



Private conservation funding from wildlife tourism enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa: Conservation marketing beliefs and practices

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ABSTRACT

Conservation finance in many African countries relies heavily on tourism. Some commercial tourism companies provide substantial funding for private reserves, communal conservancies, and public protected areas, and for anti-poaching, breeding, and translocation programs. They also provide local employment, which generates community support for conservation. To generate funds, they must attract clients. This relies on marketing, which we analysed using staff interviews, marketing materials, and client comments. We found that they market: wildlife viewing opportunities first; luxury and exclusiveness second; and conservation projects third. They focus on flagship species such as the African big cats, and they market directly to tourists, and to specialist rather than generalist travel agents. In their view, conservation projects influence purchases significantly for some clients, but not for the majority, nor for travel agents. Therefore, maximum contributions to future conservation finance can be achieved through differential marketing to these two groups. Mainstream marketing is targeted at tourists who want the best wildlife viewing in the greatest comfort. Conservation marketing is targeted at tourists who purchase products that contribute to conservation. If these tourists were identified during marketing and booking, then conservation tourism enterprises could notify conservation trusts to seek donations.

1. Introduction

Conservation finance includes private enterprise and non-government organisations as well as public parks agencies (Conservation Finance Alliance, 2002). Governments raise funds principally through taxes, NGOs through donations, and private enterprises through sales. Sales depend on marketing. Conservation marketing by private enterprises (Caro and Riggio, 2013; Macdonald et al., 2015; Duthie et al., 2017; Veríssimo et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2017) has thus become a critical component of conservation worldwide, in parallel to conservation activism by NGOs, and conservation lobbying within governments. Conservation NGOs and public parks agencies also use marketing approaches, to solicit donations and boost support (Borrie et al., 2002). For private enterprises in particular, however, commercial marketing is essential for continued existence, and hence the ability to contribute to conservation.

Conservation finance has become a highly contested field of conservation policy during recent decades. This includes both the sources and mechanisms to raise funding (Dempsey and Suarez, 2016; Lennox et al., 2017) and the distribution of funding once obtained (Buckley, 2016, 2017; Miller et al., 2013; Waldron et al., 2013). In addition to

budget allocations from national and subsidiary-state governments, sources now routinely include bilateral and multilateral aid, donations, and ecosystem services payments (Ament et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2016; Jayachandran et al., 2017; Jupiter, 2017; Little et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2013). In addition, a variety of private sector funding options have been adopted or trialled. These fall into three main categories. The first comprises fees charged by parks agencies for various individual or commercial uses. The second consists of financial arrangements with commercial tourism enterprises, ranging from small donations, to large-scale leases (Buckley, 2017; De Vos et al., 2016). The third consists of full or partial privatisation of protected areas (African Parks, 2017; Wilson, 2017).

Private sector involvement in conservation is particularly significant in developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Parks agencies in many developing countries now receive the majority of their recurrent funding from tourism; and in a few countries, such as Botswana and the Seychelles, the proportion is > 80% (Buckley et al., 2012; Rylance et al., 2017). For some individual threatened species, > 80% of remaining global habitat (Morrison et al., 2012), or > 60% of remaining global populations (Buckley et al., 2012; Steven et al., 2013), are protected through funding raised from ecotourism,

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with net gains for population viability (Buckley et al., 2016). Some private tourism enterprises play a substantial role in conservation finance, giving rise to the term conservation tourism (Buckley, 2010a, 2010b; Mossaz et al., 2015). Conservation tourism is a subset of ecotourism, itself a component of broader nature-based tourism.

Some of these African conservation tourism enterprises contribute substantial funding to conservation in public protected areas, communal conservancies, and private reserves (Buckley, 2017; Grünwald et al., 2016; Mossaz et al., 2015). Financial arrangements include leases, management contracts, profit-sharing, partnerships, and equity-transfer arrangements. Some also include NGOs, trust, donors, and local community organisations (Buckley, 2017; Grünwald et al., 2016; Mossaz et al., 2015; Van Wijk et al., 2015). Some African conservation tourism enterprises also fund, and/or operate: anti-poaching measures (Barichiev et al., 2017); breeding and translocation programs; veterinary services; disease and pest control; active management of individual species populations; fire and vegetation management; and health, education and employment opportunities that involve local communities in conservation (Mossaz et al., 2015). Conservation tourism enterprises also operate on other continents (Buckley, 2010b; Buckley and Pabla, 2012), but as yet, to a lesser degree than in Africa.

