

**IN SEARCH OF A BETTER AND VIABLE ECOTOURISM INDUSTRY:  
LESSONS FROM MTEMA ECOTOURISM CENTRE, SOUTHEASTERN ZIMBABWE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Zimbabwe like many other developing countries in Africa has an emerging ecotourism industry that is fast growing. This is considered positive as ecotourism is primarily meant to benefit the local host community and conserve the environment. Yet, whilst the industry has the potential to boost the national economy and enhance the status of local host community it has met with criticism. Drawing on the positive and negative impacts of Mutema Ecotourism Centre (MEC) in southeastern Zimbabwe, we demonstrate the complexities and subtle nuances of consolidating possible benefits of ecotourism in a society that is threatened by globalization and riddled by abject poverty, weak erratic power supply and underdeveloped industrial base. Against this background, we argue that the institution of robust practices that support ecotourism should be constructively aligned with its grassroots implementation (at institutional levels) to foster epistemological access and develop 'best practices' of environmental management and a culturally responsive, knowledge rich environment that promote sustainable ecotourism- an ecotourism that enhances the status of local host communities and biodiversity. We further argue that to confront the possible adverse impacts and the potential jeopardy caused by ecotourism, MEC should make partnership with the Ministry of Lands and Agriculture as well as Ministries of Tourism, Education, Sports and Culture, National Parks and Wildlife, AGRITEX, Veterinary Services, among others to establish a Monitoring Committee consisting of scientists and experts from different ministries and relevant bodies to help manage the environment sustainably and enhance local cultures in the name of ecotourism.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, local host communities, developing economies, Mutema Ecotourism Centre, southeastern Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

In recent times, ecotourism has become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry, growing annually by 10-15% worldwide (Miller, 2007). Tourism can be defined as “polite, organized sticky-beaking (to satisfy one’s curiosity) into other people’s places and cultures” (Panos, 1997; Neill, 2004). This means that tourism involves organized traveling to other places, and ecotourism as a form of tourism also involves travelling. Perhaps it pays to define ecotourism though briefly as this will be discussed in detail in the ensuing discussion. Technically, ecotourism can be defined as:

*Environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996).*

Following the definition above, it is clear that ecotourism normally involve both cultural and natural environments and, also seeks to conserve the natural environment and most importantly to benefit the local host communities. In this regard, it should be remarked that ecotourism plays a significant role especially in Third World economies like Zimbabwe which have little other than their natural resource endowment upon which to base their development. Yet ecotourism especially its impact on the culture of local host communities and the natural environment has been heavily contested in the last two decades in many countries across the globe. In fact there are monumental studies on the merits of ecotourism in terms of its potential to promote the growth of developing economies. Other studies have however devoted more attention to examining the negative impacts of ecotourism on local host communities and the natural environment. Cater(1993) for example has argued that it is precisely the more remote, less developed tourism areas that eco-tourists seek which are most vulnerable to cultural disruption and environmental degradation. In the words of Cater (ibid: 85) “. . . there is a very real danger of viewing ecotourism as the universal panacea, and the eco-tourist as some magic breed, mitigating all tourism’s ills”. Emphasizing the same point, other scholars like Hvenegaard (1994), Cater and Lowman (1994) have cautioned us from uncritically accepting ecotourism as a common good as it can impact negatively on both the natural environment and the life of host local communities. We therefore attempt to demonstrate that ecotourism can promote the growth of developing economies without impacting negatively on the local host communities and the natural environment if all its (ecotourism) activities are carefully planned, executed and controlled. We marshal ‘sustainable’ ecotourism and position it against the Zimbabwean ecotourism landscape, particularly the Mutema Ecotourism Centre (MEC) in order to unravel the extent to which MEC captures sustainable ecotourism and informs this genre of ecotourism.

It is worth noting that the social pressures by interested groups and academics on ecotourism, the need for economic growth by developing economies and the need for socially relevant epistemologies on issues of biodiversity and culture studies have necessitated ecotourism industry to revisit its activities, and especially, to foreground ‘sustainable ecotourism’.

