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# Editorial: Ecotourism models: identifying contributions to conservation and community

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

[Ecotourism models: identifying contributions to conservation and community](#)

## Research Topic

This Research Topic looked at research on frameworks, models, applications, and practices which highlight conservation and community strategies for ecotourism. The models presented attempted to address the complexities of ecotourism implementation and included looking at models that lead to financial benefits, direct and indirect, for communities and conservation, provide positive experiences for visitors and hosts, minimized physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts on fauna and flora and which recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of indigenous and local peoples, working in partnership with them. The topic also covered the challenges in terms of implementation and management and new ways of conceptualizing ecotourism amidst the challenges presented by climate change, pandemics, and the degradation of natural resources ([Spenceley, 2021](#)). Several principles behind ecotourism have been touted by non-profit organizations (see for example, the [Global Ecotourism Network \(GEN\) \(2023\)](#), which have been based on successful implementation and design.

- Produce direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- Minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts on fauna and flora.
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of indigenous and local peoples and work in partnership to create empowerment.

Source: [Global Ecotourism Network \(GEN\) \(2023\)](#), Ecotourism Principles.

The articles in this Research Topic, cover some of the important aspects of the promise of ecotourism, and implementation techniques to engage ecotourism as a conservation strategy in a strategic way.

## Connecting tourism activities and conservation outcomes

Two articles related to this theme and demonstrated that the tourist can be a valuable vessel to ensure conservation efforts are supported and possibly enhanced. While ecotourism has been touted as a highly effective conservation strategy, Skibins *et al.* discovered that there are differences in how visitors relate to and identify with wildlife. This study provides practitioners and park managers with ideas to improve conservation outcomes and enhance the visitor experience. Increasing strategies that improve visitor connection to wildlife, nature, and our dependence on healthy ecosystems is increasingly necessary to garner further support and resources for conservation. This study demonstrated one strategy to support the visitor experience, yet also demonstrates that there are often subtle mechanisms, strategies, and communication efforts that are feasible and cultivate positive conservation outcomes.

Related, Kredens and Vogt conducted a netnographic study which examined tourists who visited wildlife tourism attractions (WTAs) by looking at their post-visit photos and captions on Instagram to evaluate the strength of their connection to wildlife and conservation. With the advent of social media and the propensity of visitors to share experiences often in real time, it remains critical to understand the meaning of their visits and better how to implement strategies that again, increase support for conservation. For managers, practitioners, who provide Wildlife Tourism Attractions (WTAs), Kredens and Vogt found tourists were sensitive to conservation and welfare practices associated with these types of attractions. Their results suggest that WTAs with good or excellent conservation and welfare practices were found to lead to more highly involved tourists, ultimately benefitting community investment, animal welfare, and conservation efforts via the flow of tourist dollars and spread of information on social media, the tourist changing their behavior, or all the aforementioned. Conversely, WTAs with negative conservation and welfare practices were found not to foster the same level of tourist involvement as their counterparts, often leading to more anthropocentric Instagram posts that do not spread conservation messaging or imply appropriate tourist-animal interactions. The implications from this research suggest that WTA management practices should move toward a model focusing on conservation-themed interpretation, education, and positive animal welfare for the improvement of conservation efforts within wildlife and ecotourism. We would also argue that perhaps conservation groups connect with WTAs to find mutually beneficial strategies to ensure a positive result for efforts in a country or region. While it may seem somewhat obvious, their findings not only identify and support the impact of poorly managed WTAs, hopefully these findings are provided to WTAs to build capacity and understanding on the importance of animal welfare and conservation broadly within

their associated community. Yet, WTAs are truly at a crossroad, as Keulartz (2015), so aptly identified. Further examination of the conservation benefits as well as animal rights issues now are at the forefront of these areas and will require research programs that venture well beyond care and wellbeing. Yet these studies open the possibility for increasing the positive impact of visitor experiences, while simultaneously increasing conservation support. It is also evident, there is much work to be done, and we can utilize the power of the visitor experience to effect positive change.

## Benefit-sharing from tourism

Two contributions were relative to benefit sharing concepts. Benefit-sharing is defined here as “a commitment to channel some returns, whether monetary or non-monetary, back to the range of designated participants: affected communities, source communities or source nations” (P2P, 2019). It has been shown (Snyman and Bricker, 2021) that where there is benefit-sharing communities tend to have more positive attitudes toward tourism, Snyman *et al.* reviewed the Rwanda Tourism Revenue Sharing programme over the last 15 years, including primary and secondary data, which included interviewing more than 300 community members living around three national parks. Their results suggest a lack of awareness concerning the Tourism Revenue Sharing Policy, with respect to project selection, and community involvement. Decades of ecotourism research have suggested the importance of community involvement and empowerment for successful conservation outcomes. This study not only provides recommendations specific to the Rwanda context, but also demonstrates the potential widespread application of developing strategies that enhance livelihoods and create a resilient community development structure. This recommendation includes support considering significant disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Community revenue sharing schemes have an opportunity to build in emergency funds and plan for future crises that may or may not occur.

It is also clear that transparency and clear understanding of any revenue or benefit sharing scheme by community members is crucial when it comes to increased and sustained support for conservation (see Hesling *et al.*, 2021 for more on governance related to benefit-sharing). This includes clarity around selection criteria, steps in the selection process, definitions of terms, and knowledge of and selection committee members. And creating a straightforward, simplified, and transparent process can increase understanding, fairness, and continued support for achieving conservation goals. Building capacity and skills to enhance community involvement was emphasized in their recommendations. And lastly their results signify the importance of continued monitoring and evaluation of any benefit-sharing scheme, to be able to adapt and pivot to continuously meet and improve the support for communities, ultimately improving the viability of conservation efforts long term.

Stewardship at the local level, or perhaps developing a conservation ethic at the local level is enhanced with the delivery

of benefits, beyond the intrinsic benefits of protecting wildlife and their associated habitat (see Snyman and Bricker, 2019). Muntiferung et al. similarly looked at whether tourism could be used as a wildlife conservation strategy where tourism benefits are assumed to ‘trickle down’ to rural communities. In their study, there was a clear and direct relationship between demonstrated revenue sharing benefits for communities and levels of stewardship. As noted above, it is assumed that providing local benefits to communities not only increases support for conservation, but it can also assist in discouraging illegal wildlife activities. Researchers acknowledge that within their case study of Namibia, their findings do not suggest cause and effect, rather contributing factors to complex issues surrounding illegal wildlife related crimes. Again, there is significant support for community engagement and empowerment to achieve stewardship that improves conditions for wildlife, in this case, the black rhino.

The contributions within this Research Topic provide support for the principles of ecotourism, with a particular focus on enhancing stewardship and support for conservation. There is an intricate web of stakeholders and strategic nuances in any conservation program. These articles highlight the complex nature of garnering support for conservation, be it communities or visitors. It is therefore important to continue to pursue strategies, policies, good governance, and diverse communication strategies that enhance local engagement and empowerment, and transparency. In addition, articles presented in this Research Topic address strategies to enhance visitor engagement and have implications improving local initiatives, stewardship and messaging and the quality of care when it comes to conservation and wildlife related attractions.

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## Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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## Conflict of interest

KB and SS declared that they were an editorial board member of *Frontiers*, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

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