

## A Sustainable Adventure Tourism Development Framework for Thathevondo

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### Abstract

Usually adventure tourism activities are based in natural and rugged outdoor locations, and participants interact with their environment. In view of the current growing trend towards adventure-orientated holiday behavior, it is important to identify potential adventure tourism attractions and, help communities to develop and attract the adventure tourism market. This paper proposes a sustainable adventure tourism development framework for the ThatheVondo area in Venda, a former so-called "homeland" of South Africa. The research is quantitative in nature and purposive sampling was used at the villages and government departments responsible for tourism and the environment in the ThatheVondo area. This was to get the relevant participants with relevant information. A sustainable adventure tourism development framework was proposed towards positioning ThatheVondo in the adventure market, towards developing adventure activities, improving standards of living for the communities, and to enable the area to have an advantage over its competitors while being sustainable.

**Keywords:** ThatheVondo; Adventure tourism; Sustainable tourism; Tourism development

### Introduction

When South African tourism moved into the era of democracy in the nineties, the nation was captured by the promise and potential for tourism and the benefits it would bring to the people of South Africa (SA Tourism, 2002). According to the Travel Industry Association of America, the past seven years has seen adventure tourism being considered the fastest growing type of tourism. The Adventure Travel Society in America (1999) [1] reported that adventure tourism was growing at an annual rate of 10 to 15 percent with most of this growth occurring in existing markets such as Costa Rica, parts of Mexico and Peru. Also, Europeans and North Americans come to South Africa for its dramatic scenery [2]. It is mentioned that Europeans and North Americans dominate the overall adventure travel market, although it is growing in other regions of the world [3].

According to Potgieter et al. [4] the tourism industry is dynamic and highly competitive on a global scale and added to its nature are complex factors that influence its existence. This article aims to propose a sustainable adventure tourism development framework for ThatheVondo through achieving the following objectives: The first objective is to present an overview of available literature on the adventure tourism industry, tourism development strategies and sustainable tourism. The second objective is to present research data pertaining to the knowledge of the communities and stakeholders with regard to sustainable adventure tourism development. The third objective is to propose a sustainable adventure tourism development framework based on the literature and the stakeholders perspective.

### Literature Review

#### Study area background

Described as the Limpopo's most beautiful and tropical forest (a significant accolade), the ThatheVondo (Holy Forest) is sacred to the Venda people, and is said to be protected by a half-man, half-lion creature called the Nethane [5]. Nestled in Venda which was a Bantustan (black African homeland) in northern part of South Africa, it now forms part of the Limpopo Province. It was founded as a "homeland" for the Venda ethnic group (speakers of the TshiVenda

language) and was declared self-governing on 1 February 1973. On 13 September 1979 it was declared independent by the South African government and its residents lost their South African citizenship [6]. Venda was re-absorbed into South Africa on 27 April 1994.

#### Sustainable tourism

According to the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT; 1996) a number of factors still limit the effectiveness of the tourism industry to play a more meaningful role in the national economy and toward sustainable development. Hermann et al. [7] also mentioned that South African government has indicated that sustainable and responsible tourism is the key to the future development industry. Among some of the key constraints is that: tourism has been inadequately resourced and funded, the myopic private sector, limited integration of local communities and previously neglected groups into tourism, inadequate tourism education, training and awareness and the inadequate protection of the environment.

Dixon & Pretorius [8] defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is often called intergenerational equality, the idea is that we should share natural resources not just with people who are alive on the planet today but also with future generations of the earth's inhabitants [9]. Since 1994, South Africa has achieved far reaching-political, economic and social changes, with an increasing commitment to sustainable development. This was affirmed by the hosting of "The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg" [10] which placed poverty eradication

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at the centre of efforts to achieve sustainable development and reinforced the notion of development that aims for equity within and between generations [11].

Among organizations that supports sustainable tourism [12] development internationally are The International Eco Tourism Society (TIES), The Millennium Development Goals (UN, MDG's) and The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC, 2009) [13], which are an effort to come to a common understanding of sustainable tourism, and will be the minimum that any tourism business should aspire to reach. They are organized around four main themes: effective sustainability planning; maximizing social and economic benefits for the local community; enhancing cultural heritage; and reducing negative impacts to the environment.

According to Hall (2008) sustainable development and tourism present change which refers to the movement from one state or condition to another. Whether such a transition is positive or negative depends on the original criteria by which change is measured. Sustainable tourism requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Achieving it requires monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them [14].

