

The experiences of local communities in ecotourism businesses: A mixed-methods analysis of four local municipalities

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Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of residents of four local municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. A mixed-methods approach was adopted in the form of a questionnaire and interviews. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 204 participants for the quantitative study. A purposive sample of 32 participants was selected for the interviews. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and ATLAS TI applications were used to analyse data, respectively. The study revealed that most available ecotourism opportunities were accessible to white-owned ventures, though communities in some activities struggled to get a share of the ecotourism pie due to extreme poverty. The findings reveal gaps in both management and coordination of ecotourism activities in the study area. The study concludes that negative experiences of ecotourism practice are higher, partly due to a lack of relevant information, support, and knowledge on how best to capitalize on ecotourism opportunities.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Commercialisation, Management, Local community, Social-economic growth

1. Introduction

The focus of ecotourism is on the natural environment, which, when properly utilised, can spur local communities' socioeconomic growth and help to lower unemployment and poverty (Xu et al., 2023; Wearing et al., 2020). The focus on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora and fauna, and their habitats, as well as cultural artifacts found in the area, is what sets ecotourism apart. Ecotourism's main goal is to preserve resources, especially biological diversity, in order to ensure their sustainable use and provide visitors with an ecological experience (Baloch et al., 2023; Chebli et al., 2021). Ecotourism's ability to provide goods and services while also taking into account the socioeconomic and environmental aspects of society is by far its greatest contribution to development. By maintaining a balance between human needs, that is, the preservation of natural ecosystems and biodiversity, and sustainable development, it promotes sustainable development (Mnisi and Ramoroka, 2020; Connell, 2018).

Owing to its emphasis on the natural experience, ecotourism promotes and supports non-consumptive use of wildlife, for instance, hiking, horseback riding, and photographic tourism. It also raises awareness about the local environment and the plight of local communities with minimal adverse impacts on the environment (Xaba et al., 2024; Hameed and Khalid, 2018). Well-crafted ecotourism strategies encourage the participation of poor rural communities and could generate benefits that mitigate the saturation of natural and cultural resources, thus ensuring the sustainability of local communities and the environment (Shoo, 2017; Adanlawo, 2017).

If ecotourism is believed to generate benefits for local community residents, the question that comes to mind is: are local communities' residents really benefiting from ecotourism? What are their experiences with ecotourism businesses in their different local communities? This study tends to investigate the experiences of residents of the four local municipalities of Jozini, Hlabisa, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalingana in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. The residents' experiences were investigated based on their working conditions, advice and information on training opportunities, training on ecotourism and related activities, health and safety in ecotourism enterprises, promotional opportunities, treatment at work, workload in ecotourism enterprises, and working hours.

2. Literature review

Ecotourism is the practice of visiting natural areas for educational, scientific, or eco-friendly purposes as an alternative to traditional tourism. Ecotourism emphasizes the natural world, which, when properly utilized, can spur local communities' socioeconomic growth and help lower unemployment and poverty (Alfadhli, 2020). Advocates of ecotourism, specifically, contend that an economy driven by ecotourists provides a sustainable future for nearby communities while preserving the integrity of the ecosystem. Comprehensive measures are required to involve local people in the planning and management of ecotourist sites in order to achieve sustainable outcomes. According to Xaba et al. (2024), local communities are often portrayed as homogeneous groups in which tourism has an equal impact on all members of the community. As producers,

service providers, business owners, and leaders of their communities, locals play a significant role in the growth of the tourism industry. The authorities ignore or are irritated by their important contributions. In addition to being participants or beneficiaries, the majority of the local population is also a stakeholder in tourism and environmental conservation.

As many tourist destinations across the world have shown, the growth of tourism engenders new power dynamics and inequalities that limit the ability of the local population to take advantage of and participate in the new opportunities that are presented. The empowerment of rural communities is essential, according to Xaba et al. (2024) and Chaka and Adanlawo (2022), because a significant portion of these communities struggle with extreme poverty, high unemployment rates, and a lack of options for generating income. Therefore, ecotourism has the ability to supplement the income that certain households may anticipate from opportunities in the protected area when compared to other sources of income. According to Stronza et al. (2019), these opportunities, despite their marginal nature, have the potential to significantly improve the lives of those who are impoverished and barely scrape by. While researchers agree that communities react to ecotourism development in a variety of ways (Xu et al., 2023; Yanes et al., 2019), the structural injustices and power dynamics that influence how much locals benefit from it are rarely discussed in these studies.

3. Research methodology

A parallel convergent research design encompassing quantitative and qualitative research applications is used to investigate the experiences of residents of Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalingana local municipalities. This design enabled the researcher to use both numeric and non-numeric data. The study population comprised 625,846 people residing in the four local municipalities of UMkhanyakude District Municipality (UKDM: Integrated Development Plan, 2023). Simple random sampling techniques was used to select a total of 204 participants from the population for the quantitative study. While purposive sample of 32 participants ($8 \times 4 = 32$) were selected for the interviews (qualitative). The blending of qualitative and quantitative techniques is permissible when the study intends to address research questions posed by the mixed-methods research design (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023).

Questionnaires were administered directly to the respondents by the researcher. The questionnaire was divided into nine sections, which includes, biographic data, working conditions, advice and information on training opportunities, training on ecotourism and related activities, health and safety in ecotourism enterprises, promotional opportunities, treatment at work, workload in ecotourism enterprises, and working hours. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyse quantitative data collected. The data were transformed into percentages and reported in bar charts. The qualitative data collected from programme officials and project managers in each of the four local municipalities was processed through the ATLAS TI applications.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Working conditions

The aim of the question was to establish how employees of ecotourism companies felt about the working conditions in their respective organisations; hence, the study focused on induction, training, and development opportunities, as well as advice on career development options. According to Adanlawo et al. (2023), improved working conditions increase staff morale, commitment, and productivity. Below are the results of induction.

