

Economic implications of universal accessibility in promoting sustainable tourism in uMhlabuyalingana, KwaZulu-Natal

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Key words

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Abstract

The impacts of sustainable tourism must be measurable to ensure sustainable economic growth. In this article universal accessibility (UA) has been perceived as one of the strategies that could be implemented to maximise the positive impacts of sustainable tourism, and ensure economic growth. The tourists' requirements towards UA in the tourism industry appear disregarded by the academics, especially within South Africa. Moreover, the affected tourists are often seen as part of a challenge instead of being acknowledged as a solution towards enhancing sustainable tourism practices, and further towards growing the economy of the country. This study considered UA as a supporting strategy for sustainable tourism in the uMhlabuyalingana study area, pursuing an understanding of the industry challenges versus opportunities. It also explores platforms that could enhance efficient practices of UA in tourism in South Africa in order to encourage a sustainable tourism service provision by different sectors of the tourism industry. The key aim of the study was to establish whether owners of accommodation, transport service providers, and tourism officials understand the concept of universal accessibility in tourism towards economic participation and growth. This study employed a questionnaire as the main tool for data collection, targeting tourism sites at Sodwana Bay and Kosi Bay in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa as the two critical tourism nodes. The findings confirmed the study objectives since a high percentage of the respondents selected irrelevant meanings of UA, which implied that tourism service providers in the study area do not theoretically and practically understand the concept of universal accessibility in tourism, and do not understand how UA contributes to the local economy.

Introduction

This article summarises the study on UA in KwaZulu-Natal as one of the issues supporting sustainable tourism since 'provision of access for physically challenged people' is one of the characteristics of Responsible Tourism (Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism, 2002:3). It is also important to indicate that physically challenged people should be seen as beneficiaries of the universal accessibility programmes. This study sought to identify the profile of tourism enterprises in the Kosi Bay and Sodwana Bay areas of the uMhlabuyalingana Municipality, and investigate their capacity to implement UA at both accommodation and transport facilities, on the understanding that the enterprise would benefit economically if practicing UA.

Darcy & Dickson (2009:34) define accessible tourism 'as a form of tourism that involves collaborative strategically planned processes between stakeholders that enable people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments'. These people include those with permanent and temporary disabilities, senior citizens, obese, the inebriated, families with young children and those working in safer and more socially sustainably designed environments (Darcy, 2006: 2008).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2008) defines disability 'as an evolving concept' and that disability results 'from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis with others'. Technologically, UA is not the planning of separate provisions for the people with reduced abilities, but it is ensuring that what has been provided for is also accessible to the guests with a variety of reduced abilities. It is the solution derived from understanding the needs of people, drawing ideas from interacting with the potential users (Network of Asia-Pacific Schools and Institutes of Public Administration and Governance, NAPSIPAG, 2005).

UA also contributes to employment opportunities, entrepreneurship, and general economic growth of local communities, and is therefore significant to study this field in tourism, both as a challenge and an opportunity. The uMhlabuyalingana area has a high tourism potential as it provides diverse tourism opportunities.

- **Tourism potential of the study area.**

The study area falls just outside the Isimangaliso (Greater St. Lucia) Wetlands Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for the diversity of animal, bird and fish life, and mild semi-tropical climate. The largest fresh-water area in South Africa, Lake Sibaya, is in the area, as well as the Temba Elephant Park, proclaimed in 1983 to protect the remaining about 120 animals from poaching during the Mozambique civil war (Oliver & Oliver, 2001:108). The Park has South Africa's largest area of sand forest housing such rare birds as the yellow-spotted nicator, Rudd's apalis, and Pell's fish eagle, and the suni antelope. Black and white rhino are also protected here. The Park is open to visitors, including 4x4 vehicles, contributing to some employment for the local communities and the regions' economy.

The traditional Thonga fish traps are found in the Kosi Bay environment: sticks planted in a funnel formation to guide fish into a catchment area. Although abundant in fish they are too small to encourage a viable commercial fishing industry. Rather the waters are home to hippo and crocodile and therefore a popular tourist destination. The realisation of environmental, social, but especially economic, benefits in the areas tourism industry demands an understanding of the broader issues of visitor accessibility. The tourism industry appreciates elements that contribute towards positive visitor experiences, capacity building in the industry, job-creation and economic distribution.

The lack of local industry and community awareness on organisational benefits in the study area that could flow from UA product-supply is alarming. While many businesses meet their legislative requirements they do not consider the UA issue further. The industry has not connected a high standard of UA provision with other elements of corporate tourism performance. The challenges associated with ensuring people-mobility within and between regions and destinations, require action in order to effectively plan and implement best-practice access of a tourism facility and experience. The built and natural environment has a major impact on the quality of tourism experiences, but locally there is still apparently insufficient integration of its planning and development.