A number of research projects seem to have been done on rural tourism [15], profiles of the adventure tourism market [16], risks in adventure tourism activities [17], adventure tourism in the future [3], ethnic tourism application [18], community based tourism ventures [19], community tourism planning [20] and community benefit tourism initiatives [21]. It also emerged that a lot of literature is available based on adventure tourism as an alternative form of tourism [22]. In 2006, David Aabo [23] came close with his thesis entitled sustainable tourism realities: a case for adventure service tourism. This however concentrated on adventure as service tourism only, [24] also wrote on the "sustainability indicators for managing community tourism". This was to develop indicators to measure tourism development within a sustainable framework and involved 38 academic researchers in tourism to provide input in the developing the indicators. The panel members provided three classifications of indicators: checklist indicators, core indicators and indicator issues and were economic (24), social (28), cultural (13), ecological (25), political (32) and technological (3) dimension. It was also concluded during this study that sustainability indicators for community tourism development differ from traditional indicators because of the interrelationships between natural and cultural stakeholders [25].

With all of the above, little exists or less known on the literature available on the sustainable adventure tourism development frameworks to assist this type of travel in South Africa.

### Adventure tourism

When the term "adventure" is mentioned, images and associations flood the mind. This word has different meanings to different people [3]. According to Cashmore [26], most people think of adventure as an adrenaline rush and that the followers thereof are driven by a death wish. According to Standeven [27], adventure activities indicate a "quest for excitement" and they provide an opportunity to produce pleasurable forms of tension and excitement, which offer an important

counterbalance to the routines of daily life in modern society. Whiles interacting with the environment, participants engage in hiking, rafting, kayaking, mountain biking and many more. There is a growing trend towards adventure-orientated holiday behaviour in people seeking a more intensive recreational experience [28,29].

According to Crouch [30], tourism practices can be significant with regard to friendship, community building, empowerment and identity, usually as enjoyment. Many of the tourism products are located within particular communities' surroundings. This article aims to assist towards sustainability and encouraging tourism initiatives in ThatheVondo in support of the South African Tourism White Paper.

### Tourism development and strategies

The purpose of development is to reduce poverty, inequality and unemployment, and also to reduce deprivation in order to broaden choices. Three fundamental objectives of development can be said to be; (1) increasing the availability and widening the distribution of basic life-sustaining goods; (2) raising levels of living; and, (3) expanding the range of economic and social choices available to individuals and nations [31].

According to Harris et al. [32], a tourism development plan should be guided by five principles: it should support conservation, not be an end in itself, and be sustainable in the sense that it does not act to disturb or destroy the very attractions it is based on; local participation in tourism activities should be encouraged wherever possible and relevant (including policy matters and practical economic involvement); tourism development should take place in a context of environmental awareness - through guidance on appropriate ways to develop accommodation and other tourist facilities; policy and planning should leave room for adaptation and experiment under the guidance of a steering committee, and private sector activities should be encouraged under appropriate supervision with monopoly interests being avoided. To summarise Harris et al. [32], Hall (2008) put it that a tourism development plan should occur in a number of forms, structures, scales of governance, spatial scales and temporal scales. Turingan [33] suggests that as part of a tourism development strategy, several issues need to be addressed with a view to render tourism more competitive.

United Nations Environmental Programme & World Tourism Organisation (2005) [34] mentioned that developing a strategy for sustainable tourism should be a participatory process that involves a range of stakeholders in order to foster wider adherence to the strategy and commitment to its implementation. It is necessary in the beginning to guard long-term commitment both to the strategy and crucially to its implementation. When formulating a strategy, following three stages need to be identified:

- Analysing conditions, problems and opportunities - looking at state of tourism, attributes that have a bearing of sustainability of tourism, surveys and consultations.
- Identifying objectives and making strategic choices - agreements on a vision and on a broad set of strategic objectives for tourism. All of this should be appropriate to the destination.
- Developing policies and action programmes - development of specific policies and actions that relate to the aims and strategic objectives and that reflect the strategic choices made.

According to Keyser [29] who proposes a holistic planning and strategy approach, there are three pillars of sustainable development

(economic efficiency, environmental integrity and social justice) which should all be linked together and balanced in order to ensure that future generations can sustain themselves and maintain a reasonable quality of life. The above principles and strategies are applicable to any tourism development initiative and promote the management of tourism impacts. Based on some of these development strategies, a sustainable adventure tourism development framework will be proposed for ThatheVondo.

