

# Stakeholder perceptions of the potentials for rural tourism development around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park in South Africa

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**Abstract** | This study aimed to assess the potentials of rural tourism development in the communities surrounding Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park (HiP), in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It adopted a qualitative research method based on the explorative and interpretive paradigms. Interview guides were used to conduct semi-structured interviews with the participants. Twenty (20) semi-structured interviews with HiP management staff and owners/managers of tourism businesses within this area were conducted. The study used content analysis to analyse the data collected. SWOT analysis was performed to determine whether HiP and surrounding communities have potentials for rural tourism development. The study revealed lots of strengths and opportunities, which could serve as platform for rural tourism development, however the management of weaknesses and threats is essential for success. It was noted that the development of human resources would be required for the successful development of rural tourism in this area. Emphasis was also made on the area's infrastructural development, which is an important physical resource for any tourism development. The study recommends leadership commitment in driving the process of rural tourism development through capacity building.

**Keywords** | Rural tourism resources, rural tourism capabilities, rural tourism strategies, rural tourism activities, South Africa

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is widely regarded as an important means of promoting economic development, particularly in underdeveloped rural areas with few other options for transformation (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2022; Laut, Sugiharti & Panjawa, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019; Wirahayu, Sumarmi, Arinta, Islam, & Kurniawati, 2022). Rural tourism is an exciting industry that has the potential to benefit both urban and rural development. Randelli and Martellozzo (2019) posit that rural tourism has expanded in many rural areas around the world, and it is now a consistent driver of rural social and economic development. According to Wijijayanti, Agustina, Winarno, Istanti and Dharma (2020), rural tourism destinations contribute to community empowerment and long-term local economic development. Rural tourism destinations are being developed using the potential of villages as a tourism product attribute (Wijijayanti et al. 2020).

Despite the increasing research on rural tourism, to the authors' best knowledge only few studies have examined rural tourism potential in the areas surrounding main tourism attractions that are located in rural areas. Cánoves, Villarino, Priestley and Blanco (2004) state that for the rural tourism sector to thrive, local inhabitants must become entrepreneurs, and develop and promote their own enterprises. The COVID-19 pandemic which started in the year 2020 has negatively impacted the tourism industry (see Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Shen, Pan & Chen, 2020; Susilawati, Falefi & Purwoko, 2020; Ulak, 2020), and caused the industry to slow down. As this pandemic is currently losing its stronghold, tourism businesses are beginning to flourish again, and domestic tourism which draws tourists to rural destinations has emerged once again as an important facet of tourism.

Puška, Stojanović and Maksimović (2019) posit that a place's capacity to draw and accommodate tourists is referred to as its tourism poten-

tial and advised that it is vital to initially assess the potential for tourism before making investment decisions. According to Ezeuduji (2015a, b), addressing possibilities and risks associated with local communities involved in rural development in sub-Saharan Africa necessitates periodic assessments of local communities' strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats. The literature review conducted prior to this study revealed that many scholars have shown interest concerning aspects of rural tourism (Gao & Wu, 2017; Guzman-Parra, Quintana-García, Benavides-Velasco & Vila-Oblitas, 2015; Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012; Vitasurya, 2016; Zhang, 2012). Nonetheless, despite the increasing research interest on rural tourism recently (e.g., Corina, 2018; Ghasemi & Hamzah, 2014; Osman & Sentosa, 2013; Strydom, Mangope & Henama, 2018; Wijijayanti et al., 2020), few studies have evaluated rural tourism potential in the communities surrounding a protected area (such as Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park (HiP) in South Africa). This study therefore will contribute to the body of knowledge on rural tourism by assessing the potentials for rural tourism development in the communities around HiP, a protected area known for its history in conservation efforts in South Africa (study aim). The study aim is streamlined into four objectives, those of assessing rural tourism resources, knowledge and capabilities, strategies, and activities. The study will further perform SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, based on data collected, to determine whether HiP and surrounding communities have potentials for rural tourism development.

## 2. Theoretical background

According to Streimikiene and Bilan (2015), there are many theories of rural tourism development emanating from the supply and demand mar-

ket forces. The main demand factors for rural tourism development are hinged on the consumer motives. The local tourism resources and capabilities and the application of the evolutionary approach in rural tourism development are the main supply factors of rural tourism development. This is in line with the proposition made by scholars such as Cawley and Gillmor (2008), Ezeuduji (2015a, b), Ezeuduji (2017), Ezeuduji and Rid (2011), and McComb, Boyd and Boluk (2017). The evolutionary approach of tourism development, as described by Streimikiene and Bilan (2015) posit that rural tourism development is a process, hence such tourism development should be viewed as a natural and gradual process of change. This process concept supports the better understanding of the dynamism of rural tourism development. Major theories and models of tourism development are based on an evolutionary view of the development of tourism and the variables influencing it, i.e., different elements contribute to the successful development of tourism in rural regions at various stages of development (Streimikiene & Bilan, 2015). Scholars have begun to recognise rural tourism as an effective development strategy for rural areas in both developing and developed countries (Alp & Bilgin, 2019; Mitchell Shannon, 2018; Ryu, Roy, Kim & Ryu, 2020). Many recent studies (such as Nicolaiades, 2020; Ramaano, 2021; Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019) show that numerous potential advantages of rural tourism, including increased employment, population expansion, and social advancement, lead to the socioeconomic rehabilitation of rural areas. Hence it is pertinent to identify the main factors that can have an impact on the nature of changes in rural tourism development (which Ezeuduji, 2017 stressed upon), and the choice of the suitable methods for their identification and evaluation is essential. This theoretical knowledge is crucial to this study's constructs.

