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Re-thinking ecotourism and community development: the case of Ngomakurira Hills Project, Zimbabwe

Chiedza N. Mutanga¹, Patrick W. Mamimine¹, Getrude Kwanisai¹, Patricia Sambaza¹

¹Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe

Abstract

Many ecotourism projects have been funded and undertaken in developing countries, but their success and actual benefits to the local communities are hardly evaluated. This study evaluates ecotourism as a community development strategy using the case study of Ngomakurira Hills Project in Goromonzi District, Zimbabwe. The evaluation was conducted using in-depth interviews carried out between January and March 2016 and the data were analysed using the thematic approach. The main findings of the study were that ecotourism contributed to the expansion and capacitation of small business enterprises which opened employment opportunities for local people. Despite the success registered by the ecotourism project, its benefits were not evenly distributed among the community members thereby orchestrating community polarization. For the project to contribute substantially to community development, the study recommends the development of a sustainable ecotourism model which could ensure the sustainability of the project as well as sustainable community support for the project by enhancing trans-generational preservation of natural and cultural resources, and equitable distribution of ecotourism benefits.

Keywords: CBNRM, Community Livelihoods, Community Participation, Conservation, Ecotourism.

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Corresponding author: Chiedza N Mutanga(cmutanga@cut.ac.zw)

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Introduction

Globally, there is a strong argument that ecotourism contributes positively to livelihoods of host communities, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, Gross Domestic Product and development of a nation at large (Jiang, 2008; Kiper, 2013). Ecotourism is defined by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (Hunt et. al., 2015). Ecotourism enhances community development by providing more sustainable alternate sources of livelihood to local communities (Sinclair-Maragh, 2019; Kiper, 2013). Community development is a process where local people can create more jobs, income and infrastructure, to facilitate their community to effectively manage change (Cavaye, 2006). According to Sabuhoro et al. (2017), most African governments have taken up the idea of ecotourism as a roadmap for community development. Ecotourism has thus been embraced as a key community development strategy by most developing countries including Zimbabwe as it brings about benefits to the nation at large. However, despite the highlighted benefits, ecotourism has been associated with a lot of criticisms in the past. Kiss (2004) argues that most Community Based Ecotourism projects cited as success stories actually involve little change in existing local land and resource-use practices, providing only a modest supplement to local livelihoods and remaining dependent on external support for long periods, if not indefinitely.

Many ecotourism projects have been undertaken and funded in developing countries, but their success has not been widely monitored and the actual benefits to the local communities remain largely unquantified (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). If this situation persists, ecotourism projects may fail to deliver net benefits to the community, and there may not be any basis for validating claims of ecotourism as a development strategy. It is against this background that this study sought to fill this gap by evaluating the role of ecotourism in community development in Zimbabwe. The findings of this study provide insights on what is actually transpiring on the ground in some ecotourism projects and strategies that may be adopted to achieve broad-based benefits and sustainable ecotourism development.

Literature Review

Ecotourism is a growing niche market within the larger travel industry, with the potential of being an important sustainable development tool (Saurombe et al., 2017; UNEP, 2003). Ecotourism has been advanced as a form of sustainable tourism that is expected to boost conservation and rural community development in Southern Africa (Chiutsi et al., 2011). Chiutsi et al., (2011) points out that community development employs community structures to address social needs and empower groups of people thereby improving the situation of a community, not just economically, but also strengthening community functionality. Cavaye (2006) further posits that community development improves the ability of communities to collectively make better decisions about the use of resources such as infrastructure, labour and knowledge.

Saurombe et al. (2017) argue that ecotourism focuses on local and regional benefits through supporting the well-being of local people and advocating local ownership and business opportunities for local people, especially in rural areas. Ecotourism strives not only to be a conservation mechanism and an economic development tool, but also a development process that seeks to remain harmonious with local cultural and social needs (Currie, Stack & Kaufman, 2018; Epler-Wood, 2004).