As private sector contributions to conservation have become increasingly important, analysis of conservation marketing has become a correspondingly critical component of conservation research (Macdonald et al., 2015; Duthie et al., 2017; Veríssimo et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2017). Social and financial aspects are critical in conservation (Dietsch et al., 2016; Lindsey et al., 2017; Manfredi et al., 2017; McClanahan and Rankin, 2016; Olive and McCune, 2017; Selier et al., 2016). Global biodiversity and threatened species populations continue to decline ever more precipitately (Ceballos et al., 2017; Estrada et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Naidoo et al., 2016). Protected areas are increasingly critical for conservation (Gray et al., 2016; Hoffmann et al., 2015; Le Saout et al., 2014; Miraldo et al., 2016; Oldekop et al., 2015; Pringle, 2017; Watson et al., 2016); but suffer increasing pressures and threats (Allan et al., 2017; Aukema et al., 2017; Barnosky et al., 2017; Ripple et al., 2016; Scheffers et al., 2016; Moran and Kanemoto, 2017; Pacifici et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2016; Pecl et al., 2017; Scheffers et al., 2016; Tilman et al., 2017). All of this creates a context where marketing, not historically relevant to conservation, has now become a core concern. Marketing brings clients, and clients bring revenue, and revenue funds conservation.

Here, therefore, we present the first known analysis of conservation marketing strategies by private conservation tourism enterprises. We analyse these strategies for five companies operating in sub-Saharan Africa: & Beyond, Wilderness Safaris, Great Plains Conservation, Robin Pope Safaris, and Okonjima Africat. The last two of these five enterprises are small and specialised, but contribute to conservation for particular species and sites. The first three are all large international firms. Between them, they operate 88 camps and lodges in 19 countries. These constitute about 30% of the wildlife safari camps and lodges in the entire region (Nolting and Butchart, 2016). They correspond broadly to the first of the four models outlined by Clements et al. (2016). These three companies make the largest financial contributions to conservation, across all land tenure types and in multiple countries. As one example, these three companies have recently combined forces to fund *Rhino Conservation Botswana* (2017) and *Rhinos Without Borders* (2017). These have successfully invested tens of millions of dollars to translocate black and white rhino from South Africa to Botswana, where anti-poaching measures are stronger.

All five of these companies are commercial tourism enterprises. They must maintain a continuing flow of paying guests to fund their operations, including contributions to conservation. Clients may select and book their holidays themselves, or more commonly, they may make their bookings via travel agents. Wealthy tourists pay well for opportunities to watch iconic wildlife species exhibiting natural behaviours at close range (Colléony et al., 2017; Hausmann et al., 2017; Lindsey et al.,

2007). Especially for wealthier tourists, specialist travel agents can exert a powerful influence on the choice of operator, camps or lodges, and itinerary (Buckley and Mossaz, 2016). The five conservation tourism enterprises studied here, therefore divide their efforts between marketing to specialist travel agents, and marketing directly to past and potential clients. In particular, how they market their conservation programs depends on how they think clients and travel agents choose tour operators. Decision processes of specialist travel agents have been examined previously (Buckley and Mossaz, 2016). Here we examine the conservation marketing strategies used by the conservation tourism enterprises themselves. We do so firstly, by interviewing them directly; secondly, by analysing the various marketing materials they produce and disseminate; and thirdly, by examining the responses of their past and potential future clients to those materials.

2. Methods

We examined conservation marketing for each of these enterprises, through three consecutive steps. First, we conducted 63 h of semi-structured workplace interviews with 28 senior executives (founders, CEO's etc); marketing managers; and conservation staff. No inducements were used, and interviews were recorded, with permission and prior informed consent. We asked about: conservation projects; marketing strategies; roles of travel agents; attitudes and motivations of individual tourists; relations with local communities, including community involvement in conservation projects; and the role of iconic species. Interviews were analysed using standard grounded-theory qualitative approaches (Bryman, 2016; Harrevelde et al., 2016; Silverman, 2016), with deconstruction of text to the smallest distinguishable concepts, and iterative reassembly to a hierarchical set of constructs. Second, we analysed images and text from marketing materials: print brochures produced for clients and agents respectively; the conservation sections of websites; and a one-month peak-season sample of Facebook® posts. We classified images and text paragraphs into four categories: wildlife viewing; facilities and service; direct conservation measures; and indirect conservation measures via local communities. Third, we compiled comments by past and potential clients, on each of these enterprises' Facebook® posts, and analysed them as for interviews. We started with current posts, and worked backwards by date until we had scanned > 1000 posts.

3. Results

3.1. Staff beliefs about marketing conservation

Senior executives, conservation staff, and marketing staff from the five conservation tourism enterprises were generally all emphatic about the key role of conservation in their business models (Table 1), and the strong financial cross-links between the tourism and conservation components. They argued that: “without conservation, the product does not exist”; but equally, “we channel tourism revenues into conservation”.

In each of the five conservation tourism enterprises studied, there is a degree of division between conservation staff, responsible for managing the habitat and populations of the wildlife species that tourists come to see; and the marketing staff, responsible for making sure that the tourists do indeed come to see those wildlife. Conservation staff said that they must think long-term, and measure their success in terms of cumulative outcomes. Marketing staff said that they need frequent short dramatic news items. Examples include: the birth of new lion or leopard cubs, a territorial battle between rival lion prides, or the airlift of rhino as part of a translocation project. Conservation managers appreciated the requirements of conservation marketing, even though they were not directly involved. They said, for example, that: “the marketing team wants over-simplified information that sells”; so “we have to adapt our language for marketing purposes”. They add that: “the conservation team

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