Based on the literature reviewed (Amoako, Obuobisa-Darko & Ohene Marfo, 2022; Farmaki, 2019; Freeman, Phillips & Sisodia, 2020; Moneva,

Bonilla-Priego & Ortas, 2020; Nazneen, Xu & Ud Din, 2021), researchers acknowledge the importance of stakeholder engagement (emanating from stakeholder theory) in rural tourism development. The stakeholder theory suggests that individuals or groups that have a stake in the organisation be considered in its strategic management. Stakeholder theory is important in this study to gain a deeper insight regarding the perspectives of key stakeholders for rural tourism development in the study area. These selected stakeholders are HiP management staff and owners/managers of tourism businesses within this area. These stakeholders have the necessary knowledge to objectively inform the study on the potential of rural tourism development in the study area.

### 3. Literature review

Governments have long pursued tourism as a means of growth in rural regions (McComb, Boyd & Boluk, 2017). Noticeably, rural areas are undergoing significant socio-economic changes where rural livelihoods need to be transformed and diversified. Tourism is therefore increasingly being used as an instrument for local growth with the objective of facilitating community involvement and inclusion in tourism planning and activities (Lenaio & Saarinen, 2015). Kumar (2019) argues that in every country, rural tourism plays an important role in relieving stress, which is primarily felt by city dwellers. According to Paresishvili, Kvaratskhelia, and Mirzaeva (2017), rural tourism is a tourism sector that utilises natural, cultural, historical and other resources as well as rural settlements' peculiarities for the growth of complicated tourism products. Lane and Kastenholtz (2015) further explicate that rural tourism has a socio-economic element that provides jobs for the rural population in the service sector, promotes economic development of promising areas and rural settlements, and

thereby keeps local residents permanently at home. Major cultural attractions (e.g., arts, social activities) also play a key role in rural tourism and allow communities to boost revenue (Rahmani, Hajari, Karimian & Hajilo, 2013). Key resources like the flora and fauna have been identified as attracting visitors to a tourist destination (Chin, Lo, Songan, & Nair, 2014). According to Polo and Frias (2010), the growth of rural tourism can function as an agent for rural conversion and the creation of tiny new companies and new jobs, thus creating an inflow of funds and liquidity into societies. However, due to unskilled tourist planners and lack of sophisticated techniques and facilities in many rural regions, many tourism resources have been demolished (Zhou, 2018). Previous scholars have agreed on the primary aspects that must be included in local growth, such as finances, technology, build-up ability, trade, policy coherence, partnerships, information, tracking and accountability (Radović, Košić, & Demirović, 2018; Radović, Petrović, Demirović Bajrami, Radovanović & Vuković, 2020; Stafford-Smith, Griggs, Gaffney, Ullah, Reyers, Kanie, & O'Connell, 2017). Hence, the ability of entrepreneurs to sustainably use local material and intangible resources determines the possibility for rural tourism growth (Yachin & Ioannides, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that residents' lack of awareness and information prevents community involvement in tourism development (Cheng, Wu, Wang & Wu, 2019; Marzuki, Hay, & James, 2012). Rasoolimanesh, Md Noor, Schuberth and Jaafar (2019) refer to awareness as to keeping up to date on news and information about tourism development; whereas knowledge refers to residents having a deep understanding of tourism management, their community, and how they can become involved and participate in the tourism development process. A destination must be known to its locals to ensure that tourist attractions and amenities that create a sustainable tourism atmosphere are supported (Asmelash & Ku-

mar, 2019). The findings of the study conducted by Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar and Tangit (2018) indicate that the absence of understanding and skill is a major constraint on community participation in tourism. The study further reveal that local residents lack knowledge and skills in identifying opportunities associated with tourism, marketing, and how to run a business. Hence, rural enterprise development programmes must be accompanied by a capacity building and company training plan in order to encourage the development of rural regions (López & Pastor, 2015).

In many instances, the recurring constraints of rural tourism enterprise are insufficient financial resource support, lack of trained human resource as well as lack of knowledge and awareness. Inadequate resources, insufficient growth of facilities, inadequate advertising, political instability, illegal harvesting of resources, and deforestation are other entrepreneurial obstacles to rural tourism development (Ibimilua & Ibimilua 2015). Importantly, the pursuit of business strategies requires substantial financial capital (Kallmuenzer, Kraus, Peters, Steiner & Cheng, 2019), just like access to financial services but this has remained a challenge for small businesses in particular. The reason for such experience is also connected to rural tourism entrepreneurs' poor family background as they lack required collaterals, guarantors or assurances for obtaining loans from financial institutions.

The rural tourism literature further reveals that lack of education presents a major challenge to the tourism and hospitality industry in terms of human capital function in such industry (Vallabh & Mhlanga, 2015). For tourism's long-term development, the issue of human capital is crucial as the tourism sector provides staff of all ages with varying levels of skills. The development and delivery of a competitive tourist product and service are also based on the quality of available personnel, and their capability to respond to any changing requirements of consumers and reducing social problems such as poverty (Kimbu, Ngoasong,

Adeola & Afenyo-Agbe, 2019). According to Xue and Kerstetter (2019) the continued high growth in the demand for new skills in the workforce will prioritise education and training. It is therefore necessary to invest more in human capital for any tourism enterprise to succeed.

#### 4. Research design and methods

The HiP in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa lies to the west of the town of Mtubatuba and borders Hlabisa town in the east. These two towns are linked by a road which bisects the park through the section known as the Corridor. It can be accessed from the north via Hluhluwe town; from the south via Mtubatuba; and from the west through Ulundi (Hluhluwe Game Reserve, 2018). HiP is formerly known as the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve. The park has been proclaimed the oldest reserve in Africa. The size has been estimated to be 96000 hectares (i.e., 960 square kilometres), which is the same size as Netherlands Antilles. It was officially opened in 1895 as a park (Hluhluwe Game Reserve, 2018). In its proximity are key tourism sites such as iSimangaliso Wetland Park (a World Heritage Site) and St Lucia (with lots of tourism attractions and accommodation).

