Wildlife Tourism in Namibia

David Weaver’s and Katharine Elliott’s article, “Spatial Patterns and Problems in Contemporary Namibian Tourism,” in *The* *Geographical Journal* discusses the significance of core-periphery relations as it pertains to Namibia’s tourism potential. Namibia[[1]](#footnote-1) is a classic example of African diversity and struggle. Since the phasing out of the colonial and imperial era by Europe, African countries have struggled to find national unity and peace within their somewhat arbitrarily assigned borders. Still highly segregated by class and ethnic divisions, Namibia’s social hierarchy is apparent through geographic disbursement. Specifically, according to Elliott and Weaver, the White elite class resides in the commercial core and the Black poor class subsists in the communal periphery. The authors correctly determine that Namibian tourism patterns should be reviewed in order to analyze both the potential productivity and problems of tourism in countries that face similar spatial economic patterns.[[2]](#endnote-1)

On a regional scale, contemporary Namibian tourism is highly influenced by the core[[3]](#endnote-2) of sub-Saharan Africa; namely, the South African state. Before and after 1990 independence from South Africa, Namibia has relied heavily on the country for economic reasons. Since then, South Africa has become a stalwart for Namibian tourism. For example, if South Africa receives bad press or if the economy suffers, Namibia also will suffer. Reasons to consider for the residual effects that Namibia would feel as part of the South African periphery include, but are not limited to: less international visitors due to political turmoil, as international flights mostly arrive first in South Africa; and, a decline in the guaranteed frequency of South African tourists during an economic downturn. Also, “because of Namibia’s membership in integrative regional economic organizations…the high level of dependency upon South Africa…is assured.”[[4]](#endnote-3) So for now, South Africa remains the clearest regional core.[[5]](#endnote-4)

Namibia is organized with a core-peripheral structure of the social setting, which impacts the tourism economy. Prior to independence, in 1988 statistics expose “the top five percent of the population…accounted for 71 percent of income,” where the minority “White community continues to exercise a near-monopolistic control over the formal economy of Namibia.” [[6]](#endnote-5) Those not in the formal sector are primarily people who work in subsistence agriculture—those who are in the communal periphery. Therefore, Namibia’s land classification combined with core-periphery theory evaluated by Weaver and Elliott indicates that the brunt of tourism’s economic gains accrue from the White-dominated areas. They strongly suggest that in order to overcome this theme, the government should encourage “Black participation at a meaningful level” in order to relieve the tension that tourism—they believe—will aggravate between the government and the communal periphery.[[7]](#endnote-6)

Under the core-periphery model for sub-Saharan Africa, mass tourism is generally perceived as an unfavorable proposition, whereas alternative tourism (such as ecotourism) is more acceptable to state governments.[[8]](#endnote-7) Wildlife tourism is a huge market, as “Namibia has one of the highest ratios of park land to total area of any state.”[[9]](#endnote-8) In regards to ecotourism, the country is in the process of ensuring the protection of wildlife while beefing up its capabilities through requiring investors to pass an Environmental Assessment Study for their proposals, as well as initiating “a state-wide system of tourism-related zoning…on the basis of local carrying capacities,” acting as a sort of insurance on environmental sustainability.[[10]](#endnote-9) Overall, the authors conclude evidence that may indicate ecotourism will continue to thrive and create tensions.[[11]](#endnote-10) Essentially, the authors believe that ecotourism in an economy that has not fully developed protective policies for how land can be used and guards against how investors can utilize the earned money, will likely become highly risky for investors, substantially unstable for environmental fragility, and exceedingly exploitative against the Namibian people.

The spatial patterns Elliott and Weaver consider prompt questions of land management policies regarding investment and carrying capacity. For instance, what sort of political framework is in use that relates to the division of lands, especially in regards to development through tourism incentive in communal lands? Peter Massyn’s research on two acts in recent years lends a better understanding of the situation facing the government. These acts, the Nature Conservation Amendment Act of 1996 (CBNRM) and the Communal Land Reform Act of 2002 have dealt with pressing investment and land use issues.[[12]](#endnote-11) Act CBNRM launches the communal conservancy, which “acquires the rights to manage and use game and to benefit from wildlife.”[[13]](#endnote-12) The purpose of establishing conservancies is to make it easier for investors by creating defined boundaries and a management system on the local level.[[14]](#endnote-13) Such structure can promote joint ventures in tourism endeavors.[[15]](#endnote-14) The problem with the act is that it does not solve pre-existing kinks regarding the exclusivity of land use rights, leaving “an environment of uncertainty which in turn undermines business confidence.”[[16]](#endnote-15)