The impact of tourism on the economy varies depending on the tourism strategy undertaken [33]. The fact that the tourism industry in ThatheVondo is still relatively underdeveloped [35] presents policy-makers with opportunities to learn from experiences of other countries and to take advantage of tourism as a sustainable development strategy [36]. The potential for foreign exchange and employment generation makes it an attractive tool for economic, social and environmental development.

South Africa is according to the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT, 2008) [37] a developing nation grappling with the challenges of finding stability in terms of growing the economy, ensuring food security, creating sustainable jobs and eradicating poverty. Tourism development and growth, producing unprecedented economic spin-offs, has demonstrated the capability of contributing in a significant way towards finding lasting solutions to these challenges (South Africa, 2008).

## Research Methodology

The research is quantitative and qualitative in nature as the researcher interviewed all locals in order to complete the questionnaire due to language problems. Many of the respondents in government completed the questionnaire themselves. A survey on demographics, knowledge/interest of the locals on adventure tourism and; perceptions of adventure tourism development from the locals in ThatheVondo was conducted. Purposive sampling was used at the villages and the government departments responsible for tourism and the environment in the ThatheVondo area. Self-completion questionnaires were administered one on one interviews with the researcher to community members in ThatheVondo (n=40), employees of Environmental Affairs and Forestry, the Tourism Department and community development organisations that also work in the area (n=19). The researcher read the questions and explained in native (Venda) language and therefore made it understandable to the respondents. Close-ended and open-ended questions were used to avoid confusion and misunderstanding by participants.

In total, the data was collected through fifty-nine questionnaires administered in ThatheVondo and also in government departments in the area. ThatheVondo has nine villages (Tshiheni, Tshidzivhe, Tshitangani, Khalavha, Fondwe, Murangoni, Tshiavha, Tsharotha and Tshilungwi) and each village has households ranging from 5 to 23. The limited time available for the survey, the problem of accessing villages and following all the local protocol made it difficult to administer more questionnaires. A statistical analysis of data was conducted using SPSS.

## Results

### Participants' knowledge of existing forms of tourism in ThatheVondo

Results show that 62.2% of the participants replied affirmatively to the question whether they knew about a hiking trail route in the area. Among those participants who knew about the hiking route, 76.3%

claimed to know about the picnic spots in ThatheVondo, which are along the hiking route attractions such as waterfalls. Fifty-nine percent of the participants knew about the hiking huts that have been erected to support the hiking route. Only two participants described these as not in good condition for tourists currently and that is due to vandalism by the locals. An overwhelming 83.1% of the participants did not know of adventure tourism businesses operating in the area. Eighty percent answered that they had seen or noticed tourists before in the ThatheVondo area; while 79.3% stated they did not know someone from the ThatheVondo area who has participated in adventure activities. A staggering 94.8% of the participants answered yes to the question as to whether they would like to see adventure tourism being developed in ThatheVondo as another form of tourism development; thus only 5.2% answered no to that question. These findings provide insight into the level of knowledge about adventure tourism from the locals, as well as the scant infrastructure available for adventure tourism and the exact locations thereof.

### Importance of natural resources for tourism

The importance of the natural resources for tourism was established next. Participants had to rate each aspect on a scale of 1-5. According to Wall and Mathieson [38], tourism in natural areas has experienced prolific growth over the past 20 years and is now estimated to account for 20% of all leisure travel worldwide. This prompted the inclusion of a natural area analysis in ThatheVondo from the participants' perspective in relation to sustainable adventure tourism development as the main goal of the study.

Ten natural resources had to be rated by respondents (cliffs, rivers, mountain ranges, waterfalls, abnormal trees, dams, lakes, hiking trails, tree plantations, and sacred forests). All the natural resources that were rated are available in the area and were first identified before the questionnaire was developed. It is with this resources that the development of sustainable of adventure tourism can be based on with activities such as kayaking (rivers), hiking (mountain ranges), cliffs (rock climbing and abseiling), waterfall (geckoing) and tree plantations for quad biking, scrambler bikes and mountain biking.

About 60% of the participants rated all of the natural resources as extremely important, except plantations, which they rated at 50.9%. Of the participants, 10.9% rated the plantation as not important at all for the development of adventure tourism; while all the other resources also received a low average, with 4% of participants stating that the resources were not important for adventure tourism development. Of these respondents, 10% rated hiking trails, tree plantations, and the sacred forest as not important. The results show that a large percentage of the participants do, however, acknowledge the importance of natural resources for the development of tourism in general.