According to Patten and Newhart (2017) the basic elements of the scientific enterprise are research methods; they are the 'how' of systematic knowledge construction. This study aimed at assessing the potentials of rural tourism development in the communities around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park (HiP). This study is exploratory and interpretive, hence we employed qualitative research method to generate data. We adopted a non-probability sampling method (as the research population cannot be easily estimated) in a form of a purposive approach to select 20 participants. According to Andrade (2021), sample is described as purposive if it serves a purpose related to the study in question.

The results of a study using convenience and/or purposeful sampling can only be generalised to the (sub)population from which the sample was taken, not to the total population. This is true for this study which is area specific. Semi-structured interviews with park management staff (HiP) and managers of selected tourism businesses (significant industry players) surrounding the park were conducted. Semi-structured interviews offer in-depth information from several viewpoints about the qualities that communities near HiP need to have to support the growth of rural tourism. It was important to interview these stakeholders (apart from the residents themselves) to provide a more objective view of local capacity towards rural tourism development, as they have been doing their businesses within this locality. Variables that were used to guide interview data collection were taken from previous studies (such as Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011; Ezeuduji, 2015b; Kheiri & Nasihatkon, 2016; Phi, Dredge & Whitford, 2014; Rangus, Brumen, & Tople, 2018), and researchers' personal knowledge of the study area. Information collected during semi-structured interviews was recorded on audiotape (after getting necessary permission from the participants), and verbatim transcripts were prepared for data analysis.

Data analysis was manually performed on the verbatim transcripts using content analysis method (information generated is not too extensive, and local language was mostly used, which needs careful interpretation). Coding was done to generate themes and sub-themes from the research information, which are ultimately linked to the study objectives (see Table 3). It is assumed in this study, that the participation of seven (7) park managers and thirteen (13) local business owners/managers in individual interviews yields reliable data to address research objectives, as data saturation was reached at the seventh park manager and thirteenth business manager interviews. Rural tourism development outside the park has the potential to benefit from the multiplier effect of the tou-

rism activities in the park, as visitors to the park may likely want to visit the rural areas around the park if rural tourism activities are offered by the rural population. Tour operators, lodging establishments, and businesses that specialise in hand-crafts were among the tourism-related businesses that were being interviewed, using the same inter-

view guide/schedule. Frequency of participants' opinions was structured as 'very commonly recorded' (opinions recorded up to 5 times); 'commonly recorded' (opinions recorded 3 or 4 times); and 'not commonly recorded' (opinions recorded 1 or 2 times); and used in the subsequent discussion.

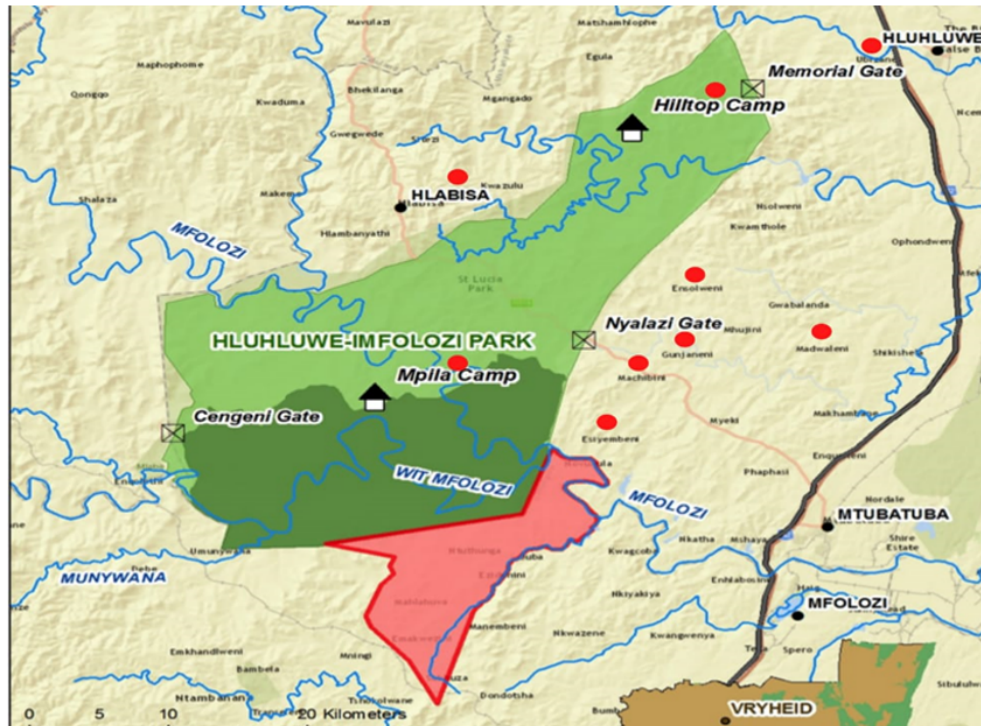


Figure 1 | The situation of Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park  
Source: Pinterest South Africa

## 5. Results and Discussion

The participants in this study were recruited from Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park management staff and tourism business owners/managers around the park. This section presents the demographic characteristics of the twenty (20) participants as indicated in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of seven (7) Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park management staff who participated in this study.

The participants were park managers and su-

Table 1 | Profile of the participants - Park management staff  
(N = 7)

Participant Number	Gender	Age range	Portfolio
01	Female	25-30	HIP Management
02	Female	40-45	HIP Management
03	Male	30-35	HIP Management
04	Male	25-30	HIP Management
05	Female	40-45	HIP Management
06	Male	45-50	HIP Management
07	Male	35-40	HIP Management

Source: Authors' compilation

pervisors from different departments inside the park. These departments include ecotourism, front desk, community conservation, and food and beverage. Four males and three females were interviewed.

