

# **Responsible Tourism Practices in the Non-Hotel Accommodation (NHA) Sector in Port Elizabeth, South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on responsible-tourism practices in the non-hotel accommodation (NHA) sector in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The NHA sector includes all the guesthouses, bed-and-breakfast establishments and self-catering accommodation establishments, which collectively constitute this sector. The primary purpose of the paper was to examine the factors that inhibit the NHA sector from embracing the adoption of responsible-tourism (RT) guidelines as set out by the South African government. The awareness and implementation of RT principles is critical for the tourism industry as it serves as an indicator as to whether this sector can contribute toward sustainability in reducing its carbon footprint. The reduction in the carbon footprint could then lead to less strain on the environment, including aspects such as climate change.

In order to address the primary purpose (main problem) of the paper, a questionnaire was designed and emailed to respondents. A response rate of 24 percent was obtained and the results indicated some understanding of the term “Responsible Tourism,” but lacked knowledge on any governmental guideline, policy documents or organizations advocating responsible tourism. In addition, efforts were made by the NHA sector in terms of being energy efficient, conserving water and reducing waste management; however, social responsibility within the NHA sector was a low priority.

From this study, it can be deduced that for government, especially at the local level, significant efforts will have to be made to ensure that the NHA sector fully comprehends the principles of RT and the significant role RT plays in terms of sustainability. This would ultimately benefit the tourism industry, as it will lead to more RT practices and enhanced sustainability.

## **1. Introduction**

The tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing industries; however the impacts that result are wide-ranging and controversial (Evans, Campbell & Stonehouse, 2003). The Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, included sustainable tourism on the agenda. It was highlighted at the summit that special attention to the relationship between environmental conservation and protection was necessary, in order to have a sustainable tourism industry. The conference concluded that the tourism industry needed to be aware of the negative impacts, and that it was necessary to encourage the adoption of more

responsible-tourism behavior in the future in order for tourism to be a sustainable industry.

In response to this and the democratization of South Africa, the 1996 White Paper on “Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa” was drafted. The then South African Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) published a book outlining Responsible Tourism Guidelines (DEAT, 2002). This provided information on the ethics and codes of practice that would be expected from the tourism industry in the future. The first conference on responsible tourism was hosted in Cape Town in 2002, prior to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). This conference led to the “Cape Town Declaration” where responsible tourism was defined as a three-tiered approach, namely social, economical and environmental.

Globally, South Africa is seen as being at the forefront of responsible-tourism initiatives (Frey, 2008). Despite this, there seems to be limited awareness or participation in responsible-tourism practices. This paper focuses on responsible-tourism practices in the non-hotel accommodation (NHA) sub-sector (guesthouse and bed-and-breakfast establishments and backpacker lodges) in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The objectives of the study are:

- To ascertain the degree of responsible-tourism awareness among non-hotel accommodation establishments.
- To determine how members within the non-hotel accommodation sector interpret and understand the term “Responsible Tourism.”
- To investigate the level or degree of responsible-tourism implementation at identified establishments.
- To understand which factors encouraged and motivated non-hotel accommodation establishment to practice responsible tourism.
- To explore whether the non-hotel accommodation establishments supported local communities.

## **2. Context**

The implementation of responsible tourism is considered a major challenge. Tourism practitioners and tourism product owners are challenged with understanding the concept, as well as the implementation of responsible-tourism practices. In a study conducted by Van der Merwe and Wocke (2006) about responsible-tourism practices within the hotel industry in South Africa, serious reservations were raised about what the concept means and the initiatives related to responsible tourism.

According to Goodwin (2009), there is a major gap between the definition of this concept and the way it is used and abused by practitioners. Thus, the issue of responsible tourism, specifically the confusion around the concept and implementation is not necessarily restricted to South Africa. On the positive side, however, it would seem that consumers, including tourists, may have a better grasp of the concept of responsible tourism. However, this study focuses on tourism-product owners, specifically the owners and managers of non-hotel accommodation (NHA) establishments.

Responsible tourism strives towards minimizing the negative impacts on the environment, society and economy, and facilitating respect and benefits to the tourists, hosts and the destination. Therefore, responsible tourism, in essence, is based on the “triple bottom line,” which would include three pillars, namely the economy, society and the environment. It is the interplay between economic responsibility, social responsibility and environmental responsibility on which tourism must be hinged in order to create a more sustainable tourism industry.

## **2.1. Three Pillars of Responsibility**

### **2.1.1. Economic Responsibility**

The tourism industry is seen as a good job creator and labor-intensive industry that can create direct employment in restaurants, at attractions and accommodation establishments. It is also able to create indirect jobs in the agricultural sector. Tourism in South Africa is already considered to be an important contributor to employment and wealth creation, with a huge flow-through effect, impacting on many sectors of the economy. According to Business Day, tourism contributed 3 percentage points to the GDP in 2005 (Business Day: South Africa Tourism’s Contribution to GDP in Focus, 2009). According to the same report, the accommodation sector was a key contributor to this figure, contributing 22 percent.

