
The Role of Ecotourism in the Struggles for Environmental Conservation and Development of Host Communities in Developing Economies: The Case of Mtema Ecotourism Center in South-Eastern Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Ecotourism has been regarded as a form of tourism that is expected to boost conservation and socio-economic development in the rural communities of developing economies, like those of many African countries. Comprehensive literature review on the concepts and discourses of ecotourism has revealed that there is no consensus on what constitutes ecotourism. As such, ecotourism has been defined in a myriad of ways. What remains certain, however, is the fact that ecotourism should help conserve the natural environment and enhance the socio-economic lives of the local community. In line with this understanding, most developing economies have embraced and adopted ecotourism as a key development strategy with the potential to mostly benefit local disadvantaged and marginalized communities living near or around tourist areas. Yet, while ecotourism has the potential to positively contribute towards the growth of these economies, some scholars have been skeptical as to whether ecotourism should be considered a panacea to the multiple challenges bedeviling the economies of developing countries. In order to examine the contributions in and impacts (negative or otherwise) of ecotourism on host economies, this paper undertakes an in-depth analysis of ecotourism in developing economies and adopts Mtema Ecotourism Center in south-eastern Zimbabwe as a case study. Mtema Ecotourism Center is an ecotourism center in developing Zimbabwe; the case study implies that the selected center represents many others.

Key words: *Ecotourism, host local community, developing economies, Mtema Ecotourism Center Zimbabwe.*

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1. Introduction

There has been a great deal of research devoted to the role of ecotourism in enhancing the economic status of host and local communities in developing countries in Africa and beyond. It is arguably true that ecotourism is one of the fastest growing sub-segments of the tourism industry that has stamped its authority in today's world economy. Honey and Gilpin (2009), for instance, confirmed the notion that tourism is the fourth largest industry in the global economy. This connotes that the growth rate of tourism and its forms, particularly ecotourism has spurred challenges on the socio-environment of cultural and natural landscapes worldwide. Supporting the same assertion, The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) has estimated that tourism generates some 12% of world's total Gross National Product (GNP) (Pederson, 2002). This being the case, tourism especially ecotourism has emerged as a striking chord section of tourism that seems to be the remedy for the prevailing socio-cultural and environmental challenges bedeviling the universe. Consequently, several governments of the developing economies characterized by ballooning unemployment rates, sky-rocketing cumulative international debts and worsening trade terms have turned to the promotion of ecotourism hoping that it brings foreign exchange and investment (Merg, 1999) to improve their economies. Complimentarily, leading international agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations agencies and business organizations like the WTTC have been substantially involved in making ecotourism a truly leading global industry (WTO, 2003).

African countries like Zimbabwe, South Africa and Kenya that are endowed with vast and diverse unparalleled natural and man-made tourist attractions, have taken up ecotourism. Taking the example of Zimbabwe, it is undoubtedly true that this part of Africa has, for a very long time, continued to be thronged with visitors from diverse backgrounds despite its recent socio-political challenges. This owes to the majestic and aesthetic nature of the country's major attractions that have lured millions of visitors from across the globe.

Yet, while ecotourism is widely believed to have the potential to enhance the well-being of host local community members and the natural environment, it has been met with serious criticism from some scholars and/or organizations. Merg (1999), for example, has argued that although ecotourism continues to offer practical solutions for economic growth of many developing economies in Africa, it is also coming with multiple negative impacts on the social, political and environmental set up of the continent. For Merg, the natural environment can be singled out as the major area mostly affected by the [negative] impacts, particularly the destruction of biodiversity, of tourism and its other forms such as, ecotourism.

While the above argument might be true about some developing countries in Africa, it does not render ecotourism a futile adventure, because it has proven to be a source of enhancement of livelihood for many local communities in other developing countries like Zimbabwe. The latter being home to numerous forms of ecotourism facilities and attractions unique in their nature, promises to contribute immensely to the national economy, enhance the well-being of the local communities and protect the natural environments.