Table 2 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the thirteen (13) tourism business owners and managers adjacent the park, who were interviewed. The Table shows that more business managers than business owners participated in this study because business owners were not always on their business premises. Seven males and six females were interviewed.

The main themes and sub-themes generated from this study are displayed in Table 3 and discussed subsequently.

**Table 2 | Profile of the participants - tourism business owners and managers (N = 13)**

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Portfolio</b>
<b>08</b>	Female	45-50	Tourism Business Manager
<b>09</b>	Female	35-40	Tourism Business Manager
<b>10</b>	Female	45-50	Tourism Business Manager
<b>11</b>	Female	50-55	Tourism Business owner
<b>12</b>	Female	40-45	Tourism Business owner
<b>13</b>	Female	35-40	Tourism Business Manager
<b>14</b>	Male	50-55	Tourism Business owner
<b>15</b>	Male	35-40	Tourism Business manager
<b>16</b>	Male	35-40	Tourism Business manager
<b>17</b>	Male	45-50	Tourism Business owner
<b>18</b>	Male	35-40	Tourism Business Manager
<b>19</b>	Male	30-35	Tourism Business Manager
<b>20</b>	Male	30-35	Tourism Business Manager

Source: Authors' compilation

**Table 3 | Main themes and sub-themes based on study objectives**

<b>Main themes</b>	<b>Sub-theme 1</b>	<b>Sub-theme 2</b>	<b>Sub-theme 3</b>	<b>Sub-theme 4</b>
<b>Main Theme 1 Reflects Objective 1 – rural tourism resources</b>	<i>Financial resources</i>	<i>Human resources /development</i>	<i>Physical resources/ infrastructure</i>	<i>Intangible resources (sanitation &amp; brand recognition)</i>
<b>Main Themes 2 Reflects Objective 2 – rural tourism knowledge and capabilities</b>	<i>Business education</i>	<i>Trust to cooperate with themselves</i>	<i>Experience/ know-how, e.g., people who have earlier operated tourism businesses</i>	
<b>Main Theme 3 Reflects Objective 3 – rural tourism strategies</b>	<i>Training and development</i>	<i>Rural tourism cooperatives</i>	<i>Business plan in place/Securing funding to start business</i>	
<b>Main Theme 4 Reflects Objective 4 – rural tourism activities</b>	<i>Cultural activities (traditional dances, rural way of life, cuisine, hunting, etc.)</i>	<i>Arts and crafts</i>	<i>Tour guiding</i>	

Source: Authors' compilation

### Theme 1: Rural tourism resources

The participants were asked about the attributes of this study area (HiP), and what they think may attract tourists to visit. In this regard, both managers of Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park and owners/managers of tourism businesses around the park perceived this area as one of the resource-rich areas in the world, in terms of natural resources as well as cultural resources (very commonly recorded). This means that this area has the

basic requirement for rural tourism development. Some of their statements are hereunder presented.

“Most people come here to experience nature (nature reserves), big five and beautiful accommodation establishments (our chalets which are built in African style makes our tourists feel culturally involved)”. **(Male, HiP Manager)**.

“There is a variety of wild animals here

which other countries or places do not have. This is a place to be or a place to know if you are not a South African or even if you are from South Africa but from other provinces". **(Female, Tourism Business owner)**.

These statements are in line with the findings of Lane and Kastenholz (2015) who noted that rural tourism is a tourism sector that utilises natural, cultural, historical and other resources as well as rural settlements' characteristic for the growth of complicated tourism products. Rich natural resources may open up new business opportunities in rural communities. KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa is known to have rich natural, cultural, and historical resources on which tourism development is based (see also Ezeuduji & Nkosi, 2017).

#### *Sub-theme 1: Financial resources*

This sub-theme concerns finances, in terms of the financial challenges that rural tourism faced. HiP managers stated that as a park, they had ways of raising funds to assist in supporting local communities to start their businesses like cooperatives and other community-based projects (*commonly recorded*). It was found that the two lodges inside the park were owned by tribal leaders (Amakhosi) to support and have partnership with local communities. Money from the lodges went to the community, and the employees were from surrounding communities. Certain statements made by park managers are outlined here.

"We have two craft markets inside the park which are owned by the members of the communities surrounding the park, they come and exhibit their craft works to the tourists". **(Male, HiP Manager)**.

"We have something we call a community levy, a certain percentage of

the money generated from entrance fees goes to local communities to start their own businesses or whatever projects they want to be engaged in". **(Female, HiP Manager)**.

"Governments do not provide financial assistance, particularly to start-up businesses; I raised capital on my own and applied for bank loans several times without success.". **(Male, business owner)**.

Lack of finance is identified as one of the obstacles preventing success in rural tourism ventures around HiP. Tourism business owners and managers are concerned that it is difficult to raise funding for new ventures, let alone sustain them. To strengthen the capacity of the owners and managers to run their businesses effectively, recognize opportunities for diversification and expansion, and maintain financial records that can be used for additional financing in the future, Dodds and Galaski (2018) propose that funding ventures should be longer-term approaches to training. It is early the pursuit of business strategies requires substantial financial capital (Kallmuenzer et al., 2019), just like access to financial services but this has remained a challenge for small businesses in particular.

#### *Sub-theme 2: Human resources development*

Both local tourism businesses owners/ managers and HiP management staff agreed that a lot of education and training in tourism-related matters would be needed in order for the locals to gain required knowledge, which could translate into gaining interest about tourism and making a living with tourism (*very commonly recorded*). Some of their responses are presented here.