People with disabilities are a potentially growing market for the local tourism industry as their travelling propensity increases. An increase in sustainable tourism best practices would open new opportunities for the uMhlabuyalingana Municipality, and for the whole KwaZulu-Natal Province. The study area has rich indigenous and natural diversity, and could be one of the up-market tourist destinations to benefit from the sustainable tourism practices through UA.

Study methodology

The study population comprised accommodation establishments and transport associations. Because the accommodation facilities are relatively large, and the transport infrastructure limited, the sample chosen for the study was almost the whole population of guest-houses, Bed-n-Breakfast

establishments, and rustic (including camping) accommodation in nature parks. Seventeen organisations participated in the quantitative questionnaire survey; 59% representing accommodation and 41% transport. On-site qualitative interviews were also conducted to verify the understanding of facility-owners of UA, and to establish accessibility (or otherwise) for disabled visitors, and the extent of compliance with the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa's (TGCSA) advisory on accessible facilities.

Study field

According to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific ESCAP (2003), of the 650 million people with disabilities worldwide, a significant portion of them are travelers with special needs. In addition, there are 600 million elderly persons in the world, and these numbers are expected to double by 2025. Some of the businesses in the different tourism sectors in South Africa have started to pay attention to UA; but specific barriers are still a challenge to people with disabilities and reduced mobility from enjoying the travel experiences. The European Network for Accessible Tourism ENAT (2008) observed that physical access, and access to information, is often less than adequate in transport, at tourist destinations, in accommodation, and at venues and attractions than it should be. Therefore, many disabled tourists and would-be travelers experience access problems.

To clarify the study field specific meanings are attached to terminology:

Sustainable tourism implies tourism continuously creating better places for people to live in, and better places to visit, and has among others the following characteristics:

- addresses negative economic, environmental and social impacts
- generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities
- improves working conditions and access to the industry, and therefore the local economy, and
- involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances (Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism, 2002:3).

Universal access refers to the ability of all people to have equal opportunity and access to a service or product from which they can benefit, regardless of their social class, ethnicity, ancestry or physical disabilities (South African National Department of Tourism. NDT, 2012).

Universal design refers to the products, services and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for personal adaptation or special provision.

Since the World Tourism Organization's '1991 Resolution (Darcy, 2006) for creating opportunities for handicapped people in the 1990s other international bodies have called for a coordinated approach to deal with the issues of disabilities and access in the travel and tourism industries. Consequently, for example, the relationship between disability and ageing presents a challenge for the tourism industry globally. People with disabilities, including those with physical and sensory disabilities, will find it easier to access tourism facilities where there is a continuous pathway, tactile surfaces and clear signage. All visitors could benefit from such provisions, including the ageing population, parents with prams, and employees as it incorporates good design for a range of Occupational Health and Safety Requirements (Preiser & Ostroff, 2001; Darcy, 2006), which calls for a tourism industry to adopt universal design principles as a foundation to achieve greater social sustainability as part of triple bottom line (Rains, Darcy, Cameron & Peggs, 2004).

According to Buj (2010) the first important work about disabled people was written in the 60s. 20 years later the World Tourism Conference connected the concept of accessibility and tourism during the Manila Declaration in 1980. This represented an important milestone on the quest for accessible tourism for disabled people as it recognised tourism as a fundamental right for all and made recommendations to the member states to legislate on tourist services (Diego & Velasco, 2003).

UA in South African tourism

On the international front UA is widely practiced, but South Africa is only slowly adapting to the international trends by ensuring UA in this important sector of the market. In order to conform to UA standards, travelling packages and tourism products are being designed to meet and exceed the needs of people with disabilities, senior citizens and families travelling with children, according to the National Department of Tourism (SA. NDT, 2012).

About 2.9 million South Africans (7.5% of the population) live with some form of disability (Rearden, 2017), while this study found that some 88% of people with disabilities take a holiday in South Africa each year, generating about R5.586 billion (about GBP 3.2 million) (Thompson, 2012) where UA refers to:

- dimensions of disability (refers to the range of disabilities that are catered for in a particular location or circumstance) – mobility, hearing, vision, cognitive and other dimensions,
- levels of support needs – whether a person can interact independently or whether they have low, medium, high or very high support needs,
- access enablers – personal aides, communication and assistive technologies used by individuals to maximise participation, and
- Universal design – where environments are designed to universally include people of all ages, genders, sizes and abilities.

These four interdependent but overlapping concepts form the basis of a comprehensive understanding of how to accommodate visitors to protected areas and in outdoor recreation activities, and to all forms of tourism.

When designers, especially of public spaces, apply universal design principles, their products, environments, and services must meet the needs of potential users with a wide variety of characteristics, instead of expecting them to adapt to a general design. The concept of accessibility has evolved from ‘eliminating barriers’ in buildings, urban environments, and transportation, to the principles of ‘universal design’ or accessibility for all. The universal design has earned the approach which went from eliminating barriers to designing everything so as to be useful by all. The Universal Design Handbook is the most comprehensive reference for the work on universal design.