This paper is structured in such a way that a quick rundown of it would give one a clear understanding of ecotourism. It first grapples with various debates concerning the concept of ecotourism and then it discusses the possible impacts of ecotourism on both the local/host communities and the natural environments within which these ecotourism centers are located. The paper adopts Mutema Ecotourism Center (MEC) as a case study. The choice of MEC is not accidental, but owes to the center's strategic position as one of the few centers amidst a rural set up where the natural environment has been minimally disturbed by anthropogenic activities.

2. Conceptual Analysis of Ecotourism

While conventional tourism has often been perceived as naturally insensitive to local host communities and their natural environments, it has been argued by some scholars such as Honey and Gilpin (2009) that other forms of tourism have emerged in recent decades that appear to be more sensitive to their surroundings and offer tangible benefits to the local labor force. The most prominent of these forms has come to be known as ecotourism, a term in the tourism industry that has been loosely understood as responsible travel to natural areas that aims at conserving the environment and improving the well-being of local people (Lindsay, 2003).

It is worth noting that ecotourism as a concept is believed to have first emerged in the late 1970s, and since then the term has dominated several other travel concepts that are, in essence, variations on the same theme. These include geotourism, pro-poor tourism, sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, alternative tourism, soft tourism, green tourism, adventure, or responsible tourism and travelers' philanthropy (see Wight, 1993; Honey and Gilpin, 2009). What is common in all the aforementioned terms is, however, that they are united by the simple idea that tourism should offer benefits—and not incur costs or burden—to host communities and the natural environments. As emphatically expressed by Honey and Gilpin (2009), all these terms reflect the desire of many holiday goers to give something back to the places they visit, or at the very least, avoid doing them harm.

While the above holds true for the said genres of tourism, ecotourism per se has not been an easy concept to define with precision. Different scholars from diverse backgrounds have attempted to proffer their own

definitions which, however, have never been adequate and exhaustive enough to address the various activities that fall within the precincts of ecotourism. Consequently, defining ecotourism has proven to be an extremely difficult and challenging endeavor tantamount to chasing the wind. Yet some working and seemingly convincing definitions of ecotourism have been conjured up. Cater (1991), for instance equates eco-tourism with 'green' tourism, that is, tourism which focuses on the need to promote a symbiotic, or co-existent relationship between tourism and environmental conservation. For Cater, as with many other scholars, ecotourism should advocate for secure livelihoods of the poor, equitable distribution of tourism benefits, equal participation in decision-making, on issues concerned with socio-economic development, by stakeholders and promotion of environmental conservation. On the same stroke, Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) states that ecotourism is a form of tourism that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations and promotes visitor awareness in environmental conservation.

Capturing Cater and Ceballos-Lascurain's thinking above, the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism has considered ecotourism as tourism which includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributes to their well-being (Weaver, 2008). In this definition as in the preceding ones, the ideas of active community involvement and environmental conservation are largely understood as integral components of 'sustainable' ecotourism. It is from this understanding that important ecotourism organizations such as The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (1990; 2006) has defined ecotourism as "the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." This is to say that, for TIES, a walk in the forest by a visitor, for instance, is not ecotourism unless it benefits in one way or the other the environment within which this walk is being taken and the people who live in or around that environment. While this definition appears convincing, given the primary role of ecotourism, it exclusively focuses on the conservation of the visited environment and well being of the local host communities without being specific on how the well-being of the local people should be improved and the natural environment benefited. It also excludes the need to respect local cultures and human rights of the local host communities-the directly affected people. Having noticed these shortfalls, Honey (2008: 29-31) sought to revise the definition offered by TIES. To this effect, she argues that ecotourism should encompass all the following seven characteristics:

- Travelling to natural destinations
- Building of environmental awareness

- Minimizing the negative impact on host local communities and the environment
- Providing direct financial benefit for conservation of biological and cultural diversity
- Providing benefit and empowerment for the local people by providing them with jobs and quotas
- Respecting local cultures
- Supporting human rights and democratic movements.