This study is based on fieldwork undertaken in Mutema Ecotourism Centre (MEC) and the surrounding local community between February and March 2012. Drawing on the above observations and the case study of MEC, we argue that ecotourism, and ‘unsustainable tourism’ in particular have not only undermined possibilities for ecotourism to be ranked

among the most lucrative enterprises that excel in both benefiting local host communities and promoting conservation of natural environments without compromising the legitimacy of the entire ecotourism industry.

In view of the above, the present study argues for sustainable ecotourism that seeks to benefit the local host communities by empowering them economically, socially, politically and psychologically while at the same time conserve the natural environment for now and for posterity. For this to be an audible reality, the paper urges that an independent regulatory body or what we call 'Monitoring Committee' be put in place with the obligation to monitor all activities by MEC. This is important because when business is the main driving force behind ecotourism, there is high likelihood that the ventures which emerge sooner or later may jeopardize, rather than benefit local host communities and conserve the natural environment. In fact it is only when the local host communities are benefited and the natural environment conserved that ecotourism can be considered a successful and viable industry.

### **UNDERSTANDING ECOTOURISM**

It is arguably true that the term ecotourism is possibly the most over-used and most-abused of all concepts in the tourism industry. This being the case, the concept of ecotourism has become somehow difficult to pin down or define with precision. This in turn has resulted in the concept being defined differently by special interest groups such as national governments, academics, environmentalists and others. This has been further aggravated by contentions among scholars and interested groups on the limit at which biodiversity, economic benefits, socio-cultural and environmental impacts should be considered. Environmentalists, for instance, have generally insisted that "ecotourism is nature-based, sustainably managed, conservation supporting and educative" (Buckley, 1994). On the other hand, governments and the tourist industry in general have focused more on the product aspect considering ecotourism as equivalent to any form of tourism based in nature (Touhino & Hynonen, 2001). Amidst all these debates, one thing has however remained certain, that ecotourism is a form of tourism that involves visiting the usually protected areas for purposes of politically empowering the local host communities, enhancing cultural integrity of the local host community, educate tourists and providing funds for ecological (flora and fauna) conservation.

Though ecotourism has been a bit difficult to define, some working definitions have been conjured by scholars and organizations since the 1980s when ecotourism was perceived a critical and worthwhile endeavor for conserving the natural environment and 'indigenous' cultures, and for enhancing the socio-economic status of the local host communities. This is emphasized by Honey (2008: 33), who insists that "since the 1980s, ecotourism has been considered a critical endeavor by environmentalists so that future generations may experience destinations relatively untouched by human intervention." It is from understanding such as this that The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (1990, 2006) defines ecotourism as "the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." This means that, for TIES, a walk in the forest, for instance, is not ecotourism unless it benefits in some way(s) the environment and the people who live in or around that environment. While this definition makes a lot of sense, it exclusively focuses on the conservation of the visited environment and well being of the local host communities: it is not specific on how the well-being

of the local people should be benefited. It also excludes the need to respect local cultures and human rights of the local host communities.

Having noticed these flaws, Honey (2008: 29-31) sought to revise the definition offered by TIES. She argues that ecotourism should include all the following seven characteristics; the first characteristic is that ecotourism involves travelling to natural destinations. The second is that ecotourism is instrumental in building environmental awareness. The third characteristic is that it minimizes the negative impact to local host communities and the environment. The fourth characteristic is that ecotourism provides direct financial benefit for conservation of biological and cultural diversity. The fifth is that ecotourism provides benefit and empowerment for the local people by creating jobs and providing them with quotas. The sixth is that ecotourism respects local cultures. The last characteristic is that ecotourism supports human rights and democratic movements.

It should be remarked that because many tourism projects do not meet these standards, some scholars have considered ecotourism as an unsuccessful adventure. Rattner in Bulletin 99 (161), for instance, argues that the “so-called ecotourism can have a very negative environmental effect”. He gives an example of the Black River in Jamaica, where crocodiles are disappearing because of the number of motorized tourist launches. This however, does not render ecotourism futile but “there is a need for an approach to ecotourism which starts from the needs, concerns and welfare of local host communities” (Scheyvens,1999:246)-an approach that seeks to benefit the local host communities, the visitors and the nation at large in the seven ways elaborated by Honey. From the foregoing, it should be emphasized that ecotourism involves travel to places where cultural heritage, flora and fauna are the primary centers of attractions with the purpose to benefit the environment and the local host communities in any possible way.