4.1.1 Induction

One of the most crucial elements of human resource management is induction, as it prepares new employees for their new roles and helps to align their attitudes and behaviours with the organisation's strategic goals (Zondi et al., 2023). The findings of the study on this issue are as follows:

Figure 1: Received induction on the current job

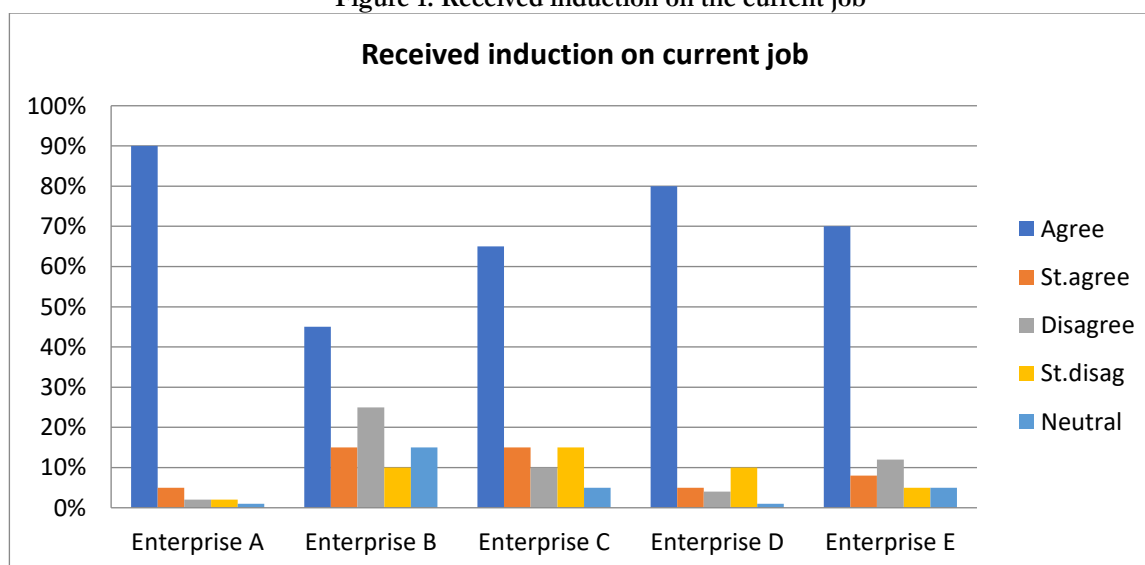


Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of workers in each of the five ecotourism businesses (Enterprise A = 90%; Enterprise B = 45%; Enterprise C = 65%; Enterprise D = 80%; and Enterprise E = 70%) confirmed having been inducted before starting their jobs. Apparently, staff induction was a common practice in the ecotourism industry in the four local municipalities. Just 10% of the surveyed staff members from each of the ecotourism businesses reported that they had not received any meaningful training on ecotourism practices when they started working there. In addition, only 1% of the surveyed employees could hardly recall whether they actually received induction prior to the assumption of their jobs; thus, some of these employees either neglected their role in induction or simply did not feel that such induction was necessary. *“The reality is that if the new employees do not go through induction on the first day of work, they lose focus and perform poorly. So, you have got to have their induction plan and be aware of their job needs and career goals before they start work. It helps, as it gives them confidence when executing their jobs. So, we do it quite often.”*

To a greater extent, the results in Figure 1 show that the surveyed ecotourism companies indeed provided induction to most of their employees at the commencement of their employment. This positive development (that is, staff induction) is commendable because most entry level employees learn and master job skills through induction rather than formal training. The quality of employment is very important in determining the benefits for local people employed by ecotourism companies. This includes improving salaries and working conditions as well as making jobs available to everyone regardless of gender, race, or any other discriminatory motive. The beneficiaries of employment activities must share the financial rewards in a just and equal manner with the people living in the recipient community to improve opportunities, services, and income to alleviate poverty (Adanlawo and Chaka, 2024).

4.1.2 Advice and information on training opportunities

Effective dissemination and sharing of human resource development information with all employees is critical, as it improves skill levels in the four local municipalities' ecotourism sector. It is against this background that the study sought to establish whether participants had been assisted in accessing training and development opportunities in their respective organisations. Overall, the data sets in Figure 2 from the four local municipalities suggest that employees had mixed feelings about information on training.