According to Preiser and Ostroff (2001) and Rains (2008), universal design, including provisions for economic development through tourism, is encapsulated in seven principles:

Equitable: the design does not disadvantage or stigmatise any group of users

Flexibility in use: the design accommodates a wide range of individual preference and abilities

Simple, intuitive use: use of design is easy to understand, and regardless of the users experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level

Perceptible Information: the design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities

Tolerance for error: the design minimises hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions

Low physical effort: the design can be used efficiently and comfortably, and with a minimum of Fatigue

Size and space for approach and use: appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use, regardless of the user’s body size, posture or mobility.

The Preamble to the South African Constitution (section 9 of the Bill of Rights) aligns with the UNCRPD requirements, and refers specifically to lighting, sound, signage, tactile, ramps, parking, ablution and lifts. The Cape Town Declaration (2002) explicitly required that sustainable tourism accept accessibility for physically challenged people. The Declaration set as a guiding principle the endeavour to make tourism an inclusive social experience, and to ensure that there is access for all. It should be noted that this is not the only declaration that connects sustainable tourism and accessibility for all; the Astana Declaration connected accessible tourism to any “responsible tourism policy” (UNESCAP, 2009).

Various pieces of legislation align with these principles, and regulate UA in South Africa. For example, The Disability Policy Guidelines require that all buildings be user-friendly and economically empower persons with disabilities, The (South African) Government Immovable Asset Management Act (Act 19 of 2007), the Buildings Standards Act (Act 103 of 1997, as amended in 1989), and the South African Bureau of Standards 0400 Code of Practice all require that:

buildings are accessible and user-friendly to persons with disabilities,
create sustainable employment,
promote sustainable economic growth, and
redistribute income.

This action is further supported by the Public Works towards the 21st Century (1997) and the Creating an Enabling Environment for Reconstruction, Growth and Development in the (South African) Construction Industry (1999) documents. UA requires that a design approach be inclusive and allow for diversity and flexibility. The process of developing accessible tourism should be governed by disability legislations and human rights. Provisions for mobility, vision, hearing, and cognitive access should be complemented through environmental planning and development legislation.

- **Transport**

It should be noted that transportation and travel can be discussed without taking tourism into consideration, but tourism cannot thrive without these two factors. It is an integral part of the tourism industry and is often seen as a part of the tourism system responsible for bringing tourists to a destination, a means of getting around the place and leaving it once the duration of the trip is over. Transport is a crucial component of travel for people with a physical disability. Much of the South African transport system has limited accessibility which significantly reduces transportation options for people with a physical disability (Darcy, 2008). Furthermore, accessibility of transport has become a crucial societal challenge which should be converted to a fundamental right for visitors in South Africa through the provision of accessible transport services. In practice, it would allow visitors with different reduced abilities, elderly, pregnant, and families with young families to participate in, and benefit from, the tourism market. Therefore, it is in the interest of the transport sector to develop an accessible facility in order to meet these needs and consequently adapt to this increasing market opportunity.

Access to transit should be transformed through the introduction of more low-floor vehicles. Travel information about transit services should be made accessible visually and audibly during travel for visitors with hearing impairments. Those with visual impairment should be assisted with audible signage systems. Ensuring a high level of universal accessibility within the built environment should be a matter of priority for the tourism industry and the community as whole.

The concept of continuity is very important when planning for UA. For example, a continuously accessible path of travel should be provided without barriers. When there are level changes along the path of travel from one point to another, accessibility must be maintained by a ramp or other means, such as a lift, and includes pulsating sounds at traffic lights. At the same time,

accessible information must be provided at conspicuous locations and the information must be clearly communicated to different users and lead the users to the final destination.

- **Accommodation**

The grading system in South Africa was developed to include UA principles in 2009 by the TGCSA, the official quality assurance body for accommodation establishments in South Africa. The aim of the grading criteria was to ensure that South Africa maintained its international competitiveness as a tourist destination, and to show that South Africa could be a world leader in terms of quality assurance. UA grading has been integrated with, and forms part of, the standard TGCSA grading criteria for all star graded categories of accommodation, and is an assessment that is undertaken for all star-grading at no extra charge to the establishment. The UA grading does not in any way affect the standard quality and star grading assessment of the property. The figures indicate that in the UA design, clear signage is a basic requirement, as is the floor surface and canopy height.

Discussions and conclusions

One of the study objectives was to establish the level of understanding of UA in tourism by owners of accommodation facilities, transport service providers and tourism officials in uMhlabuyalingana study area. A high percentage of tourism operators in the study area do not understand the concept of UA in tourism. Specifically, this means that there is an important aspect of sustainable tourism that is ignored by the tourism operators at the expense of employment and economic growth of the study area.