For the purpose of this study, Honey's approach to what ecotourism must involve shall be adopted as it is one of the most comprehensive, all-encompassing and standard understanding of what should be considered better practices of ecotourism. Put differently, it is indeed highly doubtful to say that any one definition can claim to satisfy all concerned scholars in the field. Nevertheless, Honey's concept of ecotourism has fast gained prominence over others as it comprehensively gives a base of ideas to work from when looking into what ecotourism should and/or shouldn't involve.

3. The Evolution and Status of Ecotourism in Zimbabwe

It is unwise to attempt to have an appreciation of the evolution of ecotourism in Zimbabwe before revisiting the evolution of tourism per se as it is the latter that subsequently gave birth to the former.

Tourism is the second largest foreign currency earner for Zimbabwe after mining (Mushawevato, 2012). According to Mushawevato, Tourism in 2011 contributed 10.3 % to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country, occupying second place after mining. It also contributes significantly to the socio-economic development of the sub-Saharan region as a whole.

In Zimbabwe, the history of tourism dates back to the 18th century albeit proper tourism practices come with the occupation and colonization of the Zimbabwean plateau by the British South Africa Company (BSAC) in 1890 (Matenga, 1998; Ndoro, 2000; Fontein, 2006). In fact, the opening up of Great Zimbabwe to the outside world chronicled a new chapter in the history of tourism, as hunters, antiquarians and fortune seekers were mistakenly informed that Great Zimbabwe was the capital of the Queen of Sheba (Randall-MacIver, 1906). Thus, a huge influx of people from diverse social orientations, mainly from Great Britain, visited the country to satiate their varied expectations. No sooner had they arrived at Great Zimbabwe than they started to write numerous contradictory articles, which further made the site a center of scholarly attraction. Upon realizing the vast economic potential of Great Zimbabwe, the site was slowly turned into a resort area. The establishment of the Karanga Village, the development of the place into a

golf course and above all, the construction of tourist facilities such as the Great Zimbabwe Hotel in 1905, for instance, support the aforementioned assertion.

Nonetheless, tourism activities in the country almost came to a halt in the late 1970s at the height of the liberation struggle, which subsequently led to political independence in 1980. The attainment of independence saw a significant stride in the development, promotion and rise of tourism and its forms, especially ecotourism, through the then Zimbabwe Tourism Board (Z.T.B), a government arm, which was responsible for promoting and marketing tourism products in the country. After rising during the 1980s through the 1990s, the tourism industry received 1.4 million tourists in 1999 (Pederson, 2002) with ecotourism being the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry, growing annually by 10-15% worldwide (Miller, 2007). It is, however, sad to note that before reaching its peak, ecotourism, not to say the tourism industry per se, was negatively affected by the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) in the mid-1990s and by the historic land reform program - the so-called fast track farm invasions, started in 1999-2000, which dramatically reduced the flow of tourists as Zimbabwe was labeled an unsafe tourist destination. These compound factors resulted in 75% fall in visitors to Zimbabwe and in the drop of ecotourism by December 2000, with only less than 20% of hotel rooms occupied (Pederson, 2002). To further aggravate the situation in ecotourism and the tourism industry in general, several airlines pulled out of Zimbabwe citing poor governance and political instability. However, with the Global Political Agreement (GPA) in 2008, ecotourism has been able to bounce back and once again grow significantly; surpassing many other forms of tourism. This has made tourism authorities such as The World Tourism Council to project that if the socio-political situation remains stable, Zimbabwe will be the fastest growing travel and tourism industry in the period 2012 with 8.7 % annualized growth compared to 10 % for China which is in pole position (Mushawevato, 2012).

4. The Current Perception of Ecotourism in Zimbabwe

With the economic squalors that befell Zimbabwe in the turn of the new millennium, it was mandatory that the country focuses on industries that directly benefit local communities, especially in the rural areas where majority of the population dwell. Among these industries is ecotourism whose objective is to enhance the well-being of local community members and conserve the natural environment around or within areas where ecotourism centers are located.