Figure 2: Information and advice on training

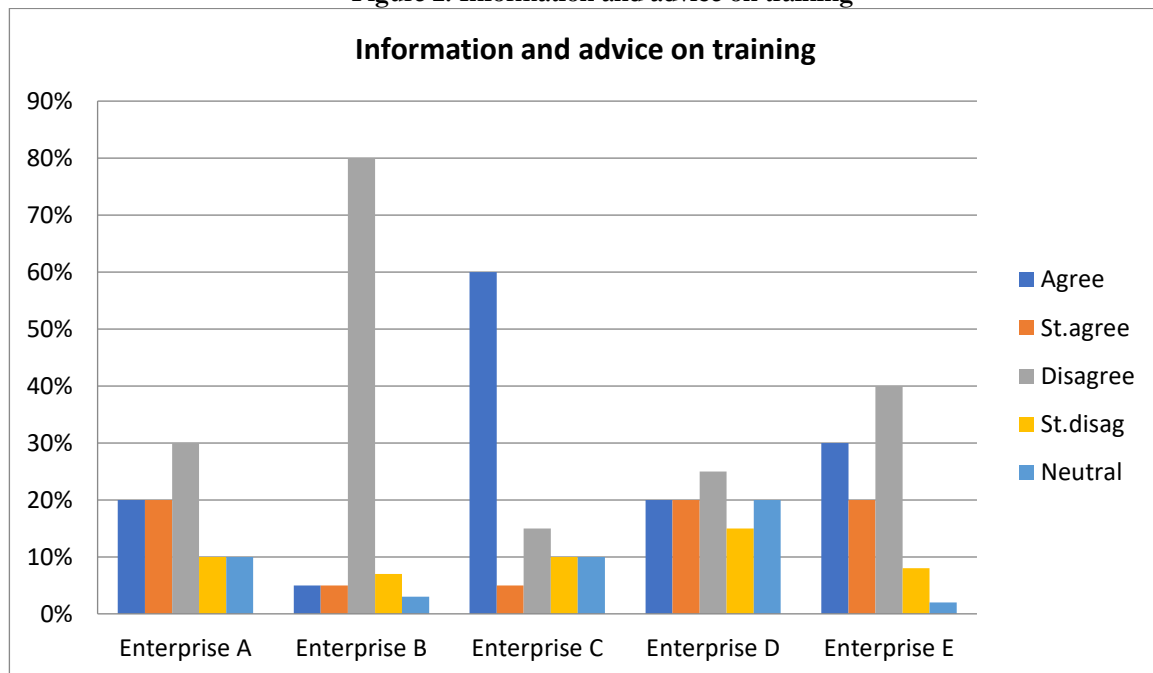


Figure 2 indicates that approximately 40% of employees in Enterprises A and D had been informed about training opportunities, followed by Enterprise C, where more than 60% of employees had received such information. Data from semi-structured interviews revealed that this information was gathered from supervisors and/or the owners of the ecotourism businesses, since employees had to undergo training prior to officially taking on their responsibilities. In the meantime, the largest percentage of workers (80%) at Enterprise B had not gotten training-related information and advice. This suggests that not every employee in this company has had equal access to opportunities for skill development. This has, in a sense, denied the workers the chance to advance their skills and knowledge while working.

Only a few (10%) of the surveyed employees across the five ecotourism enterprises hardly remembered whether or not they had received training-related information from their respective employers. This finding suggests that some employees were not fully responsible for their own learning and development in these ecotourism enterprises. One employer (an ecotourism company in Mtubatuba) described a lack of motivation to learn as follows:

“Sometimes I have got to be hard on employees who do not want to learn. I remind them that they will be the first to lose their positions, and that helps them attend courses and improve their qualifications. This applies to administration staff. They are the ones who deal with people at the

reception and on the help desk. So, we rely on them. No one should miss training in the administration section. So, they know that they always have to check on the notice boards and emails because that is how we keep them informed about current trends, including training.”

4.1.3 Training on ecotourism and related activities

Based on the Skills Development Act (1998) and the National Skills Development Plan 2030, which encourage organisations to support the skills revolution in South African workplaces, the question sought to determine if ecotourism companies implemented training programmes to up-skill their workforces for better performance and retention of human capital. The results are as follows:

Figure 3: Training on ecotourism and related activities

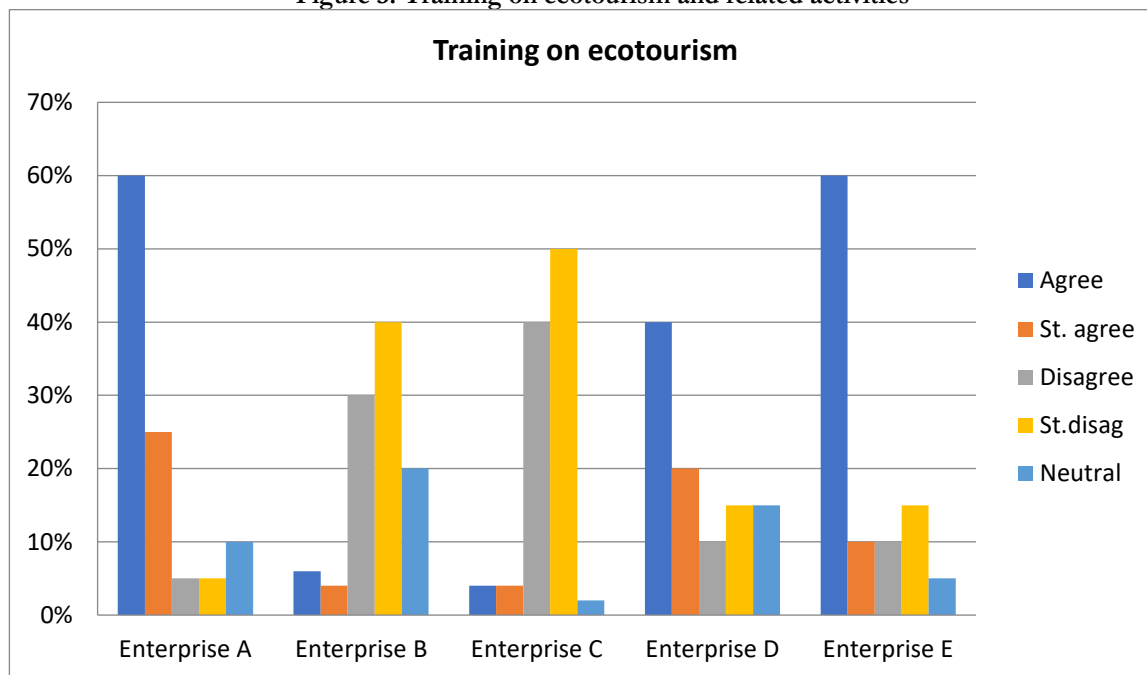


Figure 3 shows that over 80% (60%+25%) of Enterprises A's staff members had completed pertinent ecotourism training. Enterprises C and E came in second and third, with 60% and 60% of employees, respectively. However, just 10% of Enterprise B's workforce reported having received this kind of training, indicating gaps in this particular business's ecotourism training program. In a similar vein, 90% of Enterprise D's staff members had never been trained in ecotourism services, compared to 40% that had received such training in Enterprise E. This situation is not unique to the four local municipalities. According to Wondirad et al. (2020), the majority of developing nations, including South Africa, struggle to develop ecotourism skills. As a result, ecotourism businesses continue to perform poorly because their employees are not properly trained to guarantee the industry's high standards of quality.

