentrate on one particular dimension of disability.

Practically, this research will culminate in the development of a framework for universal accessibility of national parks which may be used to develop a policy for universal accessibility of parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Literature to date has guidelines here and there developed to cater for specific areas e.g. hotels; open area recreation, and at times, specific national parks. This research will however provide guidelines in terms of universal accessibility of national parks especially from both the demand and supply perspective. The framework will inform policy on product development in national parks.

APPROACH/METHODOLOGY

The following approach was adopted in this study;

Literature Study

Related literature was analysed in order to establish the existing concepts, strategies and models that relate to universal accessibility in general and access to nature based tourism in particular. The key words that were used in the literature search include 'universal accessibility', 'national parks', 'nature-based tourism', 'universal design' and 'people with disabilities'.

Empirical Survey:

Research Design and Data collection method

This research will be descriptive in the sense that the researcher would like to obtain a greater understanding of the perceptions of tourists with disabilities as well as park management regarding the universal accessibility of Zimbabwe and South Africa's national parks. The research is two-pronged in that it looks at both the demand side and supply side of tourism. It intends to establish what these

tourists with disability regard as accessible rather than relying on the definition of architects and technocrats. The study is unique in the sense that it also will also consider the views of national parks management regarding universal accessibility. This way, the research therefore becomes primarily qualitative in nature. A self- administered questionnaire, in-depth interviews and personal observations will be used to gather data for this research. The questionnaire shall be both electronic and manual in order to cater for both online and physically present respondents. The researcher also intends to attend at least one workshop or conference where tourists with disabilities can be found in their numbers and conduct focus group discussions.

Sampling

The targeted population in this research are tourists with disabilities whose interest is in nature-based tourism activities. A non-probability sampling approach will be used. The researcher will use the databases of tourists with disabilities from Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA) and South Africa National Parks (SANParks). Respondents will also be sought from organisations that deal with disability issues in South Africa, Zimbabwe and other parts of the world. Further, apart from those that have visited Zimbabwe and South Africa, other respondents will be sought online using social forums for tourists with disabilities. Since the total population is not known numerically, sampling shall be based on the guidelines set by Krejcie and Morgan (1970:608) who recommended a sample size of 384 for a population of 1000 000.

From the supply side, the research will look at park management where in-depth interviews will be conducted with the park managers. These interviews are expected to be conducted at the Hwange National Park, Gonarezhou National Park, Mana Pools and Victoria Falls National Parks and the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority headquarters in Harare, Zimbabwe. On the South African side Kruger National Park, Addo National Park, Kgalagadi and Table Moutains National parks, and the SANParks headquarters in Pretoria, South Africa will be used. The targeted respondents include the Business Development Managers and other senior managers responsible for tourism in the national parks. The sampling method here will primarily be purposive since judgement will be used to get a representative response (Jennings 2001:139). This method is also effective, convenient and economic.

Development of questionnaire

Building on and adding to Scandic's Accessibility Standards for hotels and the Parks and Benefits (2007) research, and further literature study, a detailed questionnaire was developed to harness the views and perceptions of tourists with disabilities in as far as accessibility of Zimbabwe and South Africa's national parks is concerned. The Sandic's questionnaire was made for hotel accessibility so it is not fully applicable to parks. It however provides important clues and guidelines for developing the questionnaire for parks accessibility. Parks and Benefits also came up with a master guideline for accessibility of the Baltic Sea region and their work provided a significant input in developing the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data will be collected and computed by the researcher, processed by a statistician of Statistical Services at North-West University and interpreted by the researcher. Descriptive statistics will be used focusing on the graphical display of frequency tables. A factor analysis will be done on universal accessibility variables to determine those that cut across all embodiments and structural equation modelling will be done to investigate the relationships between the variables and to develop the framework.

Key Findings

The research is still in progress and by the time of the conference, detailed results will be ready for presentation.

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