In Zimbabwe, the concept of ecotourism was first introduced in rural communities that existed around national parks under the Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE)

in the mid 1980s. The major aim of CAMPFIRE and the ecotourism development per se is, according to Odero and Huchu (1998) and CAMPFIRE Association Annual Report (1999-2000), to pin at providing income to the surrounding local communities and promote the conservation of natural resources through wildlife management. As a result, many rural communities in Zimbabwe have become proactive in protecting wildlife in the name of ecotourism and in seeing them as valuable reservoirs of wealth.

In an endeavor to revive the Zimbabwean economy as well as to make ecotourism viable, the government embarked on a massive image building exercise worldwide (Mawere, 2011b). This has yielded positive results, as a significant number of traditional tourists have yet again considered Zimbabwe's ecotourist and tourist areas as some of the treasures of Africa. This is confirmed by the recent agreement between Zimbabwe's Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality and the government of Zambia to co-host the World Tourism Organization (WTO) in 2013 (WTO, 2003) with focus on global awareness of the need to protect the natural environment and enhance cultures of 'other peoples'. Such a focus in itself is a clear testimony that there is a major inclination towards ecotourism in Zimbabwe as in many other developing countries in Africa and beyond. With the expansion of ecotourism over the past two decades world-wide, African countries have thrust forward with ecotourism investment (Mbaiwa, 2002). As a result of the recognition of ecotourism's growth potential, particularly to developing countries, the United Nation's Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism. Thus, further growth is expected in Zimbabwe, as in other African countries [like Kenya and South Africa], in future. To date, there are about 440 protected areas, including ecotourism centers, in sub-Saharan Africa covering about 2,600,000 square hectares (Vieta, 1999). In terms of ecotourism centers, Mtema Ecotourism Center (MEC) in Southeastern Zimbabwe is one example among many; hence the reason for its adoption as case for this study.

5. Locating Mtema Ecotourism Center: A brief background

Narrowing down our focus to Mtema Ecotourism Center (MEC), which is the case study adopted in this paper, a unique dimension of ecotourism centers in developing economies is provided. The ecotourism center was created in 2005 with the aim to conserve the natural environment and enhance (verbs need to be balanced) culture and well-being of the people around the center (Interview with Mr Mtema, 2012). It is located in Southeastern Zimbabwe, about 85 km and 2 km from Masvingo City and Nyika Growth Point, respectively.

In terms of climate, MEC has mild climatic conditions with an annual average temperature of 20 degree Celsius. The maximum monthly temperature mean exceeds 30 degrees Celsius especially in October and

November which are the hottest months of the year in the country. In winter the minimum monthly temperature mean is around 10 degrees Celsius in the months of June and July respectively. The area is distinct in that while most parts of Masvingo fall under climatic region 4 which receives less than 500mm rainfall per annum, the area where MEC is situated falls under climatic region 2 with approximately 800mm rainfall per annum. January, which happens to be the wettest month, has an average of 250mm rainfall amount (Michie and Nhandara, 2010).

MEC, whose flora is largely limited to *Brachystegia spiciformis* (musasa), *Paranari curatellifolia* (muchakata), *Julbernardia globiflora* (munhondo), among other indigenous species, has been a center of attraction to people of different backgrounds, living in different historical epochs that used the area for diverse purposes. A preliminary survey carried out with people around MEC by researchers confirmed, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the area was once inhabited during the early and late Iron Age period (Survey, 2012).

Although there are several hills and mountains within the broader landscape, it is curious to note that the hill on which the ecotourism center is situated was once used as a burial shrine by the people who lived there under the reign of Chief Marozva. The natural beauty and set up of the area further lured the government to construct a dam that supplies water to the nearby Nyika Growth Point located at the foot of the hill. The dam was successfully completed in 1990. Today, the dam, which is perennial, has also created an unparalleled wetland, the so-called Rozva Wetland. The existence of the dam further compelled the government to set up an irrigation scheme a few kilometers away- that is currently providing benefits to the local residents living within the environs of the dam. Apart from that, the presence of the dam has also created a micro environment that is unique in comparison with the surrounding areas.