Furthermore, only 10% of the employees across the five ecotourism enterprises hardly remembered whether or not they had received on-the-job training. Taken together, the data sets in Figure 3 suggest that most employees had received basic training on ecotourism-related activities; however, in most cases, this was just once-off preparatory training rather than an ongoing human resource development process. Most of the training reported by the participants focused mainly on the operational needs of the ecotourism businesses as opposed to the growth and development of the employees. During the interviews, ecotourism business owners confirmed this:

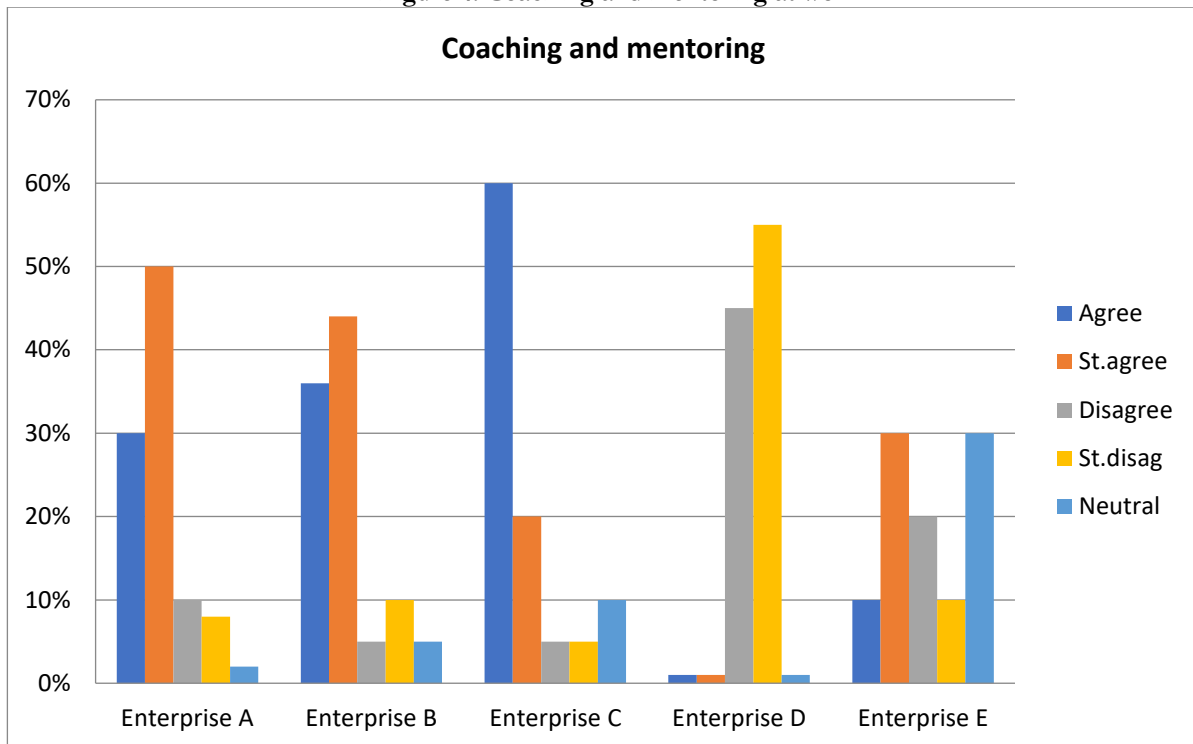
"We do not take chances. From day one, there is induction and real training begins where new employees learn everything from cooking to cleaning. Most of the time, we do job rotation. It's very effective. The new employees learn fast because they do one job today and tomorrow it's another. It's mostly soft skills like teamwork and customer care, because that is what we need at the moment. Nonetheless, some people want professional training; hence, some of our staff are sent to food and catering training colleges. Some stay on and others leave after training in search of better salaries."

The current state of skill development in tourism is severely limited in its ability to positively influence the transformation and development of tourism in South Africa due to the absence of an integrated and coordinated approach.

4.1.4 Coaching and mentoring at work

The question sought to establish whether employees of ecotourism companies had received coaching and mentoring as part of their personal development plans. Coaching and mentoring were viewed as one of the most effective ways of building skills and accelerating the professional growth and development of employees on the job (Adanlawo et al., 2021; Terblanche, 2017). These activities were also said to have a positive impact on the overall performance and contribution of employees to the attainment of an organisation's strategic goals. The results of the survey highlighted the following issues regarding the coaching and mentoring of employees in ecotourism companies.

Figure 4: Coaching and mentoring at work



Generally, the results in Figure 4 confirm that the majority (80%) of the employees in Enterprises A, B, and C had received coaching or mentoring in their respective jobs. Close to 95% of the employees in Enterprise D disagreed, arguing that they had not received any coaching or mentoring in their jobs. The reason for this deficiency could be that most of these enterprises were run by people with limited educational backgrounds, and therefore, they were unable to provide high-level human resource development services to their employees. Approximately 40% of the employees in Enterprise E had received coaching or mentoring in their jobs. Very few (10%) employees in each of the participating ecotourism companies denied having been provided with coaching or mentoring services in their workplaces. The confirmation by some employees that coaching had been provided by their employers suggests that on-the-job training had been the standard practice in some of these ecotourism companies. To some extent, coaching or mentoring facilitated human resource development in some of these ecotourism enterprises. One ecotourism business owner concurred, thus:

“Skills are important for us because we always handle large volumes of international visitors coming to Sodwana Bay. Those visitors have their own standard,s and they expect to see that when they come to our lodges. We do train people on the job. My husband does the training most of the time while I work with cleaning staff. So, he does the coaching most of the time.”

The finding that some ecotourism companies offered coaching and mentoring as part of on-the-job training strategies is consistent with the findings of other researchers. For example, Adanlawo’s (2017) study confirmed the existence of a direct relationship between coaching and organisational performance. Mentoring and coaching help businesses grow by supporting the development of their human capital. Irabor and Okolie (2019) established that continued mentoring and managerial support played a key role in raising staff motivation, commitment, and productivity. This is particularly important because the current study established that owners and/or managers of ecotourism businesses were largely responsible for providing on-the-job coaching and mentoring services to their employees.

4.2 Health and safety in ecotourism enterprises

The question was intended to gauge employees’ perceptions regarding the working conditions at the ecotourism companies they worked for. A number of empirical studies confirm the importance of an effective health and safety management programme in the workplace as a catalyst for employee protection, productivity, and the mitigation of labour turnover (Agwu, 2012; Matsaung, 2017). Additionally, the Occupational Health and Safety Act (1996) obliges employers in all sectors of the South African economy to promote and maintain the highest health and safety standards for employees and the general public. As shown in Figure 5 below, participants rated health and safety issues in their organisations differently.