Chiutsi et al. (2011) observe that the rise of sustainable tourism in Southern Africa has seen the development of a multiplicity of tourism projects packaged under ecotourism as a more sustainable form of tourism than mass tourism. Ecotourism is therefore largely associated with small-scale controlled tourism and long-term societal well-being (Reichel & Uriely, 2008). It requires active participation of the community in order for it to be successfully implemented and practiced. The activities that have emerged through ecotourism initiatives include village cultural tours, sport hunting, photographic safaris, fishing, and a lot of other downstream activities which support the eco-tourists during communal tours (2011).

Ecotourism has become an alternative approach for overcoming the problem of traditional tourism with the assumption that there will be minimum negative impacts and maximum benefits for the local people and their environment (Fletcher, 2018; Nyampane & Thapa, 2010). Bob et al. (2008) state that

ecotourism promotes an enhanced appreciation of the natural environment and environmental education by exposing visitors and locals to nature and conservation. Ecotourism projects show the importance of integrating and ensuring genuine participation of local communities and the subsequent flow of benefits to these communities (Muzvidziwa, 2013). Ecotourism is important in a number of ways: (i) it contributes to Gross Domestic Product and the livelihood of the locals in developing countries, (ii) it promotes locals' active participation and empowers them by building self-esteem, (iii) it encourages intercultural appreciation and communication between host communities and tourists, and (iv) it contributes to long-lasting economic development, and drives the development of other related industries (Jiang, 2008; Kiper, 2013). Benefits of ecotourism range from infrastructural development to income generating investment and annual dividends. Ecotourism has also created a lot of jobs for the local residents in rural communities where they earn income from the tourism related jobs they will be involved in through the conservation of local systems and culture (Kuuder & Wuleka, 2012; Mbaiwa, 2003). With a history deeply rooted in the conservation movement, ecotourism has provided a highly strategic source of revenue to natural areas that need protection (UNEP, 2003). Ecotourism is therefore regarded as a panacea for solving many of the environmental and eco problems of less developed countries. It was originally conceived as an alternative approach to the increasing threat posed to both the culture and the ecological environment of the destination areas by conventional tourism (Wearing & Neil, 2009).

Community based ecotourism (CBE) is a form of ecotourism where the local community has substantial control over, and involvement in its development and management. A major proportion of the benefits remain within the community (Denman, 2001). Kiss (2004) noted that CBE is a form of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), a popular choice of activities in an enterprise-based strategy for biodiversity conservation and a common element in integrated conservation and development projects (ICDP). The concept of CBE originated under the Communal Areas Management Programs for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) program and operates on the basic philosophy of entrusting management and conservation of natural resources to local inhabitants (Mbaiwa, 2008). CBE projects have for over three decades been promoted as a means of development whereby social, environmental and economic needs of local communities are met through

offering a tourism product (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). It is purported that through proper management, CBE projects can become efficient tools for dealing with the myriad socio economic problems that bedevil destinations which depend on natural resources (Manu & Kuuder, 2012). One essential principle of CBE is total community control over tourism development (Afenyo & Amuquando, 2014). The aim of the community based ecotourism projects is to promote rural development conservation of natural and cultural heritage and sustainable land use based on wildlife in agriculturally marginal rural areas (Nyaruwata, 2011). Environmental conservation and livelihood enhancement are other goals of community based ecotourism projects.

The growth of CBE and the associated positive economic impacts to the nation as a whole have increased its importance in Southern Africa (UNWTO, 2008). Kontogeorgopoulos (2005) argues that CBE strives to merge sustainability and conservation with ecotourism. The envisaged benefits, control and involvement, underpin community development. CBE and ecotourism in general have however been viewed as green washing terms popularised by sustainable tourism development with no real proof in practice on their role as community development tools (Brandt et al., 2019; Barry, 2012; Ross & Wall, 1999). This indicates the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of ecotourism projects so that there may be sound basis for validating claims of the importance of ecotourism as a community development strategy. Using the case of Ngomakurira Hills Ecotourism Project in Zimbabwe, this study therefore contributes to the ecotourism body of knowledge by evaluating ecotourism as a community development strategy.

