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# MULTINATIONAL HOTEL COMPANIES AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA, BOTSWANA

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**Abstract:** Multinational hotel companies operate accommodation facilities in nature-based tourism destinations of many developing countries. This paper uses the sustainable tourism framework to examine the relationship between the hotel industry and the wildlife-based tourism in the Okavango Delta, Botswana. The paper further examines the socio-economic and environmental impacts of the hotel industry in the Delta. Through the use of primary and secondary data sources, results indicate that the hotel tourism industry in the Okavango Delta is lucrative. The industry relies on multinational hotel tourism companies originating from rich countries and South Africa. Hotels and lodges in Delta offer game drives, walking safaris, boating, accommodation and restaurant services. Its socio-economic impacts include employment, income and infrastructure development. Negative impacts are: revenue leakages, poor jobs for citizens and the failure to alleviate rural poverty. Sustainable tourism approaches which include citizen participation in tourism can reduce the negative impacts of the hotel industry.

**Keywords:** hotel industry; multinational companies; wildlife-based tourism; international tourism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry has been on the increase in recent decades. This is particularly so because on the increasing number of international tourist arrivals especially in developing countries. According to UNWTO (2009), international tourist arrivals reached 922 million in 2008 (up by 1.9% on 2007). International tourism receipts grew to USD944 billion (euro 642 billion) in 2008, corresponding to an increase in real terms of 1.8% on 2007. Receipts from international passenger transport are estimated

at USD165 billion, bringing the total of international tourism receipts including passenger transport (i.e., visitor export) to USD1.1 trillion or over USD3 billion a day. However, international tourist arrivals declined by 8% between January and April 2009, probably due to the global economic downturn. Nevertheless, the UNWTO believes the industry is robust and estimates there will be 1.6 billion visitor arrivals in 2020. Africa recorded a growth of 3% in 2009 despite the global economic downturn (UNWTO, 2009). In Botswana, the tourism

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industry grew significantly in the last 15–20 years. E.g., in 1989, the industry contributed a mere 2% to Gross Domestic Product (Mbaiwa, 2008) compared to 5.0% in 2007 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2007). There were 1,759,000 visitors to Botswana in 2005 (DOT, 2010). The Okavango Delta receives between 50,000 to 100,000 tourists annually (Mbaiwa, 2010). This shows that tourism is a global economic and environmental force that cannot be ignored in the 21st century.

The global expansion of the tourism industry heavily influence the growth of the hotel industry in the Okavango Delta (Figure 1). The hotel industry in the Okavango Delta define itself as private sector, profit-driven companies, but which also market themselves as playing a key role in local community development and conservation. However, there is little research on the

precise nature of the relationship between the hotel industry and the wildlife-based tourism in wilderness based tourism destinations like the Okavango Delta, Botswana. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to use the sustainable tourism framework to analyse the relationship between the hotel industry and wilderness environments in developing countries. The paper also examines the impacts of the hotel industry to the socio-economic, political and environmental setting of Botswana.

### SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FRAMEWORK

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO, 2001) defines sustainable tourism development as development that:

meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future.