"Education and training can improve local's level of interest in tourism but to some of them because it all starts with passion first; people need to be

passionate about engaging in businesses. You can't just force education on them" **(Female, HiP Manager)**. "Education and training can actually assist them to be the ones that are creating employment instead of them looking for an employment from the park, they should be able to create their own facilities that will be sort of direct competition to the park itself." **(Female, Business owner)**.

These findings confirm Razzaq, Mohamad and Mustafad (2013) position that the primary difficulties preventing the rural population from participating actively and benefiting from tourism growth are due to human resource development. Training programmes allow people to strengthen their skills and develop their knowledge so that they can be able to welcome new trends in the tourism industry. This is in line with the submissions made by Ezeuduji (2017) regarding change management in rural tourism development, especially when local communities are transiting from their traditional livelihood earners to embark on rural tourism development.

#### *Sub-theme 3: Physical resources (Infrastructure)*

The participants mentioned that in terms of physical resources, this study area lacked access to basic infrastructure that includes roads and recreational facilities that could have formed the bases for rural tourism offerings (*commonly recorded*). Some of the responses received from the participants are presented below.

"In terms of physical resources, I can say that our area is not easily accessible due to poor quality of roads, most of our guests used to complain about it" **(Female, business manager)**. "This area is very beautiful in terms of natural and cultu-

ral resources, but it still lacks sub-attractions that will attract more tourists to visit the area, these can include centres for recreational activities and more accommodation establishments". **(Male, HiP manager)**.

This confirms the statement by Lane and Kas-tenholz (2015) who affirm that a fundamental issue for rural tourism development is a lack of control over necessary resources such as natural and man-made infrastructure. Infrastructure is a critical component of the tourism industry, and it plays an important role in its growth. This was also alluded to by Ezeuduji and Rid (2011), who conducted their study in rural Gambia.

#### *Sub-theme 4: Intangible resources (brand recognition, water and sanitation)*

Water and sanitation in and around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park remain a very big problem (*very commonly recorded*). Park managers unanimously raised their concerns about the shortage of clean water in the area, which they said can negatively influence this area's brand recognition (image) as a rural tourism destination. Some managers pointed out that:

"Our wastewater treatment infrastructure remains inadequate, water that we have is only for bathing, toilets and cleaning consumption, for clean drinking water one needs to go to the shops to buy. This is not good for the image of this area". **(Female, business manager)**.

"We pump water from the river (im-folozi river) using a generator, during dry seasons we find it very difficult to supply the whole park. It will be difficult to develop rural tourism here if nothing is done about this" **(Male, HiP manager)**.

This perspective affirms that having access to minimally adequate sanitation facilities is one of the factors that should be taken into consideration to promote the tourism industry, particularly in developing countries (Elysia & Wihadanto, 2020). The brand image of a tourism destination will be negatively impacted, if these essential requirements for tourism development are not addressed (Ezeudji & Nkosi, 2017).

## Theme 2: Rural tourism knowledge and capabilities

Ezeudji (2015a, b) asserts that developing rural tourism is a business process that requires rural communities to highlight their skills and knowledge necessary for the development of tourism. Communities around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park need to be equipped with necessary knowledge and skills so that they can be more prepared because the industry constantly needs up-to-date knowledge and new skills to meet changing tourism trends. The following sub-themes were derived from the knowledge and capability main theme.

### *Sub-theme 1: Lack of business education*

The tourism sector is routinely offered as an option to grow employment in South Africa. Yet, questions need to be asked about the nature of employment in tourism, the state of education, and skills training in the sector (Booyens, 2020). According to Ilban and Kaşlı (2015), education contributes significantly to economic growth by developing qualified workforce that industry and service sector need and by making employees more productive. With regard to business education, the study participants pointed out that there was a general lack of business education in the communities around the park. The following comments reflect on this argument:

“What I can say is that most locals lack

knowledge on how to operate businesses successfully which is a result of not having proper education. This make it difficult for a community member to start a business and to be able to manage it on their own successfully”. **(Male, Business manager).**

“People from those communities are not well educated on tourism and other business operations, although there is the youth population that is now starting to pop up. We are forced to employ people coming from faraway places, mostly in management positions”. **(Male, HiP Manager).**

Findings from the information given by park managers and business managers imply that there is a lot that need to be done in terms of educating locals about business operations (*very commonly recorded*). This is supported by Ejiofor and Elechi's (2012) view that education has a very important part to play in tourism development of any destination.

### *Sub-theme 2: Lack of trust to cooperate with themselves*

In this regard, the results from semi-structured interviews indicated absence of trust and cooperation among community members; and which had led to failure of many cooperatives in the community (*commonly recorded*).

A female HiP manager stated:

“There is some sort of a backpacker business by the gate that was funded by government, it was cooperatively owned by local residents, but it is no longer operating and now no one wants to be blamed for its failure” **(Female, HiP manager).**

According to Lane and Kastenholz (2015), rural tourism has involved numerous entrepreneurs across the world, working in relative isolation. This could be induced by the absence of trust among members of the society to collaborate (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

*Sub-theme 3: Lack of tourism business experience*

Results from semi-structured interviews indicated that local residents lacked relevant tourism experience that can help them support rural tourism development (*very commonly recorded*).

“Local communities do not have people who have operated tourism businesses or maybe who have experienced working in any tourism venture. The park provide training for them because we have lodges here in the park whereby we strictly employ local residents” **(Female, HiP manager)**.

“We do have locals working here but mostly in maintenance department because I find it hard to hire them reason being, they do not have required job experience and qualifications”. **(Male, business manager)**.