Methodology

Study area

Ngomakurira Hills Ecotourism Project is located in Goromonzi District in the Chinamora Communal Lands in Zimbabwe (Figure 1) (Appendix). It is one of the early Communal Areas Management Programs for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) projects and was established in 2002 (Government of Zimbabwe & Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2017). The project was initiated by CAMPFIRE in conjunction with the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) which is responsible for managing the Ngomakurira Hills

Heritage site. The main ecotourism attractions offered by Ngomakurira Hills Ecotourism Project include cave viewing, bird watching, village tours, mountain climbing, camping, and hill trekking, game drives, and crafts production.

Data collection and analysis

This case study adopted the qualitative research methodology to gather data from respondents (Patton, 2002; Leedy & Omrod, 2005). Respondents were purposively selected from the communities and management of Ngomakurira Hills Ecotourism project on the assumption that they had in-depth knowledge of the issues under investigation. In-depth interviews were conducted between January and March 2016 and each of them lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The guide was piloted on selected experts in the field. The in-depth interviews were conducted with seventeen respondents; namely one project officer, eight community trust members, one local community leader and seven local community members. According to Kumeckpor (2002) and Saunders (2007) a minimum of fifteen in-depth interviews are adequate for qualitative studies.

To evaluate the contribution of ecotourism to community development, the in-depth interviews were guided by a framework by Epler Wood International (2004) on how ecotourism can be measured as a community development strategy. According to the framework, five (5) questions informed the interviews and these are: (i) Has ecotourism contributed to the expansion of local business opportunities? (ii) Are ecotourism business and employment opportunities reaching greater segments of the population? (iii) Have collective benefits to the community been enhanced? (iv) What are the social and cultural impacts of tourism? (v) Has ecotourism improved access to information and allowed for more participation within society? According to Koens, Dieperink & Miranda (2009), ecotourism projects do not only give benefits, but also drawbacks. In view of this, a question on drawbacks or challenges associated with ecotourism was added to the interview guide. Permission to collect data was granted by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) and consent was sought from each interviewee before the start of the interview.

All the interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and the interviewer also took notes during the interviews. The data were coded and analysed according to themes. Following Koens, Dieperink & Miranda (2009), the results were

analysed under two main themes; 'benefits' and 'drawbacks' where the five questions from Epler Wood International (2004)'s framework formed the main sub-themes. For the purpose of validating the responses, only issues raised by three or more respondents were included in the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic profiles of respondents

The respondents consisted of nine males and eight females. Only one interviewee had a college diploma while eleven had secondary education and five had primary education. All the respondents had been involved in ecotourism for a relatively long period where five had been involved in the ecotourism for a period ranging from six to ten years while the remaining twelve had been involved in the project for more than ten years.

Community benefits from Ngomakurira Ecotourism Project

The study noted that the ecotourism project had a number of benefits which included broadening local business opportunities, creating employment opportunities, capacity building for small scale entrepreneurs, enhancing cultural awareness and appreciation, and improving access to information and technical knowledge. The findings are discussed in the sections below.

Expansion of local business opportunities

Eight of the respondents were of the view that the development of Ngomakurira Hills Ecotourism Project resulted in expansion of local business opportunities. The new business opportunities included crafts production and sale to tourists, as well as selling traditional dishes to the tourists. According to respondent 1:

Many people, especially women, have been able to develop small businesses in this area because of ecotourism. Local people used to rely on agriculture only, particularly selling tomatoes to markets in Harare, but nowadays it's not bringing much revenue to the community but communities now have an alternative form of livelihood. They are now selling crafts to tourists and the amount of money they earn depends with the amount of sales made in a day.

These findings concur with Stronza & Gordillo (2008) who noted that ecotourism minimises or eliminates dependence on activities that exploit natural resources such as agriculture and cattle ranching by opening up business opportunities in tourism. Moreover, UNWTO (2008) highlighted that to ensure there is poverty reduction in communities there should be direct sale of goods and services to visitors by the community as this is an effective way of minimizing leakages and increasing linkages. Weaver (2001) posits that retention of profits to the local communities is another crucial element of ecotourism projects. As such, there is need to reduce leakages from the local community and build linkages within it by focusing more on the long tourism supply chain by the formation of businesses enterprises that are managed by the communities. This also ensures that the poor are not only employed as a source of cheap labor, but as local entrepreneurs who participate in the supply of goods and services to the tourism organisations (UNWTO, 2008).