### State of ThatheVondo in general for tourism

According to Wall and Mathieson [38], the environment, be it predominantly natural or largely human made, is one of the most basic of resources for tourism, a core element of tourism products and a central part of most tourism communications and marketing approaches. Adventure tourism participants interact with the residents and the environment as part of their tourism experience, so a perspective of the locals on their own environment was necessary for this study. Lin et al. [39], Jang & Wu [40] and Shi et al. [41] argued that the factors used on table 2 are big motivators to different groups to travel. In support of these sentiments, the study had to establish the overall state of the ThatheVondo environment, which could be the



starting point for the sustainable adventure tourism development as the main goal for the study. In Table 2, participants had to rate factors about ThatheVondo on a scale of 1-5.

Table 2 illustrates how well the participants know their area and shows their perceptions of each factor they had to rate them on a scale of 1-5. Most of the factors were rated by the participants as excellent, as seen in the last column; seven of them were rated over 50%. The participants showed a high level of dissatisfaction with transport (38.6%), accommodation (79.3%), and information about the area (63.2%), rating them as poor. In addition, the participants gave a good rating of over 10% to better and very good on these environmental factors. This table shows the overall satisfaction about the area from the view of the participants and all the rated factors could make a contribution to the viability of sustainable adventure tourism development.

### Respondents will for sustainable adventure development

Perceptions and the overall feeling of locals concerning adventure tourism development was important for the study, as the literature section focused on sustainable tourism development with an emphasis on involving local communities together with all other stakeholders from the start in any kind of development,. This part of the survey indicates the desire among the participants for adventure tourism development to take place. The results confirm that 88.1% of the participants strongly agreed that it will be good to develop the area

Parameter	Frequency (n)	%
<b>Respondents category</b>		
Government	18	31
Tshiheni, Tshidzivhe, Tshitangani, Khalavha, Fondwe	7	12
Murangoni, Tshiavha	32	52
Tsharotha	2	3
Tshilungwi	1	2
<b>Sector involvement</b>		
Government	21	36.8
Private sector	3	1.8
Entrepreneurs	4	7.0
Other	32	54.4
<b>Levels of education</b>		
Matriculation	2	3.4
Did not complete matric	39	66.1
National certificate	2	3.4
National diploma	6	10.2
National degree	3	5.1
Post graduate	7	11.9

Table 1: Respondents Profile.

Descriptor	Poor	Not good	Better	Very good	Excellent
1. Friendly people	1.7%	-	13.6%	22.4%	62.1%
2. The scenery	-	3.6%	19.6%	12.5%	64.3%
3. The history of the area	5.3%	3.5%	15.8%	29.8%	45.6%
4. Cleanlines	3.4%	1.7%	13.8%	22.4%	58.6%
5. The climate	1.9%	-	13.0%	22.2%	63.0%
6. Quiet, peaceful place	1.8%	1.8%	5.3%	14.0%	77.2%
7. Outdoor activities	16.7%	24.1%	27.8%	11.1%	20.4%
8. Sacred sites	1.8%	3.6%	12.7%	16.4%	65.5%
9. The culture of the area	1.7%	6.9%	13.8%	22.4%	55.2%
10. Public transport	38.6%	17.5%	17.5%	10.5%	15.8%

Table 2: State of ThatheVondo in general for tourism.

as an adventure destination, while 1.7% disagreed completely that ThatheVondo should be developed as an adventure site, and 3.4% were not sure whether the area should be developed. Just over seventy six (76.3%) strongly agreed that if such a development would ever take place in the area, they would want to be involved in it, and 1.7% strongly disagreed with the idea of being involved, and 13.6% only agreed to become involved in such a development initiative. It can be concluded that participants acknowledged their environment as important for this kind of development and would choose to become involved in initiatives that could develop the area for the better.