An essential component of effective and successful involvement in the tourism industry has always been having the necessary skills and employability qualities. As a result, in order for residents to successfully run rural tourism enterprises, they must have the necessary experience to suit the changing needs of the tourism industry. Xue and Kerstetter (2019) posit that the continued high growth in the demand for new skills in the workforce will prioritise education and training.

### Theme 3: Rural tourism strategies

This theme provides strategic means to develop rural tourism in the communities around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park, based on the study results. The following sub-theme discusses training and development as one of the strategies that may play a key role in developing rural tourism in this study area.

*Sub-theme 1: Training and development*

The results showed that emphasis should be placed on the importance of training and development as one of the strategies to welcome rural tourism development (*very commonly recorded*). Few of the participants' statements are presented hereunder:

“I think that series of training and educational courses should be offered to encourage new entrants to tourism and to help existing businesses”. **(Female, business owner)**. “Training can go a long way on helping people to improve the little knowledge that they have about tourism and in assisting them to welcome tourism development in a positive manner”. **(Female, HiP manager)**.

According to the findings of the study conducted by Purnomo, Rahayu, Riani, Suminah, and Udin (2020), one of the ways that should be employed for the development of tourism is the training and development of human resources to strengthen the role of village communities in managing village potentials. Also, the development and delivery of a competitive tourist product and service are also based on the quality of available personnel, and their capability to respond to any changing requirements of consumers and reducing social problems such as poverty (Kimbu, Ngoasong, Adeola, & Afenyo-Agbe, 2019).

### *Sub-theme 2: Rural tourism cooperatives*

It was observed that the launching of rural tourism cooperatives could be a great way of bringing local residents together and getting them involved in rural tourism activities that may take place in their area (very commonly recorded). This is also recorded by Ezeuduji (2017) in relation to change management in sub-Saharan Africa's rural tourism development.

A female business owner stated:

"Cooperatives can play a major self-help role in the areas surrounding Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park, particularly because they could provide opportunities for employment, education, potable water, improved sanitation, roads, and market access to the local residents. It is easy to voice out opinions and grievances if you are in groups that when the one is standing alone". **(Female, business owner)**.

### *Sub-theme3: Business plan*

One of the Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park managers emphasised the importance of putting a business plan together for local residents to gain attention from financial institutions and big companies (*not commonly recorded*).

"I think if local residents can put together a detailed business plan to submit to potential funding structures, an effort could be made because really, no one would just throw their money away without any assurance of profitably and long-term investment in black and white". **(Male, HiP manager)**.

In line with the above statement, Karlsson and Honig (2009) posit that business plans are widely used by new enterprises and are supported by diffe-

rent universities, governmental aid agencies, management advisers, and many more. They also claim that business plans are often regarded as very useful instruments, which should be updated and utilised more frequently. According to the findings of this study, local residents should therefore create business plans to help guide them, plan ahead, make important decisions, improve their chances of securing funding, and improve their overall chances of success. This requires collaboration with public institutions (such as nearby universities) and the private sector. Coaching on how to draw up a business plan and mentoring on how to run business operations are necessary for this development. The section that follows presents the findings of this study concerning rural tourism activities.

## **Theme 4: Rural tourism activities**

This section provides an overview of activities that can be presented by the local communities to visitors/tourists. There are numerous activities that can be presented by locals that can form part of their rural tourism development, as stated by this study's participants.

### *Sub-theme 1: Cultural activities*

In terms of cultural activities, the majority of the participants mentioned cultural dance, rural way of life, local cuisine and hunting as the most dominant cultural activities in the communities around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park. (*Very commonly recorded*).

One of the participants stated, "Local residents perform cultural dance (ingoma) for guests, to entertain them and teach them how Zulus dance, after performing they get tips/ money from guest as a sign of appreciation. They also learn our way of life, eat

our food and may want to go hunting”  
(**Female, HiP manager**).

This study proposes that cultural dance, local cuisine, and rural way of life in Zululand reflect traditions and lifestyle of local people and they may be used as part of the rural tourism activities to attract tourist visits. This confirms the assertion of Dimitrovski, Todorović and Valjarević, (2012) that rural tourism can be used as a geographical term to describe the cultural operations of rural groups. Ezeudji (2015a, b) also reiterates that these activities form the core part of rural tourism activities in sub-Saharan Africa.

#### *Sub-theme 2: Arts and crafts*

The results of the study conducted by Nyawo and Mubangizi (2015) have shown that the arts and crafts sector is vital for rural communities as it addresses some of the socioeconomic challenges that communities face and invaluable contributes to tourism. Communities around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park are richly blessed with their own indigenous arts and crafts, which could help them to progressively enhance their living. The production and sale of traditional arts and crafts is an important source of cash income for many people in the communities around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park (*very commonly recorded*).

A female HiP manager stated: “Most of the people from these communities are very talented in handicrafts products, and most of them depends on it to put food on the table” (**Female, HiP manager**).

A male business manager also mentioned that: “This community is very rich when it comes to the production of arts and crafts products. You will find men selling wood trays by the roads and women selling grass mats and other handicraft products to earn their

living” (**Male, business manager**).

The findings from the study conducted by Singalen and Simange (2018) suggest that travellers can interact directly with local residents to learn the process of making arts and crafts and local specialties (cuisine) as part of the culture and local wisdom. Particularly, rural tourism might open new markets for regional art. To entertain its visitors, the park, for instance, employs local singers, dancers, and performers. It also purchases local artwork to decorate its rooms and lobby areas. When visiting the park, many tourists also purchase local arts and crafts. Residents can take advantage of this to profit greatly from rural tourism.