The increase in business opportunities has also made it possible for the local communities especially women to participate at business expos which helped them to market themselves, and instill a sense of pride and self-esteem among community members. However even though there was growth in crafts production, there were still other community members not benefiting much. Respondent 10 commented:

there is expansion of business opportunities, but only to a few community members, especially women.

Women were said to be benefiting more than other community members. Ass Sanderson et al. (2013) and Madzara (2011) pointed out, the tourism industry has more opportunities for women than men., Furthermore, women tend to have major strides in starting their own small to medium enterprises such as craft initiatives, participating in community based ecotourism ventures and setting up their own small to medium sized accommodation facilities in resort towns. This could be attributed to gender roles within societies. For example, Mondal (2006) pointed out that crafts production such as carving, embroidery, weaving, paper making, and bamboo and cane weaving in Bhutan is mainly done by women.

Business and employment opportunities from ecotourism

Employment opportunities

All the respondents attested to the fact that a number of community members managed to get employment opportunities from ecotourism with some being employed on full time basis, while others like general hands were employed as part time workers. Respondent 5 mentioned that:

Many people are employed on full time and part-time basis. In terms of salaries, full time workers are allocated salaries while part-time workers such as general hands receive some wages depending on what they would have done.

These findings show that at Ngomakurira, ecotourism development attracted both skilled and unskilled labour. The results concur with Wearing & Neil (2009) who noted that one of the most obvious and an immediate benefit of ecotourism associated with local communities is the increase in employment opportunities and generation of local entrepreneurial activities amongst the local communities. Through employing a number of community members, ecotourism at Ngomakurira can thus be said to be contributing to community livelihoods at Ngomakurira. Kuuder & Wuleka (2012) and Madzara et al. (2012) also posit that income from tourism related jobs helps improve the standards of living of the local people. Ashley (2000) and Shah (2000) suggested that although casual earnings per person maybe very small, they are more widely spread enough for instance to cover up school fees for children and sustain basic living. According to Agrawal & Redford (2006), newly generated jobs and income are the most common indicators for success of ecotourism projects. Elsewhere in Sankoyo Village in Botswana, Mbaiwa & Stronza (2010) provide an example of a successful project based on its potential to generate benefits such as income and employment.

Capacity building for small-scale entrepreneurs

Six of the seventeen respondents noted that business opportunities for small business owners was received through training, mostly conducted through workshops, where the communities were trained in areas like tour guiding. Respondent 3 had this to say:

I managed to acquire tour guiding skills from tour guiding training workshops conducted by NMMZ and I am currently pursuing a diploma in tour guiding.

Other community members managed to gain skills from the workshops conducted in the community. Besides the individual skills community members obtained from these training workshops, community members managed to teach each other some important skills. Women from the community were now able to do self-jobs like making handicrafts because of the skills they acquired, which in turn helped them financially. Respondent 5 mentioned that:

I am now able to produce handicrafts using the skills learnt from other women in the community, able to sustain my family as a widow and also managing to pay school fees for my children using the income that I get from selling crafts.

Here it can be said that ecotourism facilitated training and empowerment of the local communities which had the potential to improve their skills and to some extent solve the problem caused by lack of education which is usually faced by the poor. These findings are in accordance with Stronza & Gordillo (2008) who also noted that ecotourism leads to skills enhancement through training programs that are conducted within the communities. Nyaruwata (2011) postulated that training is imperative for those that are involved in ecotourism projects as there is need to develop skills that can help enhance tourist satisfaction with the products and services offered and potentially expand tourists demand for the local products. Epler-Wood (2004) mentioned that training is fundamental to the success of tourism as a tool to expand local business opportunities for the rural communities. However, communities were mainly trained in tour guiding and crafts making, though there is need to train them in other crucial areas like project management, tourism, administration, accounting, and customer care. Chiutsi et al. (2011) revealed that there is need to train local residents in customer care, so that they have an appreciation of the service dynamics of tourism and can be able to create and sustain demand by providing high levels of guest satisfaction. Ashley et al. (2001) also noted that important skills in tourism include language and an understanding of tourist expectations, to be able to deliver quality visitor experience and retain visitors. The communities therefore still lacked many skills which they needed to

succeed in the tourism industry. Kiss (2004) pointed out that even when communities possess local skills and knowledge that might not be enough for them to be successful in the tourism industry, which is a complex sector not appropriate for communities with few business competencies.