The White Paper of 1996 proposes responsible tourism as the guiding principle for tourism development in this country. It also implies that a proactive approach by the principals of the tourism industry, which includes the non-hotel accommodation sector, be developed to market and manage this industry in a responsible manner (White Paper, 1996). This means that government and businesses involve local communities, provide employment, revise investment policies and relations with investors, decrease economic leakages and develop meaningful economic linkages by supplying local agricultural produce to non-hotel accommodation establishments. South African Tourism is the official destination-marketing organization for South Africa. In its mission, SA Tourism highlights sustainable economic and social empowerment for all South Africans and strives to make tourism the leading sector in the economy. As part of their mission, they also want to increase dispersal of visitors across South Africa, thereby spreading economic benefits and encouraging development. To successfully achieve these goals, Harris, Griffin and Williams (2002) stress that local communities usually only benefit from tourism if it is planned together with investor communities. By adopting a responsible economic approach, positive contributions to the economic development of a region will outweigh the negative impacts, thereby leading to a more sustainable future.

### **2.1.2. Social Responsibility**

Social responsibility emphasizes greater recognition in the interests of the host community and stresses the negative impacts that tourists and their activities can have on the destination (Bennett, 2000). An observation can be made that the South African tourism industry has been slow to adopt the principles of social responsibility. Van der Merwe and Wocke (2007) researched the level of social tourism with a focus on the hotel industry. Their findings indicated that although the percentage of awareness and implementation were initially encouraging, further results from subsequent research

revealed that socially responsible tourism actually has a low level of practice. For example, HIV/AIDS policies are not in place in many establishments (Frey, 2008), and safety and security issues remain problematic. Besides the importance of reducing inequality within the tourism industry, there should be an obvious interest in following socially responsible principles, and adopting more open and transparent business practices. The rationale behind this approach is that if the business should increase the involvement of communities in tourism developments, and subsequent benefits have a positive impact, support for the tourism enterprise will increase, crime levels will decrease and employee morale will be improved. The aims of corporate social responsibility should be to deliver sustainable value to the industry for the long-term benefit of both hosts and tourists. This can be achieved by building mutually beneficial partnerships where opportunities can be provided and fair-price policies can be implemented. As stated by Tearfund (2002), investing in socially responsible tourism ethics has benefits for the business and the community; it improves business performance, reduces poverty, unemployment, and returns on investments are usually positive.

### **2.1.3. Environmental Responsibility**

Central to environmental responsibility is the lifecycle of an enterprise or product. This applies to managing the business, and integrating the establishment with environmental management. All tourism enterprises can make significant contributions to environmental sustainability, for example, by supporting producers of local products and advising guests how to make responsible purchase decisions (DEAT, 2002). Establishments must seek to minimize energy requirements, limit noise, light and air pollution, and consider the business neighborhood by minimizing any negative transformation of the environment, for instance, by planting indigenous vegetation and non-invasive species. All resources should be used in a sustainable fashion, meaning waste and over-consumption should be avoided. Establishments should encourage visitors to behave in a manner that respects natural heritage and has a low impact on the environment by discouraging certain activities (such as quad biking).

## **2.2. Who is Adopting Responsible-tourism Ethics?**

Businesses are displaying a growing trend to look, not only after their financial success, but also after the environmental and social dimensions of their business activities and performance (UNISA: Understanding Corporate Citizenship, 2008:1). However, Frey (2008) mentions that the tourism industry has been strongly criticized for its lack of transformation. Government policies have been developed, and social marketing campaigns have been aimed at trying to influence management policies, but non-hotel accommodation establishments have not embraced the responsible-tourism ethic in a way that will contribute to making the industry sustainable. This does not appear to only be a South African problem. According to Van der Merwe and Wocke (2006), there seem to be very few tourism companies participating in globally responsible tourism initiatives. At a recent seminar held by UNISA, it was stated that the trend to adopt responsible business ethics, both locally and internationally, has grown significantly, and corporate citizenship has been introduced to describe a more balanced way of doing business;

however, compared with other industries, tourism has been slow in adopting these ethics (UNISA, 2008).

### **2.3. Consumer Demand: The Only Hope for Sustainable Practices**

Consumers might not be realizing that they are beginning to practice responsible tourism. There is a growing culture to travel and enjoy more authentic experiences. Tourists are beginning to request local restaurants where they can enjoy traditional food and meet the local people. Local guides are being requested, particularly for certain areas such as township tours (McGrath, 2004).