### Suggestions on what should happen at ThatheVondo during development

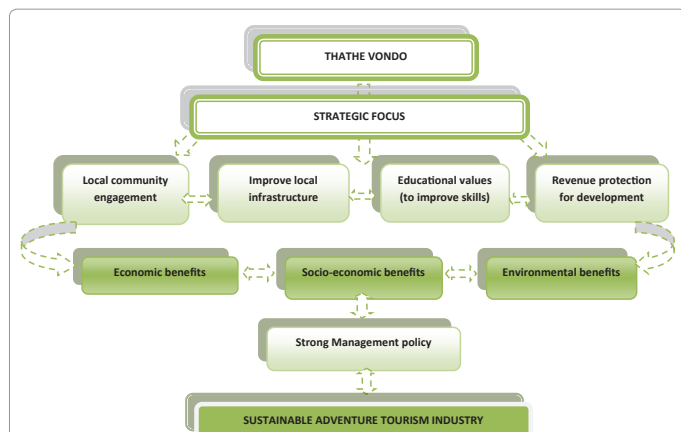
Participants were asked to suggest a plan of action for this development. The results presented the following suggestions. Of the respondents, 50.6% stated that they would want the development of a good road network, water, electricity, clinics, a filling station, accommodation, a curio shop and information centre and other basic services as a plan of action. Dialogue with the chief and thereafter with the community was suggested by 12.3%, while 8.6% said revamping the trail, camping spots and developing picnic spots with a pool, fencing the area for better control, proper use of the little money being currently paid for access, and documenting the history of the area for tourists and future generations would be a good way to go about the proposed development. Slightly more than six percent (6.1%) advocated uplifting and empowering the local communities through a sense of ownership and “encourage them towards civilisation”, with 3.7% suggesting identifying activities and guides, and publishing them in newspapers as part of the development needed for the area.

Any form of development could have undesirable side effects for the local people; therefore the participants were given an opportunity to state which possible consequences of the development of adventure tourism in ThatheVondo they would not like. From the suggestions given above by the respondents, it can be concluded that most respondents are aware of the natural resources that could contribute to adventure tourism development in the area, they are willing to see adventure tourism development in ThatheVondo, and also willing to welcome tourists to the area. The development of basic services in the area or an investment in infrastructure could make it more accessible and could also create many opportunities for the local people. There is a feeling of optimism towards this kind of development in general and the locals seem to know and appreciate that they live in a good environment that has the potential to become one of the most exciting areas in the country in terms of attracting adventure visitors.

### Proposed sustainable adventure tourism development strategy for ThatheVondo

The tourism development strategies discussed above emphasized the environment, socio-cultural and economic integrity. These aspects are used as the basis for developing a sustainable adventure tourism development framework for ThatheVondo.

Figure 1 illustrates that ThatheVondo and all possible investment organizations that would be interested in developing the area should engage the local communities in the planning phases of the area. Community engagement would make matters uncomplicated since these locals would feel a sense of ownership and empowered to participate in decision-making. There is a great need for improving the infrastructure in the area as well as educational values with a view



**Figure 1:** Sustainable adventure tourism development strategy framework for ThatheVondo (The following strategy to develop ThatheVondo as a prime adventure destination is suggested: Based on Inskeep (1991:50) model for comprehensive development and Wall & Mathieson's (2006:309) framework for conceptualizing and evaluating ecotourism as well as tourism development strategies review on the literature section).

to address the high levels of poor education in the area, and efforts to improve this should be aggressively pursued.

Of the few tourism activities that are being seen in the area, the little revenue collected from entrance fees must be properly reserved and channeled back towards improving the overall appearance of the area and the attractions facilities. It is believed that by addressing all the recommended solutions outlined above, the area should see some economic, socio-economic and environmental benefits to be enjoyed by all the communities in ThatheVondo. A strong management policy to oversee the management of tourism in ThatheVondo should be established. Due to the lack of managerial skills in the area, the Department of Tourism in the municipality should handle the development stages with an elected candidate from the community doing on-the-job training to take over after a period of time. When all of the steps in Figure 1 are followed, this will lead to a well-run, sustainable adventure tourism industry which can compete with other adventure destination locally and internationally.

## Discussion

Through the research, an examination of adventure tourism development in ThatheVondo as well as the likelihood of this type of tourism expanding was done. Thus, the aim to "Develop a sustainable adventure tourism development framework for ThatheVondo in Venda Limpopo province". It can be concluded that, although ThatheVondo certainly has the potential for expansion and development as an adventure destination, a number of pressing factors would challenge such an endeavour. These factors range from a lack of investment, lack of education on local people (table 1) the deterioration and a lack of infrastructure to a lack of forceful marketing strategies for the region. Having identified these challenges, the researchers are of the opinion that this area could result, if gradually and properly developed, into a lucrative adventure tourism destination that could compete with other renowned adventure attractions nationally. This is also motivated by the response of the participants on table 2 and reaffirms the state of ThatheVondo in general for tourism.

As a result, it can be concluded that for ThatheVondo to be a premier adventure tourist destination, the government, and the general local public would have to contribute towards ensuring that

it maintains a state of equilibrium between environmental awareness, sustainability, and profitability during development.

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