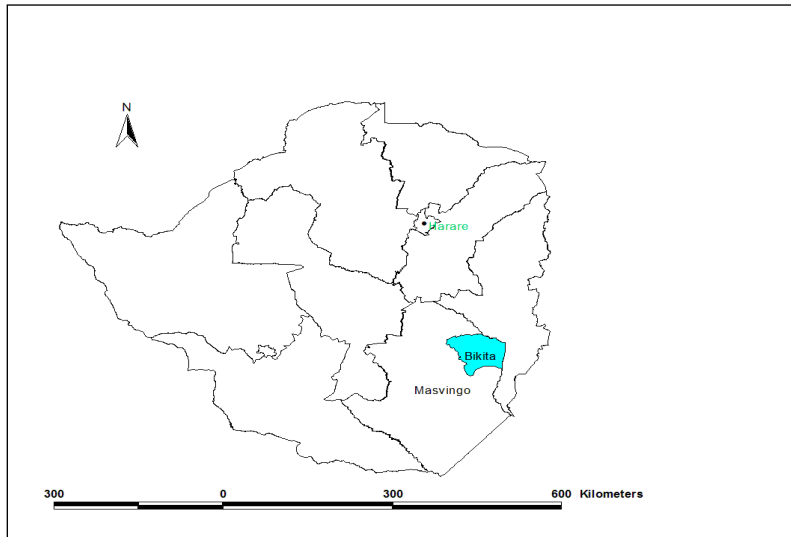
### **BACKGROUND TO MUTEMA ECOTOURISM CENTRE (MEC)**

Now that the concept of ecotourism has been unpacked, it is important to look at the background of Mutema Ecotourism Centre (MEC), which is the case study adopted by this study. MEC is in southeastern Zimbabwe, about 85 km from Masvingo city along the Masvingo-Mutare highway. The centre which was created in 2005 is 45 hectares in size, and is located on a hill that overlooks Rozva dam which is about 2km from Nyika Growth Point and around Runyare and Chivasa villages under Chief Marozva in Bikita district, Masvingo province. The area which is still in the process of development is generally characterized by gentle slopes yet in a valley bound between hills. This facilitates easy water and sewer drainage, but at the same time calls for construction of terraces on pathways that run downhill. The land is mostly virgin with large swatches of natural vegetation mainly trees such as *Paranari curatellifolia* (muchakata), *Julbernardia globiflora* (munhondo), *Brachystegia spiciformis* (msasa), *Acacia milotica* (muunga) and the *Strychnos cocculoides* (mupembere).

The climatic conditions in this area are generally mild with an annual average temperature of 20 degree Celsius. The mean maximum monthly temperatures exceed 30 degrees Celsius in the hottest month of the year, October with the mean monthly temperature of around 10 degrees Celsius in the months of June, July and August. While most parts of Masvingo are under region 4, the area where MEC is located is under region 2 with approximately 800mm per annum. The wettest month is