### **3. Study Area: Design and Process**

The study area for this project was Port Elizabeth, which is the fifth largest city in South Africa and located along the east coast of South Africa. It boasts a population of about 1.2 million, and is seen as the gateway to the Garden Route, with a thriving safari sector, boasting the Big 5 (lion, leopard, buffalo, rhino and elephant) and many game reserves. In addition to a growing tourism industry, the city is also known for its automobile industry.

To access the NHA sector, a number of sources were used, which included the Port Elizabeth Metro Bed-and-Breakfast Association (PEMMBA), Nelson Mandela Bay Tourism (the local tourism authority), a listing from the Tourism Grading Council from 2008 and a listing from the Portfolio Bed-and-Breakfast Collection.

In order to address the primary purpose (main problem) of the paper, a questionnaire was designed and emailed to respondents in the Port Elizabeth area. This was followed by personal interviews with NHA establishments, where they had not completed the emailed questionnaires. The survey was conducted over a two-month period. A sample of 120 NHA establishments was targeted and a response rate of 24 percent was obtained.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

#### **4.1. Level of Awareness of Responsible Tourism**

The intention was to establish the actual level of awareness within the non-hotel accommodation industry. Fifty-two percent had some sort of policy guidelines in place regarding responsible tourism, although only 7 percent were aware that there was an official handbook available. Ninety-three percent had therefore never heard of the handbook before. Probing questions led the researcher to understand that “policy guidelines” were practiced according to knowledge gained through the media; advertising, such as “save-water” campaigns; and various levels of one’s own conscience. All respondents seemed to recognize the need to employ some sort of responsible-tourism practice, but the motivation is largely due to strategic business reasons rather than simply the “feel-good factor” that was rated at 28 percent.

Only 3 percent of respondents indicated that they were members of a sustainable organization. There was almost no knowledge of what the FEDHASA Imvelo Awards and the Heritage Ratings program stood for, and there was no evidence to suggest any

non-hotel accommodation owner or manager had made any effort to investigate the criteria necessary to belong to any sustainable organization.

An interesting note is that the majority of establishments surveyed were members of the local tourism authority, namely Nelson Mandela Bay Tourism (NMBT) and the Port Elizabeth Bed-and-Breakfast Association (PEMBBA). The researcher was advised that belonging to associations did not bring any benefits and there was limited support from local authorities.

#### **4.2. Understanding Responsible Tourism**

There appears to be confusion amongst the NHA establishments regarding the understanding of responsible tourism. Forty-nine percent strongly believed that responsible tourism is about creating sustainability for the future. This is in line with DEAT's Responsible Tourism Guidelines, as mentioned above. A significant proportion, 32 percent, understood it to signify service delivery. The minority (19%) of respondents had no thoughts or ideas on the subject, and this is indeed cause for concern.

#### **4.3. Implementing Responsible Tourism**

According to Goodwin (2009:1) there appears to be a major gap between the definition of the responsible-tourism concept and the way it is used and abused by practitioners. Van der Merwe and Wocke (2006) confirmed this perception in their research conducted on responsible-tourism practices within the hotel industry, when they explored reasons "for the limited uptake of responsible tourism despite South Africa being regarded as a leader in the field of responsible-tourism policy."

In the survey, 69 percent viewed the level of importance regarding the implementation of responsible tourism as personally important, while 62 percent deemed it the right thing to do. Fifty-nine percent felt that implementing responsible tourism is necessary for future sustainability of the industry, linked strongly with the fact that it is also important for business. The sustainability concept appears to have different interpretations, and it is with this in mind that 48 percent of respondents felt that the environmental factor was the most important. It is significant that most of the respondents felt that implementing responsible tourism for environmental reasons is necessary.

The same level of importance was, however, not attached to improving relationships with the local community. This could be because the managers and owners have not yet considered the vital part that the local community can play in the future success of their non-hotel accommodation establishment.

Thirty-eight percent were motivated to implement responsible tourism due to the cost-saving factor.

It would appear from the collected data that the guest-influence factor plays a minor role in implementation practices. This could indicate that guests are not adopting a culture of responsibility by demanding good-practice ethics.

#### **4.4. Motivation for Responsible Tourism**

Tourism is a high-impact industry. It is also considered to be an industry that can make significant contributions to solving environmental and social problems; however, survey results indicate that the most important factors that contribute to the practice of responsible tourism were not widely known by non-hotel accommodation owners and managers.

Environmental needs, specifically related to waste and water management (ranked the highest), and cultural needs (ranked second) were deemed to be the most important factors that influence the practice of responsible tourism. Environmental needs pertaining to the flora and fauna of Port Elizabeth, humanitarian and community needs had a very low ranking by comparison.