Collective benefits

Collective benefits like improvement in infrastructure within the community such as roads, water, health facilities were still very few in Ngomakurira. All the respondents pointed out that the only major development that had taken place as a result of the ecotourism project was the improvement in water facilities from boreholes that have been sunk in every ward. Respondent 6 stated that:

Yes, boreholes have been sunk in each ward, but there is still need to construct tarred roads in the area.

These findings are not in sync with what is expected from ecotourism and can be a reflection that the community in Ngomakurira has not benefited much from ecotourism. For instance, Stronza & Gordillo (2008) identified a number of collective benefits that include improvement in roads, water, and health facilities in the community, while Sebele (2010) identified the development of community assets such as schools, boreholes, roads and grinding mills from funds generated through ecotourism. As Ashley et al. (2001) point out, the development of physical capital such as roads, water and other tools also ensures that the marginalised rural communities benefit within their community. These results from Ngomakurira are worrying as they may be pointing to the fact that the ecotourism project has not been fully able to live to its objective of sustaining the well-being of the community as a whole.

Enhancement of cultural awareness and appreciation

Only three of the respondents had the opinion that community members participating in the ecotourism project postulated that they now appreciated their culture more through working together and through the use of indigenous knowledge, materials and labor. Moreover, they put forward that their cultural values were also enhanced through working together there by strengthening social ties. It can therefore be concluded that ecotourism at Ngomakurira was thus empowering the local community as it promoted cultural awareness and provided an opportunity for local communities to generate benefits from

ecotourism. These findings are in support of Wearing & Neil (2009) who argue that working together strengthens cultural appreciation in that it provides self-esteem and incentives for maintaining traditional arts, crafts and traditional knowledge.

Improved access to information and technical knowledge

About nine of the respondents were of the view that ecotourism at Ngomakurira improved access to information by local people through workshops that are conducted within the community, as well as through attending travel expos such as the Sanganai Travel Expo held in Zimbabwe every year. Respondent 14 had this to say:

Through this project we have participated at the Sanganai Travel Expo where we have managed to learn a lot as well as benefited from interacting with members from other ecotourism projects.

This is in line with Madzara et al. (2012) who posited that Sustainable Tourism Enterprise Promotion Zim (STEPZIM) & Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) have facilitated the participation of community based ecotourism enterprises at Sanganai Travel Expo and this has served more as an information source. This shows that ecotourism has the potential to improve access to information and technical knowledge which in turn allows for more community participation. According to Epler-Wood (2004), a project can be named a success depending on its ability to improve access to information and technical knowledge.

Weaknesses of Ngomakurira ecotourism project

Besides the limited community benefits discussed in the section above, it was also noted that the ecotourism project had inherent weaknesses which included limited financial capital, unequal distribution of benefits, power-sharing conflicts and cultural erosion. These findings discussed in the sections below.

Limited financial capital

Thirteen of the respondents postulated that the project had not successfully availed long-term capital outside the initial donor contribution. Moreover, respondents were concerned that there was no credit income available to the communities as they had no access to getting loans from financial institutions. Responded 12 had this to say:

We are failing to grow the business because we have no access to funds. We have even tried to get loans from banks but the banks wouldn't give us any since we are not formally employed and we do not have collateral.

It can be argued that even if community members have been able to develop small businesses because of ecotourism, they have not really been able to grow their businesses due to lack of financial capital. According to Ashley et al. (2001) financial capital is imperative for the rural communities to be able to expand informal sector activities within tourism such as crafts business. In this case, ecotourism has not been sufficiently able to financially empower the communities.