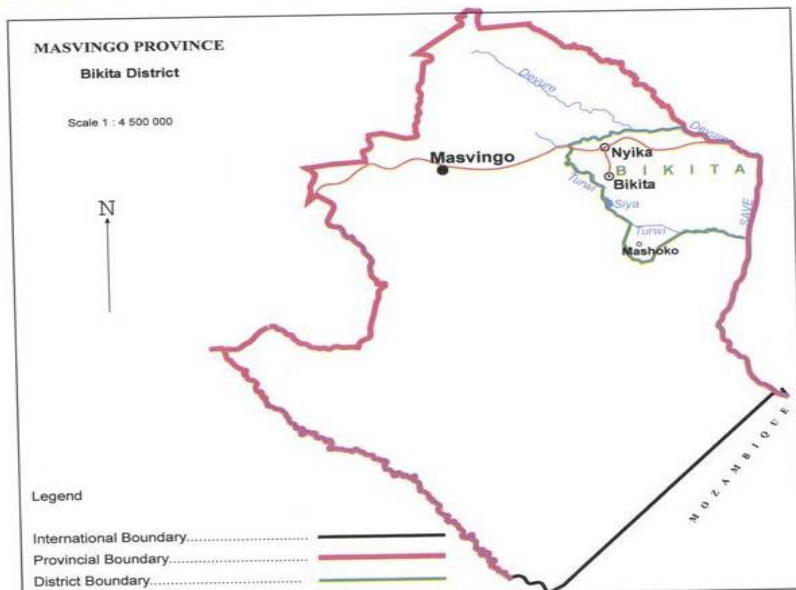
January with an average of 250mm (Michie & Nhandara, 2010). The centre was proposed as a tourist destination with facilities such as conference house, recreation, conservancy and accommodation. The targeted groups were visitors from within and outside Zimbabwe. Below is a map of the study area, Map 1, showing the position of Bikita where MEC is situated, and Map 2 showing Masvingo province where Bikita district is located.

**Map 1: Showing location of Bikita district where MEC is located**



Adopted from Zimbabwe's Land use classification and location of the country's provinces, 1995

**Map 2: Showing Masvingo province where Bikita district is located**



Adopted from Zimbabwe's Land use classification

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

The present study seeks to address the following questions: 1) What are the impacts of Mtema Ecotourism Centre to the local host communities and the natural environment 2) What is the nature of relationships between MEC, local community and the natural environment?

As part of research design, the researchers relied on literature studies, content analysis, observations and in-depth interviews. In terms of the latter, twenty in-depth interviews, each lasting between one and two and half hours were conducted in Shona (the vernacular language of the interviewees and the researchers). Using vernacular Shona allowed for detailed probing of respondents' views and opinions and facilitated the elaboration of answers where the respondents deemed necessary.

The research was carried out between February and March 2012 using a randomly selected sample of 18 people from 15 selected families around the MEC-the people who are directly affected by the existence of MEC. Besides, research was also carried out with the owner/Director of the ecotourism centre as well as the manager to make it a total of 20 respondents. The sample size of a total of 20 people was considered sufficient in providing the general perceptions of the people of Runyare village, particularly the directly affected families.

The researchers used observation data collection procedure to observe the physical environment in the chosen area. This method, field observation, was adopted by researchers from one of the researcher's anthropological studies to be used as one of the major collection tools. The method was believed appropriate to ascertain the project location and what really happened on the ground. Observation allows the researcher(s) to have access to first hand information that they can observe and record in person.

To supplement the field observation information, informal interviews were conducted, particularly with the owner of the ecotourism centre, Mr. Chakanyuka Mutema, the Manager of the centre, Mr. Muronza and the mostly affected (directly or otherwise) members of the local community. This was done in order to obtain more information on the possible impacts (positive or negative) of ecotourism activities at the centre in addition to gotten through observation. More so, the researchers wanted to hear from the affected people –‘the real people’ on what they think could be the problems (if any) resulting from the existence of the ecotourism centre in their locality. In a research such as the present, hearing from the directly affected people is important as affected people understand their problems better than anyone else.

The respondents in this study were drawn from different societal classes and families in the community around MEC with the hope to obtain a balanced research result(s) that could be representative of the whole affected areas. They ranged from 10 to 80 years. This age group was considered appropriate for the study because all people within this range are affected differently (positively or otherwise) by the ecotourism centre. Besides, it is within this age range that we find groups of people mostly involved in activities that affect the natural environment. More women than men were sampled for two major reasons. First, the researchers wanted to make sure that the voices of women who are often mis/underrepresented are heard. Second, the research was carried out during the day, time which most of the men are away from their homes. Participants interviewed

during this study responded to the questions individually and participation was voluntary. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were asked not to identify themselves by names if they choose. Collected data were tabulated to show frequencies before being subjected to evaluative analysis. The Tables 1 and 2 respectively contain details of the people participated in the study and the data that was gathered during the study:

## **PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHICS**

**Table 1**

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

Source: Survey 2012

## RESULTS OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS ASKED

**Table 2**

ITEM	RESPONSES		
	Agree	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 violent 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 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

Source: Survey 2012



## **DISCUSSION BASED ON OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS**

The findings that are presented in the present research are based on the data that were collected from the locals of Runyare in Chief Marozva between February and March 2012. They show both positive and negative perceptions on MEC, a centre in their locality since 2005. This means there were mixed feelings with regard to the ecotourism centre in the area.