This shows that there is a fairly large awareness level regarding waste disposal and water management. The cost of these environmental factors is carried by each particular non-hotel accommodation establishment and therefore has a direct bearing on their financial resources. These factors are deemed to be more important than those that do not directly effect the bottom line.

Although 59 percent of respondents encouraged positive guest behavior, almost all had never thought about influencing supplier's behavior. In other words, they were of the view that they had limited influence on the existing relationship between suppliers and themselves.

#### **4.5. Supporting Local Communities**

The researcher was attempting to investigate the level of responsible tourism on a social level that might be practiced within the non-hotel accommodation industry. They could choose any of the descriptions provided, and there was an option to provide any additional information in writing.

Sixty-six percent do not support any type of community initiative, which equates to 19 of the 29 respondents. Seventeen percent of respondents supported a local school, and one respondent supported a clinic in a nearby disadvantaged community. This was because their chef's family lived in the area, and he had brought this clinic's plight to their attention. Seventeen percent responded "other."

The findings suggest that the lack of enthusiasm and commitment in terms of implementing responsible tourism is primarily due to limited awareness, and additionally, a lack of understanding regarding the responsible-tourism concept. It is disconcerting that although there are certain awareness campaigns and initiatives in place, so many within the non-hotel accommodation sector of the tourism industry appear confused about the concepts and demonstrated this lack of understanding. This is likely to impede any adoption of responsible-tourism guidelines, and could be the reason for the non-hotel accommodation industry's slow response in the adoption of these principles

None of the non-hotel accommodation establishments had set any targets or objectives for implementing any responsible-tourism guidelines; however, gauging from the responses, all the accommodation establishments practiced some form of responsible tourism, albeit at various levels. It was noted that these particular activities were providing definite cost-saving benefits to the establishment.

The primary factor that appeared to motivate a non-hotel accommodation establishment to practice any form of responsible tourism was the cost-reduction benefits. Unwittingly, most non-hotel accommodation establishments were adopting some form of responsible-tourism practice in the form of energy-saving light bulbs, switching off appliances when not used and practicing water-conservation methods.

In previous literature, it was suggested that the degree of responsible tourism that is practiced could be consumer-driven. One accommodation establishment, in particular, was very pro-active in socially responsible tourism. Guests contacted the owner prior to their arrival requesting information regarding historically disadvantaged communities and they became involved making positive contributions. Although this was not the initial intention of this particular accommodation establishment, it remains a fact that their social-responsibility program has brought more business and therefore more financial benefits to all those involved. It was noted that this particular accommodation establishment was a larger one, and had been operating in the industry for a number of years. The owner of this establishment indicated that they were thriving during this time of economic recession, and were increasing the size of their business.

A viewpoint often expressed by the respondents was that the associations that they belong to show a lack of any supportive policy or planning framework. The non-hotel accommodation owners and managers thought that associations such as Nelson Mandela Bay Tourism (NMBT) should be advising its members on topical issues, and communicating with them on such topics as per the guidelines found in the DEAT Handbook on Responsible Tourism.

## **5. Recommendations**

- Continuous assessments relating to the understanding of the various causes that prevent the non-hotel accommodation industry from embracing the principles and practices of responsible tourism need to be conducted. Conducting evaluations could result in a continual improvement in awareness levels and stimulate implementation.
- Due to the negativity regarding government and the role that it plays in tourism, it would not be a good strategy to implement legislation regarding the responsible-tourism guidelines. It could produce a more positive outcome if the non-hotel accommodation owners and managers were encouraged to buy into the concept, and a provincial Responsible Tourism Strategy, to address specific issues was set up as a benchmark for tourism enterprises.



- Membership organizations need to pay close attention as to how they communicate with their members, especially about initiatives, such as responsible tourism, which could benefit the tourism industry.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study has offered a snapshot view of the present status, constraints and success factors regarding responsible-tourism ethics and implementation within the non-hotel accommodation industry in Port Elizabeth. As this industry continues to grow, there is a need to develop a better understanding regarding responsible tourism and what it entails, before policy can be implemented. This fact will remain the largest inhibiting factor that will affect progress in the adoption of the responsible-tourism principles. Further study with a larger sample to gain a better understanding for the reasons regarding lack of awareness is necessary.

Responsible tourism has not entirely been embraced by the non-hotel accommodation industry, and there are serious shortfalls in the training of those who are able to implement change. The reason appears to be a lack of awareness and knowledge regarding how to move forward and embrace the guidelines as set out by the 2002 Responsible Tourism Handbook and the government policy document, namely the 1996 White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa. Once tourism is managed responsibly, positive impacts will be felt in economic, social and environmental areas. Education is one of the key factors that limit the positive impacts. There is scope for further research in this particular field and it is highly recommended. The research could immediately identify areas where differences can cause maximum change affecting all sectors in the tourism industry in a positive manner.

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