Unequal distribution of benefits

Almost all the respondents mentioned that fights because of unequal distribution of benefits from ecotourism have negatively affected the community in Ngomakurira. This was mainly due to the fact that some community members were benefiting, whilst others were not benefiting at all. Respondent 12 commented:

When the project was established we were promised that we were all going to benefit whereas in reality only those located close to the site are benefiting a lot compared to us who are located far from the site.

These results concur with Madzara et al. (2012) who also noted that in most ecotourism projects there are unclear benefit sharing arrangements either among community members themselves or between communities and private players involved which leads to mistrust between parties. This distribution gap is unhealthy as it is likely to discourage community support for the current and even future community projects that may come to the community.

Moreover, a number of respondents complained that there was lack of transparency in distribution of benefits between NMMZ and the communities, where the communities felt that they were being prejudiced in the distribution of benefits. Coria & Calfucura (2011) noted a similar trend of the uneven distribution of benefits from ecotourism between indigenous communities and other stakeholders outside protected areas. This disproportionate benefit

distribution among stakeholders can erode their support for or lead to the failure of ecotourism projects. Although this challenge of inequality in benefit sharing is common among many ecotourism projects (He et al., 2008), it still indicates that Ngomakurira Ecotourism Project has failed to deliver promises of community-level benefits.

Power-sharing conflicts

All the seven local community members who participated in the study were unhappy with the issues of power-sharing due to the fact that there had been no appointment of new committee members since the establishment of Ngomakurira Ecotourism Project. Respondent 1 revealed that:

Conflicts have arisen because there is no appointment of a new committee; the same members have remained in position since inception.

These findings are in support of Madzara et al. (2012) who noted that in most cases office bearers remain in position for a long time because of lack of stringent enforcement of rules and regulations particularly relating to tenure of office bearers. This dissatisfaction in relation to power-sharing that the community expressed may portray the leaders as being more advantageous in accessing the benefits from the project. This is because, usually there are perceptions amongst communities that since leaders are more powerful, they derive more while the “powerless” gain less (Afenyo & Amuquandoh, 2014). The resultant effect of such dissatisfaction may be the withdrawal of support for the project by unhappy community members and this has the potential of weakening the trust and unity in local communities.

Cultural erosion

About four of the respondents indicated that another undesirable effect of ecotourism in Ngomakurira Hills was cultural erosion which was reflected by the desecration of certain cultural practices. Respondent 1 observed that:

Elders from the community complain that the Ngomakurira heritage site is no longer sacred as it was before, take for instance, jewellery and shoes are not allowed to be worn whilst going up the mountain, but tourists do not observe the rules.

On the same issue Respondent 3 also had this to say:

Ngomakurira used to be sacred, but it is no longer and the elders are unable to perform rituals as in the past all because the hills have been literally overrun by tourists.

The above state of affairs has similarities with the findings of another study conducted in Kodagu district, India, where Vishwanatha & Chandrashekara (2014) noted that ecotourism caused a distortion of local customs and changes in local culture. Epler-Wood (2004) and Wearing & Neil (2009) also observed that tourism often brings changes in local systems there by threatening indigenous identity. Although it is happening elsewhere, these results may indicate that at Ngomakurira Ecotourism Project, the vulnerability of the cultural resource being promoted is being threatened by the activities being carried out. This cultural erosion may be evidence that the project has failed to foster respect for local culture which is one of the characteristics of ecotourism (Trofimov & Soimu, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study were that Ngomakurira Ecotourism Project contributed to the expansion of local business opportunities, capacity building in small business enterprises, and opened employment opportunities for local people and others. However, regardless of these benefits, there was an unclear benefit sharing scheme between NMMZ and local communities, coupled with uneven distribution of benefits among community members, which discouraged community participation and created divisions and conflicts within the community. Considering the definition of ecotourism espoused by the International Tourism Society (TIES) as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (Hunt et al., 2015), we conclude that while some tangible benefits were realized, ecotourism in Ngomakurira has also largely failed to sustain the well-being of the community as a whole. If these issues are not addressed, the Ngomakurira Ecotourism Project may eventually lose any basis or claims of contributing to community development through equitably delivering benefits to the community, and preservation of cultural identity. For the project to contribute substantially to community development, the study recommends for the development of a sustainable ecotourism model

which could ensure the sustainability of the project as well as sustainable community support for the project by enhancing trans-generational preservation of natural and cultural resources, and equitable distribution of ecotourism benefits.