It was found out that there are strong notions that MEC was benefiting the local community as 100% of the respondents agreed. As explained by majority of the respondents, the reason for this was that the owner of the ecotourism centre, Mr. Mutema participates actively in most of the community's activities such as funerals. 85 % of the respondents, for instance, confirmed that since Mr. Mutema started working on his ecotourism project in the area, he has helped significantly with transport, food and coffins for deceased members in that community. Almost similar 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 MEC though requires monitoring on all its activities, is still sensitive to aquatic, flora and fauna lives. If the centre continues with this 'good spirit', this will certainly eschew the tragedy as 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 during 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 centre (Mawere, 2011a). Such a tragedy makes the state an 'accomplice' in environmental mismanagement and cultural erosion.

It should be remarked that there was lack of knowledge by some respondents on whether MEC is likely to promote moral decadence, for example, prostitution and other violent related problems. To confirm this, 25 % of the respondents were unsure if the centre promotes such problems. It appeared most of these respondents didn't know the possible impacts of ecotourism or tourism per se to local host communities. The researchers were patient to provide explanations to participants. This was done to ensure that responses from informed positions were obtained.

On whether MEC should be stopped, an overwhelming majority (100 %) of respondents strongly disagree, thus showing support for the ecotourism activities. The presence of the MEC has provided a means of survival (to the locals) such that its existence is so deeply woven into the fabric of lives of Chief Marozva's people (where MEC is situated) that they have accepted it and even unconsciously. However, most of the respondents (85 %) were quick to point out that though ecotourism has become the source of their livelihood, there is need for a regulatory body that controls activities by MEC and help negotiates 'sound' relationships between MEC, 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 impact negatively on the natural environment and the culture of the local people. This suggests the government through the Rural District Council (RDC) should 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 African ones, 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 this grave concern, 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).

Concerning security at the Rozva dam which is partly controlled by MEC, 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 at the dam. This means that there is need for MEC to devise practical mechanisms that would improve the safety of all visitors at the centre.

Having discussed study results, possible impacts of ecotourism and in particular of MEC are examined. Recommendations are given and conclusions drawn thereafter.

### **NEGOTIATING RELATIONSHIPS: TOWARDS A BETTER AND VIABLE ECOTOURISM**

Ecotourism is a money generating project that seeks to benefit the local host community and conserve the natural environment. As such, the government of Zimbabwe should not stop ecotourism from expanding. In support of this view, some scholars such as Liu (1994) and Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) have argued that the term 'community-based ecotourism ventures' should be used to distinguish those initiatives which are environmentally sensitive, but which also aim to ensure that members of local communities have a high degree of control over the activities taking place, and a significant proportion of the benefits accrue to them. This means that there should be a 'generative dialogue' (Verran, 2011) and negotiations of 'sound relationships' between MEC, local communities and the natural environment. However, in view of the observations and impacts noted during the field survey carried out at MEC and the surrounding community, this study revealed that there are no pronounced and 'sound' relationships between MEC, the local host community, the natural environment and other such organizations and/or ministries as the Forestry Commission of Zimbabwe, AGRITEX Department and the Veterinary Department. This is important in so far as some ecotourism ventures are controlled wholly by outside operators, and are so distinct from contexts in which most of the economic benefits of tourism accrue to the government (Akama, 1996). Ziffer (1989: 2) gives an example of the slogan for East Africa of "wildlife pays so wildlife stays" which to date has mainly 'paid' for governments, foreign tourism companies and local entrepreneurs, rather than returning benefits to local communities". The cobweb of relations in form of a regulatory body suggested above thus should cooperate in the following:

- i) In assisting MEC to practice sustainable ecotourism- ecotourism that simultaneously conserve the natural environment and considers the needs, concerns and welfare of local host communities. Benefiting the local community is important as local people should be compensated for the loss of access to resources they suffer when MEC was created in 2005. ii) In protecting Rozva dam (which is partly owned by MEC) from contamination
  
- ii) In facilitating human health, environmental health education or education and culture programs in the community around MEC. This is in agreement with Buckley's (1994) framework which proposes that ecotourism should be based on nature tourism which is sustainably managed, includes environmental education and supports conservation. In addition to Buckley's framework, socio-cultural programs should also be done to promote constructive, symbiotic relationships between local community and the environment as well as to raise

awareness on how ‘bad’ ecotourism could negatively impact the natural environment and culture of local host communities. In other words, a community-based approach to ecotourism –ecotourism that seeks to recognize the need to promote both the quality of life of local host communities and the conservation of the natural environment should be promoted. This is what Sindiga (1995) alluded to when he noted that the Narok Country Council which had jurisdiction over the Masai Mara Park put aside some money into a trust fund which was used to fund schools, cattle dips and health services, projects that benefited the entire community. Basing on results obtained during the study, such ‘community spirit’ is the one that the local community members within MEC’s proximity are expecting from the latter.

### **RETHINKING THE MTEMA ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES: SOME RECOMMENDATIONS**

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 if an empowerment framework with the following four levels is used: psychological, social, political (Friedmann, 1992) and economic empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). As argued by Scheyvens (ibid: 247), 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 this understanding, an ecotourism framework based on Friedmann and Scheyvens is shown below:

### Framework for determining the impacts of ecotourism initiatives on local communities

Framework	Signs of empowerment of ecotourism	Signs of disempowerment of ecotourism
<b>1.Economic empowerment</b>	Brings lasting economic gains to a local community. Cash earned is shared between many households in the community. There are visible signs of improvements from the cash that is earned (e.g. improved water systems, houses made of more permanent materials).	Ecotourism merely results in small, spasmodic cash gains for a local community. Most profits go to local elites, outside operators, government agencies, etc. Only a few individuals or families gain direct financial benefits from ecotourism, while others cannot find a way to share in these economic benefits because they lack capital and/or appropriate skills.
<b>2.Psychological empowerment</b>	Self-esteem of many community members is enhanced because of outside recognition of the uniqueness and value of their culture, their natural resources and their traditional knowledge. Increasing confidence of community members leads them to seek out further education and training opportunities. Access to employment and cash leads to an increase in status for traditionally low-status sectors of society e.g. women, youths.	Many people have not shared in the benefits of ecotourism, yet they may face hardships because of reduced access to the resources of a protected area. They are thus confused, frustrated, disinterested or disillusioned with the initiative.
<b>3 .Social empowerment</b>	Ecotourism maintains or enhances the local community's equilibrium. Community cohesion is improved as individuals and families work together to build a successful ecotourism venture. Some funds raised are used for community development purposes, e.g. to build schools or improve roads.	Disharmony and social decay. Many in the community take on outside values and lose respect for traditional culture and for elders. Disadvantaged groups (for example women) bear the brunt of problems associated with the ecotourism initiative and fail to share equitably in its benefits. Rather than cooperating, individuals, families, ethnic or socio-economic groups compete with each other for the perceived benefits of ecotourism. Resentment and jealousy are commonplace.
<b>4.Political empowerment</b>	The community's political structure, which fairly represents the needs and interests of all community groups, provides a forum through which people can raise questions relating to the ecotourism venture(s) and have their concerns dealt with. Agencies initiating or implementing the ecotourism venture seek out the opinions of community groups (including special interest groups of women, youths and other socially disadvantaged groups) and provide opportunities for them to be represented on decision-making bodies e.g. the Wildlife Park Board.	The community has an autocratic and/or self-interested leadership. Agencies initiating or implementing the ecotourism venture treat communities as passive beneficiaries, failing to involve them in decision-making. Thus the majority of community members feel they have little or no say over whether the ecotourism initiative operates or the way in which it operates.