Taking advantage of the already existing fascinating and intertwined resources, Mr.Chakanyuka Mtema, a local businessman, decided to develop the area into an ecotourism center. The center which targeted visitors from across the globe has a variety of facilities such as, conference house, recreation, conservancy, fishing, boating, game viewing, bird watching, accommodation and entertainment through traditional dances.

6. The Impacts of MEC on the Local Community and the Natural Environment: Methodological Issues

The term local community is problematic to define and so is the concept of community involvement in managing resources locally available in their respective areas. The level at which the local communities

need to be involved in ecotourism activities within their areas is also a matter of concern. In light of these observations, Weaver (2008) notes the difficulties of defining which individuals comprise the community that will have privileged access to participation, funding and the dissemination of any benefits that are generated. He argues that in almost every situation that involves ecotourism activities identifying and defining the community can be extremely complicated and contentious thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict and ultimate failure of the ecotourism project. For the purpose of this study, local community shall be used to refer to the immediate people or the surrounding communities living around the ecotourism center or within the center's sphere of influence.

With regard to this understanding, the current study has set to examine the extent to which MEC has affected (word impact is a noun not a verb, whereas impacted is an adjective with a totally different meaning) the lives of the local and host communities and the natural environment within and around which it is located. In order to determine the degree to which MEC has influenced the lives of local and host community members and the natural environment, a research was carried out between February and March 2012 using a randomly selected sample of 18 people from 15 selected families around the MEC. These families were chosen (over usage of a single word within the same paragraph makes the writing lose its vigor) simply because they are the most directly affected by the existence of MEC due to their proximity with the latter. In addition to the random sample, research was carried out with the Owner/Director of the ecotourism center, Mr. Chakanyuka Mtema as well as the manager of the center, Mr. Muronza. This made the total number of respondents 20. The researchers considered this sample size (of a total of 20 people) as sufficient in providing the general perceptions of the people of Runyare Village whose families are directly affected by the activities of MEC and how they perceive MEC's relationship with the natural environment and the local community members. Besides, direct observations were made to ascertain the extent to which the natural environment within and around MEC has been tampered with by MEC authorities.

Participants interviewed during the study responded to the questions individually and voluntarily. At the same time, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were asked not to identify themselves by names if they chose so. Data collected were tabulated to show frequencies before being subjected to evaluative analysis. Tables 1 and 2 respectively contain details of the people who participated in the study and the data that was gathered during the survey.

7. Results

Observations from the survey data show that MEC has had different impacts on the lives of the local community- both positive and negative. Based on survey results, the ensuing paragraphs examine in depth the positive and negative impacts of MEC on the well-being of the local community members and the natural environment.

7.1 The Perceived Positive Impacts of MEC

Generally speaking, host communities and national governments of many countries always expect successful ecotourism to have a positive impact on the natural environment and the well-being of host community members. Successful ecotourism ventures thus generally generate financial revenue as well as provide valuable jobs that add to the social and economic structure of the local community. Confirming this idea, Vieta (1999) argues that employment generated by ecotourism is sometimes one of the most significant benefits for local communities, providing supplemental income to rural farmers, women and young people. Although these jobs are relatively few in many cases (as has been noted in the case of MEC where the present study was carried out), it is worth noting that they remain an important economic contributor to the development of the community (Weinberg et al., 2002). Even though the workforce at MEC is still relatively low, an in-depth analysis of the ecotourism center revealed that 99.9% of the employees come from local surrounding villages. However, not all family members in the local community around MEC are direct beneficiaries, in terms of jobs. The majority (100%) of our survey respondents indicated that the Center helps the local community in one way or another. For example, during funerals the Center helps with food for mourners. This means that a critical component of MEC's philosophy has become that of strongly being involved in and interacting with the local community. MEC strongly feels that community-based ecotourism is essential in order to ensure that the local people accrue benefits from tourism developments taking place within their areas.