Figure 5: Health and safety at work

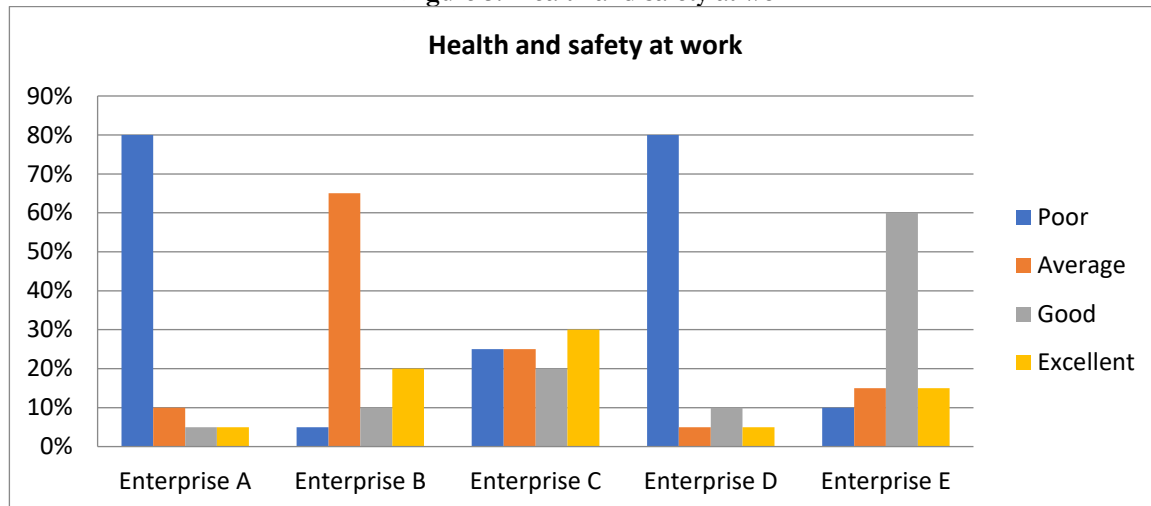


Figure 5 shows that the majority (80%) of the employees in Enterprises A and D perceived health and safety conditions in their organisations as generally poor. Enterprise B had the highest number (65%) of employees who thought that health and safety in their organisation was somewhat average. Furthermore, roughly 60% of the employees in Enterprise E felt that health and safety conditions in their workplaces were good. Enterprise C had the lowest number (25%) of employees who thought that the health and safety conditions were poor in their workplace. In addition, only 20% of the employees across the five ecotourism enterprises felt that health and safety issues were excellent in their organisations. To some extent, these results dovetail with insights from the owners of ecotourism companies. One company owner said:

"We talk to staff about safety every day. They acknowledge the need to follow the rules. We even facilitate their training. We also do fire drills every month so that everyone knows what to do in an emergency. This works perfectly for us. So, we do not experience accidents resulting from carelessness or something like that. People know their duties very well."

Some researchers found a positive relationship between a conducive working environment and employee performance and productivity (Badrianto and Ekhsan, 2020; Ikechukwu et al., 2019). To satisfy the needs of their employees, particularly good working conditions, ecotourism businesses need to increase employees' efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and job commitment. This same principle applies to ecotourism enterprises in the four local municipalities.

4.3 Promotional opportunities in ecotourism jobs

Creating and providing equitable access to promotional opportunities is key to attracting and retaining talent in any organisation, including ecotourism companies (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2023). Participants were asked if there were any opportunities for career advancement in their ecotourism companies. Not only do meaningful promotional opportunities enhance staff morale and professional development, but also they help to reduce labour turnover, which is detrimental to both organisational performance and customer satisfaction. The participants rated promotional opportunities in their organisations as follows:

Figure 6: Promotional opportunities

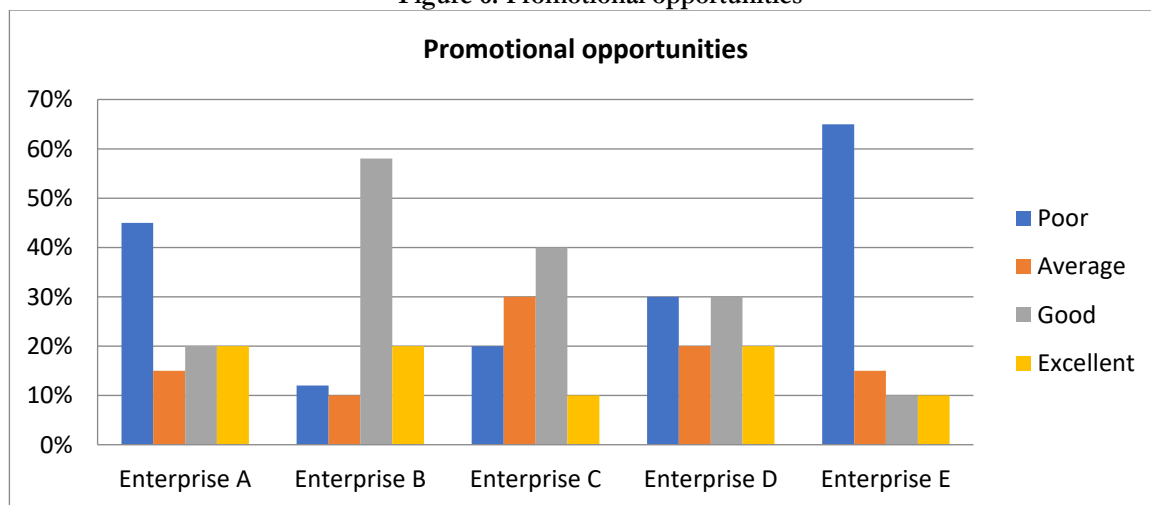


Figure 6 suggests that employees had different perceptions about promotional opportunities in their respective organisations. For example, in Enterprise A, the employees felt that opportunities for promotion were poor (45%); average (15%), good (20%), or excellent (20%). Over half (58%) of Enterprise B's staff members expressed general satisfaction with their

organization's promotion opportunities, compared to 40% who shared similar views in Enterprise C. In Enterprise D, only 30% of the employees thought that promotional opportunities were poor in their organisation. Similarly, 65% of Enterprise E's workforce said that the company didn't offer enough opportunities for advancement. In all five businesses, less than 20% of workers felt that their jobs offered great opportunities for advancement. These findings demonstrate that there were opportunities for career advancement in some of the ecotourism ventures in the four local municipalities, despite the differences in the promotional opportunities offered by each ecotourism enterprise. An owner of an ecotourism business stated:

"We tell our employees that they can be anything they want in life if they work hard and respect the rules; we will support and keep them. It all depends on each person's attitude. If they are motivated to work and show respect to others, they get promoted; but if they are not cooperating, we sometimes decide to release them."

The only challenge, as corroborated by the interview respondents in areas like Jozini and UMhlabuyalingana, was the lack of relevant skills on how. The study presents the results of treatment and working relationships as reported by employees of these ecotourism companies. To some extent, the results support the findings of Aynalem et al. (2016) that ecotourism generates a variety of job opportunities across various industries. On the contrary, Baum (2016) found that ecotourism employees were disgruntled with their working conditions, owing to a number of factors, including lack of clear career paths, challenging working conditions, dirty and difficult work, poorer incentives, lack of opportunities for gender and minority groups, precariousness, seasonal employment, and low status at work.

4.4 Treatment at work

The aim of the question was to understand how employees felt about the treatment they get from their employers. Fair and equal treatment of all employees at work has been found to improve staff perceptions about the organisation and their interactions with management (Wang and Seifert, 2020). In other words, the way in which an organisation treats and handles its human resources determines the success or failure of organisations. Figure 7 below presents mixed results, with many employees rating their organisations as good or average.

Figure 7: Treatment /working relationship

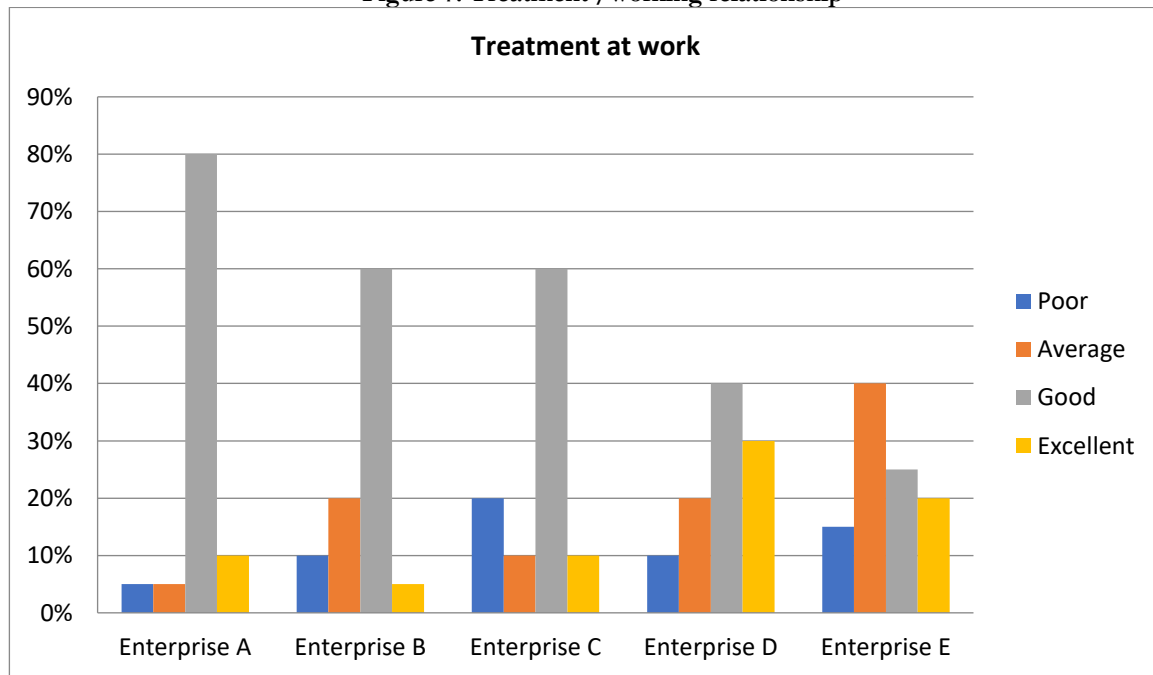


Figure 7 indicates that almost 80% of the employees in Enterprise A felt that the treatment they received in their organisation was good. Similarly, 60% of employees in Enterprises B and C had a positive experience with treatment at work. Conversely, a marginally greater proportion of workers (40%) at Enterprise B believed that they were treated poorly by their company. In addition, close to 40% of the employees in Enterprise E felt that the working relationship was average; followed by 20% in Enterprises C and D with a similar experience. On average, the number of employees who experienced excellent treatment across the five enterprises was significantly low, at 15%. The only exception here was Enterprise A, where "excellent ratings" averaged 30%. On the whole, these findings suggest that job satisfaction can be achieved in ecotourism enterprises if working conditions are gradually improved in order to accommodate the employees' diverse needs. The interviews revealed the following:

"As soon as they join the company, we ensure that they understand what we do, and how we work, and what they are expected to do. So, our people will know from day one that we are a company that loves its guests and that we always strive for excellence in what we do. So, trust and mutual respect are our important values, and many of our staff members are comfortable with that."

The results presented above are consistent with the literature, which underscores the importance of human resources in ensuring high-quality ecotourism services. Employees were found to be the most indispensable assets of the ecotourism

enterprises. Ecotourism enterprises benefit immensely from an adequate supply of high-quality staff or a sustainable workforce. Fair treatment of staff by management is important because the quality of tourists' experiences and images in an ecotourism destination highly depends on the level of professionalism displayed by staff in each ecotourism enterprise (Aynalem et al., 2016).