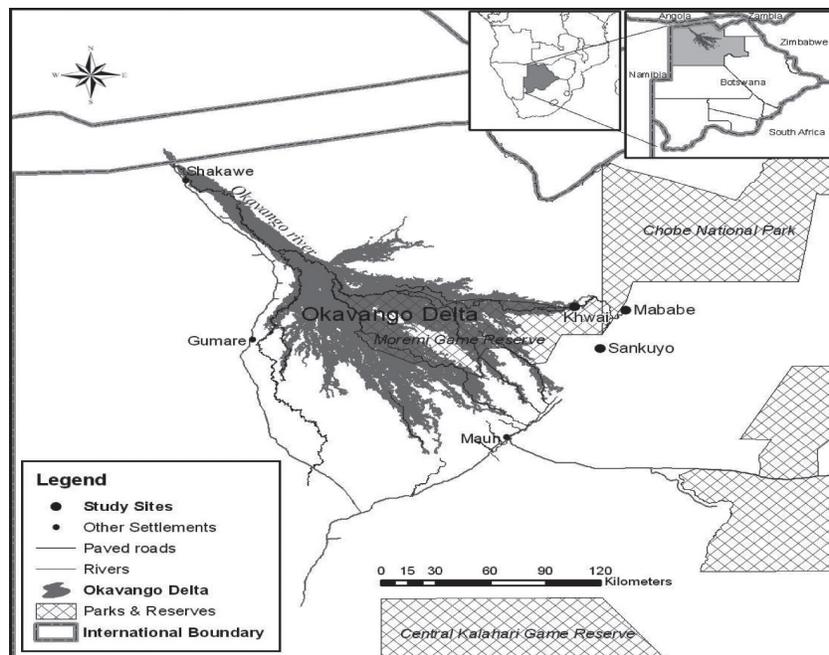


Figure 1 Map of the Okavango Delta, Botswana

It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.

Prosser (1994) and Liu (2003) adds that in tourism development, there are four forces of social change that should drive sustainability in tourism, these are: the dissatisfaction with existing products; growing environmental awareness and cultural sensitivity; realisation by destination regions of the precious resources they possess and their vulnerability; and, the changing attitudes of developers and tour operators. Tosun (2001, pp.290–291) notes that sustainable tourism development is informed by the following six principles:

- Sustainable tourism should contribute to the satisfaction of basic and felt needs of those hitherto excluded in local tourist destinations.
- Sustainable tourism should reduce inequality and absolute poverty in local tourist destinations.
- Sustainable tourism should contribute to the emergence of necessary conditions in tourist destinations which will lead local people to gain self-esteem and to feel free from the evils of want, ignorance and squalor. Sustainable tourism should help host communities to be free or emancipated from alienating material conditions of life and from social servitude to nature, ignorance, other people, misery, institution and dogmatic beliefs.
- Sustainable tourism should accelerate not only national economic growth, but also regional and local economic growth. This growth must be shared fairly across the social spectrum.

- Sustainable tourism should achieve the above principles indefinitely without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need.

Tosun (2001) argues that from these principles, sustainable tourism must be regarded as an adaptive paradigm capable of addressing widely different situations and articulating different goals. In this regard, Tosun argues that as an adaptive paradigm, sustainable tourism is a multi-disciplinary and broad concept touching upon a wide range of issues such as economic development policy, environmental matters, social factors, structure of the international tourism system. Wall (1997) argues that if tourism is to become sustainable, it should be economically viable, socio-culturally sensitive and environmentally friendly in destination areas.

The concept of sustainable tourism development has its own critics such as Harrison (1996) and Liu (2003). Liu states that the sustainable tourism development debate is patchy, disjointed and often flawed with false assumptions and arguments. Harrison says, the debate is 'muddy pool'. According to Sharpley (2000), sustainable development advocates a holistic perspective, i.e., development can only be sustainable if it is considered within a global political, socio-economic and ecological context. Sharpley argues that at first sight, the underlying philosophy of sustainable tourism development appears to embrace a holistic planning. However, sustainable tourism presupposes a balanced triangular relationship between host areas and host communities, tourists and the tourism industry where there is no one stakeholder upsets the equilibrium (Lane, 1994). Lane argues that such a scenario where one stakeholder does not upset the equilibrium is likely to be ideal than practical. Sharpley (2000)

argues that despite the acceptance that tourism should be integrated into national and local development strategies, the focus of sustainable tourism development is usually inwards or product centred. The fact that the tourism industry is complex, fragmented, multi-sectoral and profit oriented in nature, the operationisation of sustainable development is fraught with problems (Hunter, 1995; Sharpley, 2000). Because of this problem, sustainable tourism strategies in practice tend to focus on localized and small-scale development projects without much attention beyond its local or regional boundaries (Sharpley, 2000). The different sectors of tourism include varying degrees of environmentally sound policies, there is little evidence of a common development and business philosophy according to sustainable principles across the industry (Forsyth, 1995; Sharpley, 2000).