In view of the foregoing, we recommend that the Mutema Ecotourism Centre (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 centre to ensure that all the activities that require expertise from any of the stakeholders are properly done, that is, are done in a manner that does not, in any way, upset the ecosystem and the local community. This is important given that ecotourism as tourism per se cuts across many sectors, levels as well as 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 the paramount importance of different stakeholders mentioned above to be given the mandate to monitor, regulate and harmonize interests and activities by the ecotourism centers and the local host communities. Such an approach as that suggested in this study is an energised version of Stengers' (2005; De la Cadena 2010) 'cosmopolitics' – a politics constituted by multiple, divergent worlds whereby indigenous movements may meet scientists and environmentalists of different stripes and where the interrelations between 'humans' and 'non-humans' is seriously considered. Such an approach has the merit of allowing the interface of Science with other knowledge forms while at the same time enhancing the interactions/relations between the 'state', 'humans' and 'non-humans' that moves beyond the nature/culture divide (in a productive sense) (Mawere, 2011b).

Besides, this study has revealed that while the Mutema Ecotourism Centre (MEC) has consulted with the Chief and the village head as well as the local community members, apparently there is no guarantee and clear indication that the latter have been fully empowered by the centre. Though the ecotourism centre still co-exists in harmony with the local communities, we can safely say a gentlemen's agreement was reached which at any time can be breached by either party. Put differently, there is need to rationalize and formalize whatever they have agreed in form of a constitution or memorandum of understanding. This would then operate as a guiding principle to both parties. In the event that there is a dispute between the two parties in the foreseeable future, such a document would be used as a fall back or a point of reference. Absence of such a critical binding document would inevitably create a platform for future conflicts.

In view of this observation, we recommend that MEC should see to it that the local community is empowered economically, politically, psychologically and socially. This concurs with the recommendation suggested in the preceding paragraphs and Akama's (1996:569) argument that in order for ecotourism to maximally benefit the local community:

*alternative ecotourism initiatives are needed which aim to empower local community to decide what forms of tourism facilities and wildlife conservation programs they want to be developed in their respective communities, and how the tourism costs and benefits are to be shared among different stakeholders.*

The empowerment framework which could be applied in all economies-developed and developing- is designed chiefly to assess the impacts of ecotourism on local host communities and on how best can the local host communities have some control over natural resources and sharing ecotourism benefits in their areas. The logic behind the framework is therefore to determine how ecotourism should simultaneously benefit the local communities and sustainably conserve the natural environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study it has been argued that ecotourism, especially in developing economies such as Zimbabwe where it generates a significant proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) should be approached in a critical way that seeks to promote its success. The approach should aim at benefiting both local communities and the natural environments. Yet while this is the ideal, ecotourism is more often than not viewed as a threat to both the natural environment and culture of the local host communities as has been argued in the preceding discussion. High levels of poverty in many developing economies, lack of will by both government institutions and ecotourism industries to deal with the negative effects of ecotourism make local host communities and the natural environment where ecotourism centers are located more vulnerable. In view of this observation, it has been argued that an ecotourism framework that empowers the local host communities socially, psychologically, politically and economically should be adopted by MEC in order to protect the interests and rights of all affected parties- the environment, local communities and MEC.

More importantly, the paper has argued in the light of the research results from members of the local community, the Manager and Director as well as observations by the researchers on the possible impacts (negative) of an ecotourism project such as the present. In view of the results and observations, we have argued for the need by MEC to have a regulatory body consisting of experts from different 'relevant' ministries/institutions to promote a 'generative dialogue' (Verran, 2011) and monitor the relations between MEC, local host community and the natural environment within which MEC was created. Put differently, the regulatory body will help to harmonize theory and action, that is, emphasizing "the need to expedite implementation of policies, improving information circulation and movement from emergency actions to preventive plans without delay" (Mawere, 2011a). This suggestion has been given in line with the argument elaborated in this study that although MEC has consulted with the Chief, the local community and other authorities in the Environment, Tourism and Leisure industries, there should always be an independent body that should be accorded the mandate to monitor relations of all affected parties.

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