4.5 Workload in ecotourism enterprises

The participants were asked to rate their employers in terms of work allocation. Arguably, a happy and committed staff compliment guarantees organisational success. Positive attitudes and feelings about work, co-workers, and management determine high staff morale, which drives productivity and customer satisfaction. Contrary to this reality, it has been contended that heavy workloads and poor treatment of workers at work exacerbate stress levels among employees, thus discouraging creativity and innovation (Adanlawo and Chaka, 2024). The participants rated the workload in their organisations as follows:

Figure 8: Workload in ecotourism enterprises

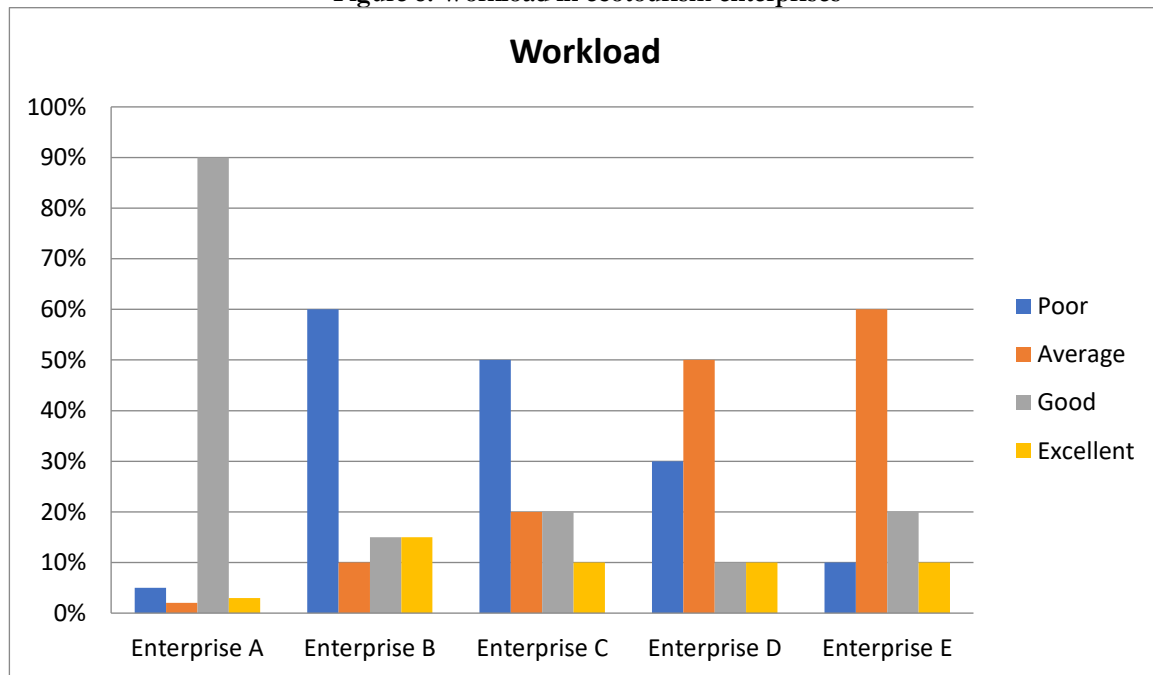


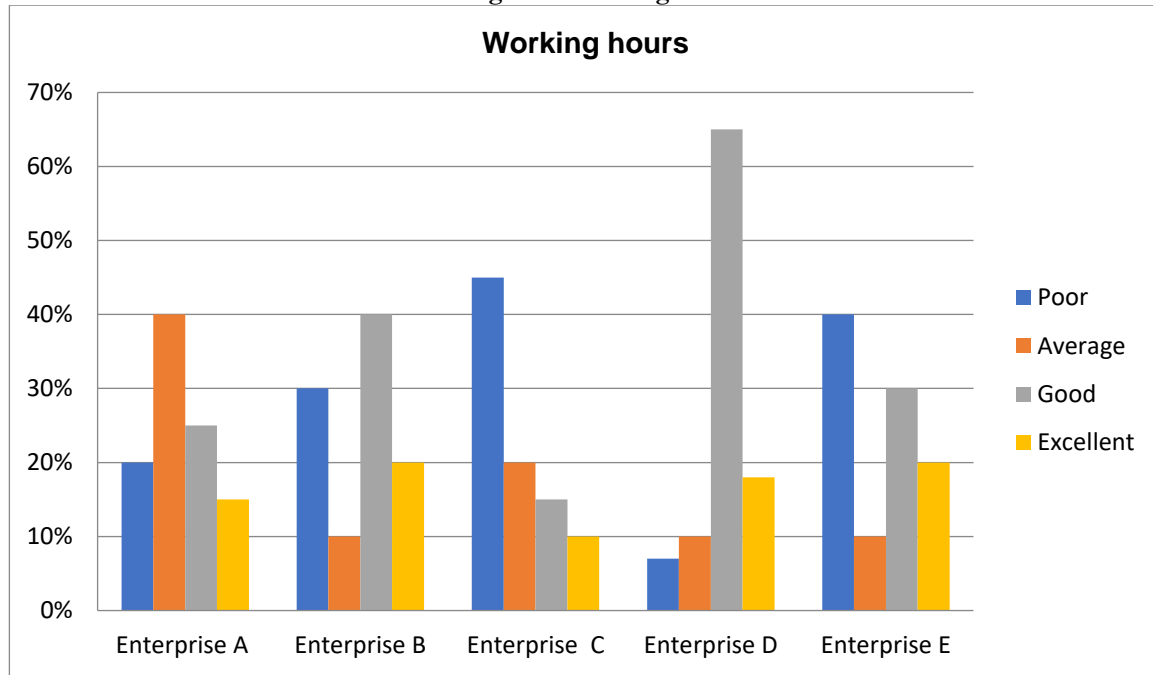
Figure 8 shows that the majority (90%) of employees in Enterprise A felt that their workload was good. Contrary to this, most employees in the other four enterprises felt that their workloads were either poor or average, an indication that some of these employees were generally unhappy with the current work allocated to them in these organisations. Most of the negative experiences about workload were reported by employees who occupied either temporary or part-time positions, which were said to be very demanding during peak times when more tourists visited areas like St. Lucia (Mtubatuba Local Municipality), Hluhluwe Game Reserve (Hlabisa Local Municipality), and Sodwana Bay (UMhlabuyalingana Local Municipality). Insights from the interviews held with owners of ecotourism enterprises confirmed the cyclical nature of ecotourism work as follows: *“The amount of work given to staff each day is determined by the orders and bookings that we get from visitors; hence, there is no fixed work. Our employees know that because we talk to them about it, and they know that if opportunities arise, we have to use them because we may not have them again in the future. So, everyone is committed, and they realize the fruits of putting extra effort into their work-related bonuses when they have met their performance targets.”*