Although there are numerous criticisms that sustainable tourism has been subjected to, it is globally accepted that 'real' development should adhere to the principles of sustainable development (WCED, 1987). Proponents of sustainable tourism development argue that it holds a considerable promise as a vehicle for addressing the problems of negative tourism impacts and maintaining its long-term viability (Liu, 2003). Bramwell and Lane (1993) describe sustainable tourism as a positive approach intended to reduce the tensions and friction created by complex interactions between the tourism industry, tourists, the environment and the host communities so that the long-term capacity and quality of both natural and human resources can be maintained. As such, sustainable tourism is considered to be a goal that is applicable to all tourism ventures regardless of scale (Hardy et al., 2002). This means tourism as an economic activity should also adhere to the principles of sustainable development for it to be sustainable.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for this paper were derived from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data sources consisted of articles and reports on tourism development in the Okavango Delta. This included government policy documents, consultancy reports, community-based tourism reports and other cultural and wildlife-based tourism reports. Information derived from these sources includes historical development of the hotel industry in the Okavango Delta. Primary data were derived from ongoing tourism research particularly by this author in the Okavango Delta dating back to 1998. Brochures and pamphlets on tourism development by the different hotel tourism companies operating in the Okavango Delta were also used. Websites of these hotel tourism companies were also visited to derive information on the number of rooms and beds, prices charged in these accommodation facilities and the ownership of these facilities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The size of accommodation facilities

The accommodation or hotel sector is one of the primary sectors in the tourism industry. The type of ownership of the sector and who derives more benefits, particularly the revenue, can be used to determine the sustainability of tourism in destination areas. In Botswana, the number of beds in hotels, motels, lodges and camps grew by approximately 22% from 1984 to 1988. The number of beds grew from 960 in 1984 to 3,257 by 1998, representing an approximately 71% increase in the 14-year period (Mbaiwa, 2002). The Department of Tourism (2010) indicates that in 2009 there were 380 licensed and fixed tourist accommodation facilities in Botswana. These facilities have 6,511 rooms with 11,275 beds (Table 1). The

**Table 1** Accommodation capacity by region

Region	Number of facilities	Rooms	Beds
South East	44	1,602	2,787
North East	57	1,119	1,734
Okavango	116	1,125	2,129
Chobe	26	765	1,588
Kgalagadi	17	160	255
Kweneng	14	240	343
Kgatleng	2	25	40
Southern	11	216	323
Ghanzi	14	221	345
Central	79	1,038	1,731
Total	380	6,511	11,275

Source: Department of Tourism (2010)

Department of Tourism (2010) further notes that in 2009 the Okavango region had the highest number of accommodation facilities. The Okavango Delta had a total of 116 facilities with 1,125 rooms and 2,129 beds (Table 1). The Delta, therefore, contains the highest number of accommodation facilities.

The general conclusion that can be made about hotels and lodges in Botswana is that they have increased in the last 20 years. The fact that the Okavango Delta has the highest number of hotels and lodges shows that critical role that wildlife-based tourism plays in the socio-economic development of Botswana.

#### **Ownership of accommodation facilities**

The hotel and accommodation sector in the Okavango Delta is predominately owned by foreign companies and investors. E.g., a recent survey has shown that 53.8% of the accommodation facilities are 100% owned by foreign safari companies, about 27.7% are jointly owned between Botswana citizen

and non-citizen companies while 18.5% are fully owned by Botswana citizen companies. This means that foreign companies and investors have an influence in about 81.5% of the accommodation facilities in the Okavango Delta (Mbaiwa, 2005b). Multinational hotels in the Okavango Delta own more than one lodge or camp. As shown in Table 2, Okavango Wilderness Safaris is the largest company, with over 19 camps and lodges in the different parts of the Okavango Delta. Most of these companies also operate in neighbouring countries of South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia (Mbaiwa, 2002). This, therefore, explains the multinational aspect of the hotel industry in Botswana and Southern Africa.

The domination of accommodation facilities by foreign companies and investors suggests that much of the revenue generated in the accommodation sector does not accrue to local companies. Studies (e.g., BDTP, 1999) have shown that that Botswana retains less than 29% of the total revenue generated from tourism in the country. E.g. in 1997,