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Appendix 1

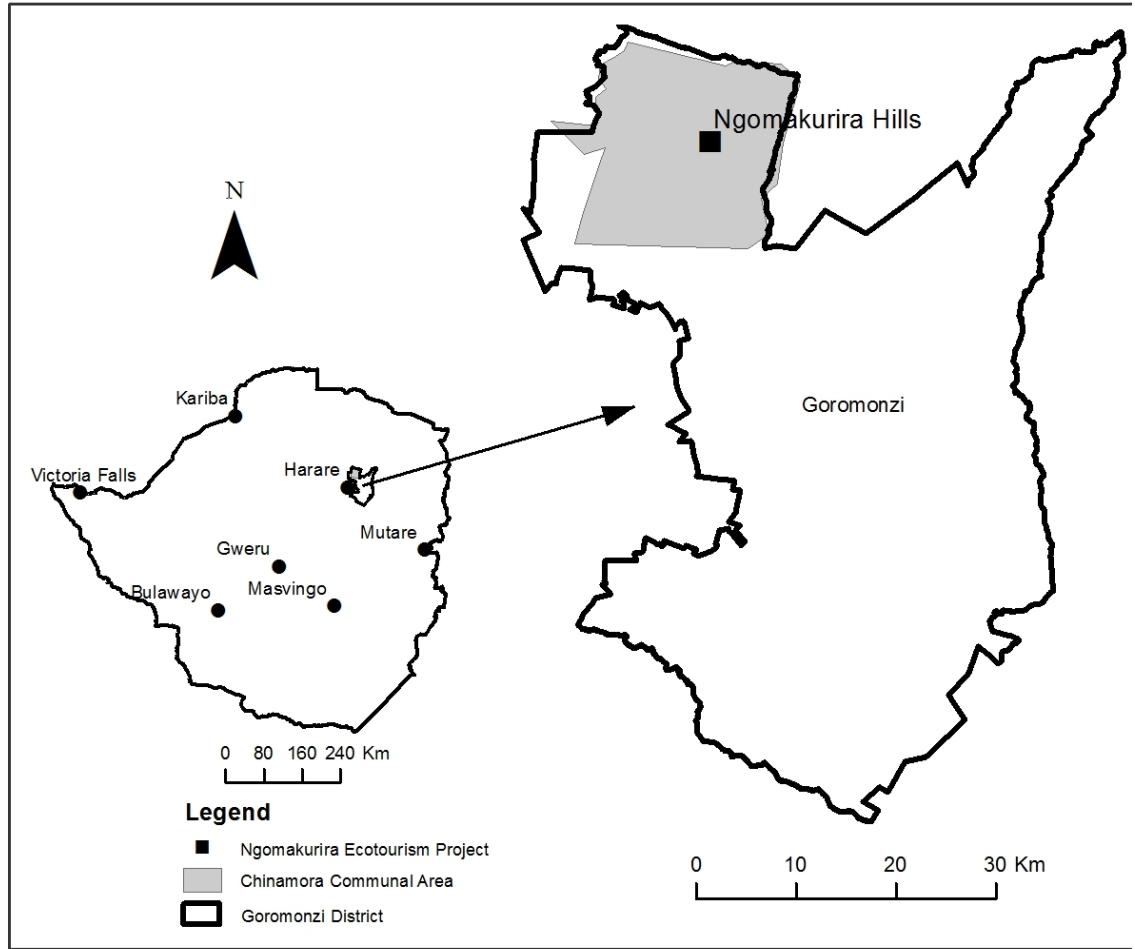


Figure 1: Location of Ngomakurira Hills Ecotourism Project