The adverse findings on workload presented in Figure 8 are consistent with research undertaken by Landsbergis et al. (2017), which found that staff shortages, time constraints, work overload, long working hours, shift work, and difficult customers all contributed to a stressful working environment for employees. Unhappy employees are prone to stress, resulting in absenteeism, dishonesty, and exacerbated staff turnover, thus decreasing the profitability of the ecotourism business.

Working hours in ecotourism enterprises

Basically, the question was intended to explore how employees felt about the working hours in their respective organisations. Research shows that the manner in which working time is allocated, utilised and managed directly impacts the achievement of an organisation's strategic goals and the retention of human capital (Holly & Alwine, 2012; Abid, 2017). Coupled with heavy workloads, long working hours impact negatively on the employees' health and well-being (Hong et al., 2022). Worse still, poor management of these issues may prompt the resignation of some employees from the organisation as a result of depression, fatigue, and burnout (Linos et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the participants rated working hours in their organisations as follows:

Figure 9: Working hours



The results in Figure 9 show that most (65%) employees in Enterprise D perceived the working hours as generally good, followed by Enterprise C, where almost 60% of the employees also thought that their working hours were good. To some degree, the majority of employees in these two enterprises were generally satisfied with the working hours stipulated by their employers. In contrast, 40% of Enterprise E employees felt that the working hours in their organisation were poor. A similar situation was reported in Enterprise D, where 8% of the surveyed employees also felt that working hours in their workplace were poor. In some way, these findings suggest that some of the employees in the participating ecotourism enterprises probably worked longer hours than their counterparts in the other ecotourism companies. Very few (1%) employees across the five ecotourism enterprises felt that their working hours were excellent; suggesting that improvements were necessary in ensuring that the working hours conform to the generally accepted norm of 48 hours per week for all salaried employees in South Africa. This common low rating also implies that the perceptions of employees regarding working hours were somewhat identical across the five ecotourism companies. During the interviews with operators of ecotourism companies, one participant revealed that:

“This is a very unpredictable industry. Sometimes we have work, and sometimes we don’t. So, we always think about tomorrow, worried about the survival of the business. This affects our decisions regarding the number of people we can afford to keep and what we can do for them in terms of skills and welfare.”

The mixed results on the working conditions, particularly the working hours, treatment, pay, et cetera, are consistent with the findings of other researchers. For example, Aynalem et al. (2016) found that while ecotourism brought jobs and income for locals, the challenges were poor pay and working conditions, sexual harassment, discrimination, unequal treatment, low educational attainment and training, a rigid and undemocratic corporate culture, and a drastically reduced number of visitors while also exacerbating staff turnover in ecotourism enterprises.

In a related study, Hong et al. (2022) found that dissatisfaction with compensation, supervisors' management style, and general working conditions had seriously hampered employee motivation. Their lack of motivation and discontent would probably lead them to look for other employment elsewhere. Workers are frequently exploited when there is an excessive focus on attaining results through strict performance management procedures. This is because individuals at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy may put in the most effort for the least compensation.

Other researchers found that satisfying hygiene factors, such as clear job responsibilities and consistent working hours (Pham and Nguyen, 2020), quality supervision, leader facilitation and support (Bailey et al., 2016), and a team environment (Hylton and Vu, 2019), increase the retention of employees. According to Xaba (2024), in the tourism and hospitality sectors, self-fulfillment and favorable working conditions were more important for employee retention than financial compensation.

Conclusion

The study revealed different experiences regarding the implementation of ecotourism projects in the local communities of Jozini, Hlabisa, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalingana. On the positive side, the overall impression was that some communities were knowledgeable about ecotourism services; however, most of this information was essentially the preserve of key role players, such as tourism developers, wildlife management services, and established ecotourism companies. Adversely, it was felt that the available ecotourism opportunities were accessible to white-owned ventures. To some extent, these results contradicted the thrust of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (2003), which encourages a meaningful transformation of the ecotourism sector through increased participation of previously disadvantaged groups in the sector. The common trend was that, owing to extreme poverty, communities tried everything to get a share of the ecotourism pie,

including the harvesting and selling of honey along the routes frequented by tourists (Mtubatuba); collecting and selling braai wood and precious stones such as quartz to tourists (Jozini); handcraft in Mbazwana (UMhlabuyalingana); and performing arts (Hlabisa).

Most of these activities were informal and focused on meeting the subsistence needs of community members; the findings reveal gaps in both management and coordination of ecotourism activities in the study area. In light of these findings, the study concludes that communities in these local municipalities had more negative than positive experiences of ecotourism practice, partly due to a lack of relevant information, support, knowledge, and business skills on how to best capitalise on ecotourism opportunities and related activities.

Ecotourism interventions have largely been commoditised, modernised and formalised in a manner that hugely benefits the main players at the expense of the local communities. Not only have ecotourism goods and services been commercialised, but they have also been packaged and branded exclusively without proper consideration for the negative impacts of commercialisation on local cultures and the natural environment. Consequently, a paradigm shift is inevitable to ensure that ecotourism retains its originality and authenticity in the eyes of local people and tourists. Future research requires a more comprehensive, longitudinal study to track and measure the socio-economic impact of ecotourism projects in KwaZulu-Natal Province in its entirety.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors of this manuscript declare that there is no any conflict of interest.

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