Following the survey results above, it can be argued that the economic might of the ecotourism industry can often help transform societies for the better. Besides benefits being accrued by local community members around MEC, other areas around the globe have also benefited from ecotourism in their local communities. In Costa Rica, for instance, women's handicraft cooperatives catering to the tourist market have flourished, providing many women, for the first time, with both independent incomes and improved self-esteem (Merg 1999). The intrigued scholars like Merg, to proffer the argument that ecotourism enables communities that are poor in material wealth but rich in culture, history, and heritage to use their unique characteristics as an income-generating comparative advantage. Thus, for Merg and indeed so,

ecotourism tends to encourage the development of multiple-use infrastructure, for example, roads and health facilities such as clinics, that benefits the local community/regions.

Besides the creation of employment opportunities for locals in the local community and the provision of benefits in other community activities, the research results revealed that MEC, to a greater extent, is helping to conserve the natural environment of the area. In fact, positive results, 95% and 90% respectively were obtained on whether MEC is destroying aquatic, flora and fauna in the local area. This finding indicates that though MEC requires the monitoring of all its activities and interactions with the natural environment, it is still sensitive to aquatic, flora and fauna lives in the area. If the Center continues with this 'good spirit', this will certainly eschew the tragedy like that of Majune in Manica, Mozambique where due to lack of government initiative, many people by default or otherwise were reluctant to actively take part in good environmental management activities through mining in the area resulting in the wiping away of the scenic beauty of the area before it could realize its full potential as a successful ecotourism center (see Mawere, 2011a).

Still on MEC's interaction and relations with the natural environment, the researchers observed that MEC was constructed in an environmentally and culturally friendly way that took into consideration the genius loci (spirit) of the place (Survey, 2012). This has significantly improved the aesthetic outlook of the area and as a result the pristine environment has attracted a number of animals such as, bush bucks (*tragelephus scripts*), baboons (*parpioursinis*), vevert monkeys (*ciropithecus aethops*), and a variety of birds.

In addition, because the natural environment around MEC is conserved and protected, it has created a micro-climate that has made the area distinct from all the other surrounding areas. Whilst most of the areas in Masvingo Province (where MEC is located) fall in climatic region 4 with an annual rainfall of less than 500mm, the area around MEC falls in climatic region 2. Region 2 receives around 800mm of rainfall per annum. This, however, owes to the unwavering and deliberate efforts invested in conserving the natural environment around MEC. It is also interesting to note that it was by virtue of its conservation status that MEC was chosen as the 2011 venue for the World Wetlands Day which was celebrated under the theme, Wetlands my Leisure my Responsibility. In short, ecotourism is an opportunity to preserve ecosystems and biological diversity that would otherwise be lost.

7.2 On the Negative Side of MEC

Strictly speaking, the role of ecotourism is to enhance culture and well-being of local community members as well as conserving the natural environment around or within areas where ecotourism centers

are located. While this is the ideal that should primarily prevail in all ecotourism areas across the globe, this has not always been the case owing to the fact that many ecotourism ventures are owned and run by foreign corporations or egoistic individual business people providing little or no benefit for local and host communities. Consequently, most of the revenue generated is siphoned off to foreign investors or directed towards self socio-economic development instead of being reinvested in the local and host communities. While in case of MEC, this seems to be still far from imagined, there was a feeling in some local community members (30 %) that MEC is only benefiting selected families in the community. This means that the needs of some local communities are being marginalized as only the 'well-connected' individuals are monopolizing the few job opportunities available, thereby bracketing out the rest of the community members.

Concerning security at the Rozva Dam which is partly controlled by MEC, the majority (60 %) of the respondents indicated that a lot is still desired to be done, especially to improve the security of minors during their visits to the dam. This means that there is the need for MEC to devise practical mechanisms that would improve the safety of all visitors at the centre.