The study also sought to establish the accessibility status of tourism facilities; the findings revealed that even though the owners of tourism facilities and tourism officials did not generally understand what is meant by UA, their facilities are able to provide services to broad range of visitors. Only one tourism operator indicated that his facility may be disadvantageous to some groups of users, while fourteen thought their facilities could be used by any group of users; two respondents were not sure of whether the status of the facilities could be regarded as accessible. The study then sought to establish what facilities were available for disabled persons. The responses indicated that parking with a disability sign was the most available UA facility (29.4%), followed by clear signs around the facility (23.5%), a ramp (17.6%), and stairs (11.8%). Accommodation was not specifically developed with accessibility in mind. This suggests that tour operators in the study area do offer basic UA provisions. Unfortunately, the fact that some respondents who mentioned 'stairs' as a UA facility clearly indicates that tour operators do not understand what is meant by UA in tourism, nor the economic implications of not addressing UA.

A question was asked to establish which tourists would benefit most from the application of UA guidelines. The responses show that senior citizens and families with young children (41.2% each), and tourists with physically reduced abilities (11.8%) benefited, while 5.9% indicated 'none' to any UA tourists. It is therefore evident that some organisations in the study area do offer holiday destination-facilities for tourists, but with varying degrees of disability.

A further question was asked to establish whether UA contributed to income generation, job creation and wealth distribution for local communities. Survey data revealed that 76.5% doubted if UA had any influence on the economic environment; only 17.6% responded positively. Specifically, it means that there is a vital economic element of UA that has not been addressed by tourist operations in the study area, impacting negatively on the local economy, so outstanding benefits emanating from practicing UA in tourism for both tourist operations and surrounding communities are not enjoyed. The findings strongly suggest that respondents are not convinced that UA makes any significant contribution to the economic development or sustainable tourism at uMhlabuyalingana.

From the survey data it appears that the majority (77%) of tourist operations within the study area are just not aware of the TGCSA-UA grading guidelines, suggesting a high possibility for not

adequately providing facilities to meet the requirements of UA. As a follow-up to the question on whether respondents are aware of the guidelines it became important to find out if their facilities are TGCSA-UA-graded. The results show that among all of the tourism operations interviewed, none of them is UA graded by TGCSA as they all answered no; implying that no tourism establishment at uMhlabuyalingana has been assessed to meet UA requirements. Thompson (2017) records that since the 2012 study the number of UA compliant organisations in South Africa's rural areas has dropped considerably (from about 7000 to just on 100), and the TGCSA will need to urgently revisit this policy. According to the survey 70.6% of respondents are not sure of the benefits of applying UA guidelines, while 17.6% indicated that applying UA helped them improve customer service, implying a loss of economic benefits.

Future research

Most importantly, examples of inclusive design were demonstrated to provide wide spectrum for users to universally access tourism services independently. The study revealed that seniors, families with young children, and visitors with physically reduced abilities remain a valuable source of tourism revenue and economic development at uMhlabuyalingana. However, findings revealed meagre understanding of UA concepts by the tourism service providers of the study area, so the market remains available.

Given the above, while also contemplating the specific research findings, the study recommends:

- Enhancement of basic understanding (both theoretically and practically) for UA in tourism by tourism operators of uMhlabuyalingana;
- When tourism operators of uMhlabuyalingana reach an acceptable standard for the understanding of universal accessibility, its provisions should be made so that the area could be better marketed as a UA tourism destination to augment the demand for tourists with special needs, augmenting the economy of the area;
- As part of the marketing strategy, TGCSA-UA grading must be implemented;
- The tourism stakeholders including government should offer special trainings focusing on universal accessibility in tourism to ensure specialised and professional UA practices and also, their analysis should be used to provide an insight on complexities of universal access in tourism;
- The community should also obtain better education about dimensions of reduced abilities and learn to practice it even in public spaces so as to improve career opportunities;
- Education institutions should be encouraged to develop universal accessibility in tourism modules within their tourism, recreation, travel, and hospitality courses, with emphasis on the economic importance of UA compliance;
- The tourism operators of uMhlabuyalingana should recognise tourists with reduced abilities as a market and convert uniqueness and sensitivity nature of implementing universal accessibility modifications to an economic opportunity;
- Understand diversity of situations experienced by tourists with reduced abilities and ensure to apply relevant continuum of the recreation opportunities;
- Ensuring of requirements, design, and presentation preferences for each dimension of reduced abilities in tourism including language barrier;
- Establishment of collaborated universal accessibility in tourism campaigns;
- Passageways and light rapid transit systems should be built to ensure accessible infrastructure to passengers in wheelchairs; and

- Low-floor vehicles should be introduced so that passengers in wheelchairs could be allowed to board their transport via a simple ramp.

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