The 2002 Act “grant[s] local residents valuable commercial rights and creating a framework for modernized land allocation.”[[17]](#endnote-16) However, the most serious issue this act neglects is defining the expected criteria to be met for approval of land use (by investors and locals alike).[[18]](#endnote-17) Therefore, it potentially can be arbitrary decision-making, which could lead to corruption or be subject to it. Without official criteria, corruption of interests could prove problematic for investors and conservancies.[[19]](#endnote-18) To date, no “policy and legislative framework” exists to address the overarching problem of definition and clarity in proper “land use planning.”[[20]](#endnote-19) This uncertainty inhibits the viability of wildlife tourism development in communes because it causes tension between the locals, the government, and the investor. Ultimately, from these two reform acts is missing a third defining act that would cement law theory with land practice, eliminating much of the uncertainties that exacerbate tensions with the periphery. Even so, the acts attribute to the policy reform process Weaver and Elliott recommend geared toward ownership rights and investment incentives.[[21]](#endnote-20)

Caroline Ashley’s study better expresses the Namibian point of view and on-site situation in terms of inequalities in the periphery by providing research on region-specific tourism issues. For the rural community, ecotourism can “strengthen… households’ productive capacity by increasing skills and providing cash for investment,” but it also can “conflict…with livestock and crop production, which are the staple activities.”[[22]](#endnote-21) Venture enterprises, for instance, do not often create many permanent jobs, but those they do can provide enough money to move a family into a “secure status socio-economically,” potentially creating a “multiplier effect” as money is recycled back into the community.[[23]](#endnote-22) Selling local products, though not as beneficial financially as a permanent job, can “benefit a higher percentage of local households…and are more important for the poorer people who have few other options for earning cash.”[[24]](#endnote-23) Joint venture enterprises owned by the community can generate a small collective income that has been used to help households with the cost of schooling and “a couple of bags of grain.”[[25]](#endnote-24) All these can prove beneficial in reducing community and household vulnerability, food insecurity, and possible disenfranchisement, while improving the local infrastructure in order to present a solution to the potential long term tourism problem of tensions created from exploitation outlined by Weaver and Elliott.[[26]](#endnote-25) Though the examples gathered by Ashley are region-specific, they can be used on a nationwide scale for examining the effects of wildlife tourism development in the periphery.

As sub-Saharan Africa is ecologically characterized by its abundance of rare wildlife, ecotourism as a means of income generation as well as of preservation of carrying capacity (in the ecological as well as the cultural sense) appear to be a rapidly growing, though somewhat precarious, alternative tourism outlet, Namibia included.[[27]](#endnote-26) Weaver and Elliott’s article provides a backbone of understanding Namibia’s geographic stratification of land, resources, and people, and how that affects tourism results. However, the article leaves one wondering how Namibians could possibly manage maintaining wildlife tourism in such a spatially and socially segmented land without disastrous tension-raising results. Ashley’s and Massyn’s articles go further by detailing the effects on those living in the periphery as well as on investors, suggesting the future potential outcomes for tourism development in Namibia’s periphery could be beneficial given progress and outcomes over the last ten years. With such information, one then may apply the spatial patterns to the political structure and social customs in order to formulate how tourism development might shape and be shaped by Namibia’s local community.

1. Please see Illustrations section, number 1, for a map of Namibia and Appendix A for a brief review of Namibia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Endnotes