#### *Sub-theme 3: Tour guiding*

According to Sezgin and Duz (2018) guided tours are popular for tourism markets and represent a significant portion of tourism activities. During the interviews, there was a mention of tour guiding businesses, which are not much dominant in this study area. One of the managers of HiP explained that tour guiding was one of the activities that were found in the area (*not commonly recorded*). Rural tourism development in this area can foster tour guiding businesses in the local communities, who may not only take tourists inside the park, but also around the local communities to learn rural way of life and be involved in rural activities.

“We have guided tours here inside the park where tour guides show tourist wild animals around the park, but also there is a tour guiding business outside the park that is owned by a black guy who used to bring tourist here from St Lucia and other tourist destinations for day visits”. (**Male, HiP manager**).

This statement confirms the position of Chan,

Hsu and Baum (2015) that the presence of tour guides motivates tourists to join tours rather than travel by themselves, since guided tours are one of the best ways to take a look at the particular attractions of a destination, if short on time (Zerva & Nijkamp, 2016). This study suggests that local people may be engaged in the art of rural tour guiding and that may lead to taking tourists to souvenir shops and craft markets, in order to receive commissions. They may also consider presenting and explaining their natural and cultural heritage to the tourists.

### Rural tourism: SWOT analysis

SWOT Model is a kind of research methodology used for conducting a comprehensive assessment for development. Internal factors are related

to weaknesses (W) and strengths (S) of a set or a region or subject; and external factors are related to opportunities (O) and threats (T) of a region or system (Mondal & Haque, 2017). SWOT analysis was performed in this study to determine whether HiP and surrounding communities have potentials for rural tourism. Identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats together with the study's findings, may assist the researcher in determining whether this study area has adequate potential rural tourism development. This stage aims to evaluate the internal environment of the communities surrounding HiP for the identification of the strengths and weaknesses. It is also aimed at looking for the effects of external environment on the host communities for the identification of opportunities and threats as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 | Identification of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
<p><b>S1.</b> The presence of artistic dance as a tourist attraction, such as welcome dance in welcoming the tourist and entertaining guest during their stay in the park performed by locals</p> <p><b>S2.</b> The presence of various arts and crafts activities in the area such as bead works, wood works, grass works and ethnic costumes (amabheshu) made from animal skin, which is normally worn in traditional events and ceremonies, cultural dance groups also use these costumes</p> <p><b>S3.</b> Untouched natural beauty, rich wildlife species and major cultural and historical features which attract many tourists</p> <p><b>S4.</b> Many young populations with knowledge of tourism and positive attitude towards rural tourism development, and elderly population with indigenous knowledge about the area</p> <p><b>S5.</b> Peaceful and stable political climate in South Africa</p> <p><b>S6.</b> Friendliness of rural population, having English as official language</p>	<p><b>W1.</b> Lack of skilled and trained human capital in the area</p> <p><b>W2.</b> Residents' unfamiliarity with and lack of training about tourism</p> <p><b>W3.</b> Lack of local government's support in funding local communities to make their own living through tourism</p> <p><b>W4.</b> Lack of trust between community members</p> <p><b>W5.</b> Lack of tourism infrastructure (such as roads and sewage disposal system)</p> <p><b>W6.</b> No existing clear functional framework for rural tourism development</p> <p><b>W7.</b> Not enough investment in high quality tourism products and services</p> <p><b>W8.</b> No adequate interpretation of all aspects of the region's natural, cultural and historical heritage</p>
Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)
<p><b>O1.</b> Likelihood for funding from local government to help local communities start their own businesses</p> <p><b>O2.</b> Sunny climate in the region is suitable for all year-round tourism</p> <p><b>O3.</b> Emerging niche market focusing on individual travel</p> <p><b>O4.</b> The Western perception that Africa has the most authentic rural areas</p> <p><b>O5.</b> Region is not sensitive to dangerous natural disasters</p> <p><b>O6.</b> Close proximity to HiP</p> <p><b>O7.</b> Better linkage between tourism and agriculture</p> <p><b>O8.</b> No recorded significant negative socio-cultural and environmental impact from tourism</p>	<p><b>T1.</b> Economic, commercial and logistical issues such as accessibility and infrastructure to the area, availability of skills and interest of investors</p> <p><b>T2.</b> Growing competition within the global tourism industry, especially with the emergence of virtual travel and new information and communication technology</p>

According to the result of the SWOT analysis and the details given in Table 4, the study area has strong potentials for tourism in terms of strengths and opportunities. These findings are similar to Ezeuduji and Rid's (2011) SWOT analysis of The Gambia's rural tourism. Tourism can be mainly built through infrastructural development, access to financial resources and the provision of adequate business management knowledge (represented as weaknesses) to residents. If the above-mentioned areas of improvements can be addressed; the area may become one of the most important rural tourism centres in the world. In addition, a lot of strengths and opportunities are identified which could serve as platform for rural tourism development, however the management of weaknesses and threats are essential for success (see next section).

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Establishing rural tourism in communities serves as an alternative means of economic development. The challenge lies in the capability of rural communities to develop critical mass of tourism products and services, implement, and manage rural tourism development. Tourism potential is the ability of a location to draw and accommodate visitors who have concerns about accessibility, resource quality, resource interpretation, and other factors. However, for a successful growth of rural tourism, it is necessary to clearly define the roles and duties of the various stakeholders in the tourism industry. This will promote collaboration and understanding among those involved in the tourism industry. The researchers investigated whether the host communities possess the needed or enough resources for rural tourism development, the level of business knowledge, and the capabilities needed for this development, and a fitting strategy coupled with activities on which rural tourism development may take place in this study area.

Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park provides excellent animal viewing and is home to all the Africa's Big Five, which is a key lure for visitors to the area. Nonetheless, it was noted that the development of human resources would be required for the successful development of rural tourism in the area. Emphasis was also made on the area's infrastructural development, which is an important physical resource for any tourism development. In terms of knowledge and capabilities, the results indicated that local residents lacked specific qualifications and professional requirements needed to start a business. It was therefore highlighted that local communities' education and training programmes would be extremely important for the successful planning of rural tourism development in the study area.

Participants also noted that the main cause of failure for rural tourism cooperatives was due to absence of trust among the community members, and they further mentioned that if the problem could be addressed, rural cooperatives may play a major role in rural tourism development. Strategies were suggested for the development of rural tourism in the communities adjacent the park. In this regard, training and development to equip local residents with necessary skills and knowledge, the launching of cooperatives and the crafting and presentation of detailed business plans were noted as strategies that can be used for the successful operation of rural tourism development. Moreover, it was noted that the area has activities that can be presented to tourists to form part of rural tourism offerings, these include cultural dances, rural way of life, local cuisine, arts and crafts as well as tour guiding.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were therefore made for possible considerations.

1. There is a need to identify and make use of the other attractions of the region such as handicrafts in the communities, as part

of rural tourism products. There are special handicrafts in these communities such as thatching, the making of brooms, baskets, mats, wooden spoons and trays as well as African wood-carved animals.

2. Holding small local markets on regular basis to sell handicrafts and other products made by the residents is recommended because women have indicated that they usually struggle to sell craft works to the customers individually.

3. There should be leadership commitment in driving the process of rural tourism development through capacity building: to train local residents, to assist in the development of business plans and the acquiring of funds to start their own businesses.

4. Tourism industry requires specific skills or experience for specific jobs. Some solutions

that may be considered by the industry include on-the-job training, industry sponsored apprenticeship programmes, internships, and other various forms of education and training programmes.

In addition, many other positive impulses can be observed in the areas of construction of rural housing, launching cooperatives, launching training centres, establishing partnerships with educational institutions and other rural tourism stakeholders. Organising local events and rural exhibitions where the residents will show their talents to tourists; and launching new types of rural tourism products may also help in achieving viable rural tourism development.

In addition to the recommendations above, it is essential for this study to address key weaknesses and threats identified by the SWOT analysis conducted (Table 5) and allocate these responsibilities to rural tourism stakeholders.

Table 5 | Addressing weaknesses and threats of rural tourism development

Weaknesses	Recommendations and possible solutions	Responsible Stakeholder
<b>Lack of skilled and trained human capital in the area.</b>	To fully address labour and skill shortages, as well as to keep up with changing lifestyles and consumer demands, workforce development/training is required.	Not-for-profit organisations
<b>Local residents' unfamiliarity with and lack of training about tourism.</b>	The collaboration with local or national educational institutions would result in a new supply of skilled potential workers. Apprenticeships, co-op work placements, and internships can all help to develop the next generation of skilled workers.	Local governments; Not-for-profit organisations
<b>Lack of local government's support in funding local communities to make their own living through tourism.</b>	This study recommends effective financial management by local governments, and they need to consider the transformation of local areas into better places to live; local residents could also take advantage of this opportunity to earn a living through tourism.	State/Provincial/Local governments
<b>Lack of trust between community members.</b>	The study recommends that local residents establish cooperatives with a legally binding approach, in order for each member to commit to business legally.	Local communities; Local governments; Not-for-profit organisations
<b>Lack of tourism infrastructure (such as roads and sewage disposal system).</b>	This study suggests that government has a role to play in the development of infrastructure through the provision of infrastructure capital for such projects.	Provincial/ Local governments
<b>No existing clear functional framework for rural tourism development.</b>	This study recommends the creation of a clear functional framework for the development of rural tourism. This framework can harness guidelines suggested by this study.	Provincial/ Local governments
<b>Not enough investment in high quality tourism products and services.</b>	Investment in high quality rural tourism products and services is recommended, in the study area.	Local communities; Local governments; Not-for-profit organisations
<b>No adequate interpretation of all aspects of the region's natural, cultural and historical heritage.</b>	This study suggests interpreting the value of heritage assets (both tangible and intangible) that would help local residents develop rural tourism with a strong sense of identity, pride, and belonging.	Local communities (Communities around HiP); Local governments; Not-for-profit organisations
<b>Threats</b>	<b>Recommendations and possible solutions</b>	<b>Responsible Stakeholder</b>
<b>Economic, commercial and logistical issues such as accessibility and infrastructure to the area, availability of skills and interest of investors.</b>	This study suggests an improved accessibility, the development of resource-efficient rural tourism infrastructure, as well as initiatives to foster stakeholder networks, innovation and the adoption of rural tourism business practices, in the study area.	Provincial/ Local governments; Not-for-profit organisations
<b>Growing competition within the global tourism industry, especially with the emergence of virtual travel and new information and communication technology.</b>	Creating the right framework conditions for the digital transformation of tourism businesses, the adoption of virtual reality for rural tourism, and the opening of new opportunities for tourism businesses to compete in global markets.	Tourism authorities; Provincial/ Local governments; Not-for-profit organisations

## 7. Limitations and Further Research

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, hence access to people was restricted. This limited the sample size, but data saturation was reached with the twenty participants. Probably a larger sample size and the usage of probability sampling, instead of non-probability sampling could yield more representative results for the wider prospective South African rural tourism destinations.

This study assessed the potentials of rural tourism development in the communities around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park. Other potential areas for future research could be the assessment of the available resources (their conditions), and where they need improvement for the successful development of rural tourism in the area. Further studies may also be conducted to explore the motivations for rural tourism and segments its market based on the push and pull motivational forces. This could help in developing rural tourism activities based on tourists' needs. Similar studies may also be conducted in other rural areas of South Africa to identify similarities and differences (comparability) in results.

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