It would be appropriate to remark that there was a lack of knowledge in case of some respondents regarding the question whether MEC is likely to promote moral decadence, for example, prostitution and other violence related problems. To confirm this, 25 % of the respondents were unsure if the center indirectly promoted such activities. It appeared that most of these respondents didn't know about the possible impacts of ecotourism or tourism per se on the culture of the local communities and behavior of the people, especially the youth. The researchers were patient to provide explanations to participants. This was done to ensure that accurate responses from people, directly affected, were obtained.

On the question about whether MEC should be closed, an overwhelming majority (100 %) of respondents strongly disagreed, thus showing support for the ecotourism center's activities. The presence of MEC in the area has become a means for survival (to the locals). Its existence is so deeply woven into the fabric of lives of Chief Marozva's people that they have even accepted it unconsciously. However, many of the respondents (85 %) were quick to point out that though ecotourism in the area has become the source of their livelihood, there is need for a regulatory body to control activities by MEC and help negotiate 'sound' relationships between MEC, the local community and the natural environment. Reasons given varied but the major one was that while ecotourism can bring economic benefits to the local community, it also has the potential to negatively influence the natural environment and the culture of the local people. This suggests that the government, through its Rural District Council (RDC) should work in collaboration

with MEC and put up measures to control the ecotourism activities in the area. This finding concurs with results from a recent study on Mozambique's Green Revolution Program by Mawere (2010) which urges nations, especially the developing ones in Africa, to control anthropogenic impacts on the natural environment in order to cut on the mortality rate, solar radiation, mean air temperature and the decrease in annual rainfall. In the light of these grave concerns, Mawere calls African governments, and in this case Zimbabwe, to reconsider ecotourism; to incorporate environmental ethics and respect both humans' and non-humans' rights (Mawere, 2011a).

7.3 Rethinking Ecotourism in the Context of MEC: The way forward

While MEC is doing a sterling job in trying to enhance the well-being of the local community members and in conserving the natural environment, a lot more still remains to be done. To ensure that the natural environment or biodiversity within MEC's sphere of influence is preserved and the local community accrues maximum benefits from the ecotourism activities taking place in their area, the local members should be fully empowered. Such empowerment can only be recognized and achieved if a framework of empowerment is issued at the following four levels: psychological, social, political (Friedmann, 1992) and economic empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). As argued by Scheyvens, ecotourism should economically bring lasting gains to a local or host community. The cash that is earned is shared between many households in the host community. As a result, there are visible signs of improvements from the cash that is earned. For example, there has been some improvements made in water systems and some houses are now built of more permanent materials. Psychologically, ecotourism should improve self-esteem and ideas of low-status within the sectors of the society such as that of women through the recognition of their unique knowledge of the culture, and natural resources as well as their traditional knowledge of practices. In terms of social empowerment, ecotourism should maintain or enhance the local community's 'socio-cultural equilibrium'. Community cohesion is improved as individuals and families work together to build a successful ecotourism venture. Funds raised are used for community development purposes, for example, building schools and improving roads. And, politically, ecotourism should provide a forum through which people can speak about questions relating to the ecotourism venture(s) and have their voices heard and concerns attended to. Agencies initiating or implementing the ecotourism venture should seek out the opinions of community groups (Scheyvens, 1999) (including special interest groups of women, youths and other socially disadvantaged groups) and provide opportunities for them to be represented on decision-making bodies, the Wildlife Park Board for instance. It is therefore vital to note that the potential economic benefits that tourism can bring do not materialize without careful planning. Such is a framework that lacks at MEC and should be adopted to ensure that the local community fully

benefits from the ecotourism proceeds in the area. In Scheyvens' (1999: 247) words, such "an empowerment framework has been devised to provide a mechanism with which the effectiveness of ecotourism initiatives, in terms of their impacts on local communities, can be determined".