 Weaver and Elliott’s paper was written only 5 years—less than a decade—after Namibian independence from South Africa in 1990. Since the publication of the paper, over 12 years have passed, so the analysis of the paper will also take into consideration evolving spatial patterns in more recent years. The authors are correct in determining that Namibian tourism patterns should be reviewed. After all, today, a typical Western mindset on tourism seeks out unseen beauty in unheard of places, looking farther than the more traditional Grand Tour that has generally been geographically constricted to the Northern hemisphere for roughly the last 350 years. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Core-periphery theory considers the economic and political dominance or influence of one area, known as the core or hegemon, over another area. In the case of Namibia, the core is the primate capital city Windhoek, and the periphery includes the lands that spread out to the state’s borders. A compact state, with the primate city in the center (Namibia and Windhoek are a prime example—aside from the sliver of land appending the northeastern side of the state), is theoretically easier to manage than other state shapes. Distance decay refers to the decreasing influence and interaction increasing distance causes. Though they discuss their importance to Namibia, the authors do not lay out definitions for these theories, but a simple Wikipedia search provides the basics. For more detailed models, however, see Fahrer and Glassner. 2003. *Political Geography*. Ed. 3. John Wiley & Sons Inc.; or see Wallerstein. 1979. *The Capitalist World Economy*. Cambridge University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Weaver, David and Katharine Elliott, “Spatial Patterns and Problems in Contemporary Namibian Tourism,” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 162, (1996): 209. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. In 1991, tourists came mainly from South Africa, Europe, and other nearby African countries (Ibid). The authors deduce that though South Africans frequent Namibia more, they do not spend near as much money as the Europeans, who typically stay longer but with less frequent visits (Ibid). Therefore, some suggestion implies that Europe will play a greater role in core-periphery relations as international tourism to the country increases—especially as Namibia continues to focus on drawing Western tourists (Ibid, 209-210). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid, 216. Also, Leon Jooste, Deputy Minister of Namibia reinforces this perspective in a recent interview by Moses Magadza of *AfricaFiles*, when he states, “Namibia will never be a mass tourism destination due to our sensitive environment…” Magadza, Moses, “Namibia: Interview—Tourism at full gallop, Hon Leon Jooste,” *AfricaFiles*. Accessed online 17 February 2009. <http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=19571>. 2 December 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid, 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. Due to the emphasis on wildlife, the major areas of “wildlife” tourism in the article are adequately broken into consumptive and nonconsumptive. Consumptive tourism contains hunting and fishing, whereas nonconsumptive comprises of ecotourism activities (Ibid, 206). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. Ibid. The government’s stance on tourism has not drastically changed since the early 1990s at the writing of Elliott’s and Weaver’s article. According to the Department of Industry Services of Namibia’s Tourism Board in 2006, “All marketing efforts to sustain Namibia's favourable reputation as a quality tourist destination are in vain if they cannot be supported by sustainable resources.” See “Namibia Tourism Board.” Accessed on 04 February 2009. <http://www.namibiatourism.com.na/>. 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid, 216. One must call into question then how much effect the tourism industry is having on what portion of Namibian society. The spatial distribution of land types provides some indicators; however, the reaction of this paper delves into other political and social issues within the spatial lands context. According to Weaver and Elliott, in 1993, the distribution of land between commercial (economic/business), communal (indigenous peoples’ land), and state (government controlled parks) lands also followed along the availability of tourism sites in the formal versus the informal economy (Ibid, 208). The distribution of land corresponds with layout of business. Namibia’s inner core consists of the primate city, a center for shopping, government, hotels, manufacturing, and business (Ibid, 214). The outer core consists of the commercial lands, where the “remaining urban hierarchy, infrastructure, and formal economy” exist, which includes tourism accommodations where the large wildlife populations are also located (Ibid). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. Massyn, Peter John, “Communal Land Reform and Tourism Investment in Namibia’s Communal Areas: A Question of Unfinished Business?,” *Development Southern Africa*, 24:3, 383. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. Ibid, 384. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. Ibid, 383. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. Ibid, 385. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. Ibid, 386. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. Ibid, 387. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. Weaver and Elliott, *Spatial*, 216. To incorporate the majority of the population into the economic sector, the government is encouraging in regard to tourism “community cooperatives, soft loans and joint ventures,” as Weaver and Elliott note (214). These have increased over the last decade since the writing of the article due to the above laws. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Ibid, 18. In this manner, tourism can be categorized as a means to rural development (Ibid, 8). For instance, a study done on the Northwest (Kunene) and Northeast (Caprivi) regions of rural Namibia indicates issues associated with tourism in the communal periphery and “details…how to enhance livelihood impacts” by considering the “local people’s priorities” when it comes to the significance of tourism development in their areas (Ibid, 6-7). This study is termed the “livelihoods approach” (Ibid, 6).

In the above provinces, community members within each household usually diversify their daily activities in order to provide for multiple life necessities. This helps them to maintain a less volatile existence and more reliable outlets for sustainable living. Therefore, tourism often times is seen as an additional activity that can be adopted to contribute to a more “diversified portfolio of stock options,” so to speak, for potential future gains. Though tourism is a relatively new facet in the rural communes, it is one that is being seriously considered and implemented as time progresses (but not necessarily as a substitute for all other activities, for reasons explained above) (Ibid, 9, 17). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. Ibid*,* 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. Ibid*,* 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
25. Ibid*,* 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
26. Ibid*,* 21-2, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
27. Weaver and Elliott, *Spatial,* 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)