In view of the foregoing, we recommend that the Mutema Ecotourism Center (MEC) actively involves other stakeholders such as National Parks, Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), AGRITEX, CAMPFIRE, Veterinary Department and local stakeholders. This would help the center to ensure that all needs and activities that require expertise from any of the stakeholders are properly done, that is, realized in a manner that does not, in any way, upset the ecosystem and the local community. This is important given that ecotourism as a type of tourism cuts across many sectors and levels of implementation as well as of interests. This is confirmed by Cater (1994: 21) who asserts that:

The relationship between tourism development, socio-economic development and the environment is circular and cumulative. Most tourism activities exert additional pressures on the environmental resources upon which it is based, compromising the present and future interests of tourists and host populations as well as of tourism organizations.

The assertion by Cater connotes that the different stakeholders mentioned above should be given the mandate to participate in activities of the center, monitor, regulate and harmonize interests and activities by the ecotourism centers and the local host communities to promote a 'generative dialogue' (Verran, 2011) between MEC, the local host community and the natural environment.

Also, taking into consideration the fact that the area where MEC is located has some interesting archaeological objects scattered on the surface, archaeologists/experts in cultural heritage should be consulted so that they advise on how the artifacts can best be either rescued or conserved for posterity. This is very important especially considering that heritage is priceless. We therefore recommend that MEC constructs a relatively small museum that would feature the aforementioned artifacts. The setting up of a museum would enhance and broaden the activities and benefits offered by the ecotourism center as well as incorporating a cultural heritage dimension which is unusual to most ecotourism centers.

8. Conclusion

In this study, it has been argued that ecotourism is a thriving global industry with the power to shape economies of developing countries such as Zimbabwe, if exploited in a manner that seeks to enhance the well-being of local and host communities and conserve the natural environment. If properly adopted, planned and executed, the industry will go a long way to economically empower host and local

communities by improving their standard of living as well as changing and challenging the way they think and look at things. MEC serves as a case in point of an ecotourism venture that has promoted the conservation of the natural environment as well as financially and socially benefitted the local community, of course though with its own limitations.

More importantly, it has been argued that not all efforts that bill themselves as ecotourism are beneficial to the local community and the natural environment. McLaren (1998) notes that: "At its worst, eco-travel is environmentally destructive, economically exploitative, culturally insensitive, 'green washed' travel". This therefore means that ecotourism is not a magic pill with the ability to always transform economies of developing countries for the better as it is not easy to strike a balance between preservation and development. In order for ecotourism to promote conservation of the natural environment and enhance the well-being of local people, ecotourism centers in conjunction with the national government should ensure that the local communities are empowered socially, economically, politically and psychologically.

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Appendix

Table 1. Details on Study Participants (Survey 2012)

Occupation	Gender	
	Male	Female
Farmer	2	5
Manager	1	0
Business people	1	0
Religious people	1	2
Students	2	2
Cattle herders	3	1

Table 2. Responses to the questions asked about people's perceptions of MEC (Survey 2012)

ITEM	RESPONSES		
	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Uncertain
1. Mutema ecotourism Centre benefits the local community with jobs and in funerals	20	0	0
2. Mutema Ecotourism Centre is destroying flora and fauna in the community	1	18	1
3. Mutema Ecotourism Centre is destroying the aquatic life in Rozva Dam	0	19	1
4. Mutema Ecotourism Centre robbed the local community of their traditional land for pasturing cattle and gathering firewood	5	15	0
5. Mutema Ecotourism Centre took away the people's land traditionally used as a burial site	2	18	0
6. Prostitution and violence related problems are likely to increase as a result of the ecotourism centre	10	5	5
7. There is poor security, especially for children at Rozva Dam which makes part of the Ecotourism Centre	10	8	2
8. Mutema Ecotourism Centre is only benefiting selected families in the local community	6	12	2
9. Mutema Ecotourism Centre should be closed	0	20	0
10. There should be a body that regulates relationships between the Ecotourism Centre and the local community	17	1	2