**Table 2** Selected accommodation companies and the number of hotels they own

Name of hotel company	Number of lodges owned
Okavango Wilderness safaris	19
Desert and Delta safaris	7
Gametrackers	4
Crocodile Camp safaris	3
Ker & Downey	6
Kwando safaris	7
Landela safaris	4
Island safaris	2
Lodges of Botswana	5
Johan Calitz safaris	4
Okavango Explorations	2
& Beyond	7
Independent Companies (with one lodge each)	14

tourists who visited Botswana spent an estimated P1.1 billion. Of this gross expenditure, 55% (P605 million) was spent outside Botswana (representing payment to external agents) and a further (16%) P175 million was first-round leakages of receipts due to tourist-related imports (e.g., food, equipment and wages of expatriate staff). Only 29% (P320 million) was spent in Botswana on local goods, wages, taxes and other activities (BDTP, 1999). Revenue leakages and the foreign domination of the hotel industry in the Okavango Delta contradicts the ideals of sustainable tourism of equitable distribution of revenue and participation in resource use by all stakeholders.

#### **Wildlife-based tourists segments in the Okavango Delta**

Wildlife-based tourists that visit the Okavango Delta can sub-divided based on price segments. As shown in Table 3, these visitors can be categorised into non-consumptive (e.g., photographic) and consumptive (e.g., trophy hunters) visitors.

Photographic tourists include: independent (private), mobile, high cost (fixed lodge) and day visitors while consumptive tourists include safari hunters (trophy hunters).

High-cost tourists pay a high price for the package (i.e., USD 6,000) for a 2–3 nights in Delta. Mobile safari tourists pay USD 200–500 per night (for modest priced packages) and over USD 5,000 per night for the up market packages. Independent tourists are also termed ‘low cost’ tourist because of the assumed low expenditure they incur while in the delta. Safari hunters also form an important part of tourists in the Okavango Delta. Some safari hunters combine safari hunting and photographic tourism activities. As a result, some spend part of their time hunting from a luxurious lodge before moving to a photographic lodge to complete their African safari.

#### **Creation of employment**

One of the most important economic impacts of tourism in the Okavango Delta

**Table 3** Type of tourists and tourist activities in the OD

Type of tourist	Tourist activities	Remarks
High cost or fixed	Game drives, night drives, walking trails, boating, bird watching, fishing, canoeing	High paying tourists, pay for visit as a package in countries of origin, stay in 2-3 camps for 2-3 nights (total 6-8 nights)
Mobile	Game drives (at times boating), bird watching, fishing, canoeing	Stay in private and public camps, spend 5-21 days, pay for visit as a package in country of origin, second highest paying tourists
Self-drive (independent, low cost)	Game drives, bird watching, fishing	Stay in public campsites, spend 8-10 days, drive own or rent vehicles, least spending tourists
Day visitors	Game drives, boating, bird watching, canoeing	Visit the Delta in the morning and come back in the evening (they are largely conference and business delegates in Maun)
Safari hunters (sport or trophy hunters)	Hunting (some combine it with photographic activities as in high cost tourists)	Some combine hunting with photographic activities hence classified as high cost tourists

is its potential to create employment. The extent to which employment is created is influenced by the degree of linkages between tourism and other sectors of the economy. The Department of Tourism notes that in 2009 about 10,390 people were employed in the accommodation sector compared to 7,000 in 2008 in Botswana. In the Okavango Delta, a survey in 2001 indicated that 923 people were employed in 30 accommodation facilities and 727 other people were employed in tourism-related businesses in Maun (Mbaiwa, 2002).

### Income generation

Revenue generated from accommodation establishment in Botswana has increased in recent years. E.g., in 2009 the accommodation turnover amounted to close to P1.6 billion compared to P898 million in 2008. Johnson (2009) notes that a community-

based tourism projects which includes community ecolodges at least generates P52, 486, 472 during the period 2006-2009. From a total of P52, 486, 472 generated by community projects, 88% or P46, 305, 245 is generated by only eight (8) CBOs in the Okavango and the Chobe district (Johnson, 2009). Revenue generated from CBNRM supports rural livelihoods in most communities in the Okavango Delta villages. Mbaiwa (2010) notes that because of revenue generated by communities from tourism in the Okavango, employment opportunities have been created in villages. In addition, this revenue is used to support a number of community project such as: assistance for funerals, sport activities, scholarships, transport services, building of water stand pipes, construction of houses for the elderly and needy, assistance to orphans and disabled, and provision of communication tools such as television and radios. This therefore

shows the impact of tourism on livelihoods in the Okavango Delta.

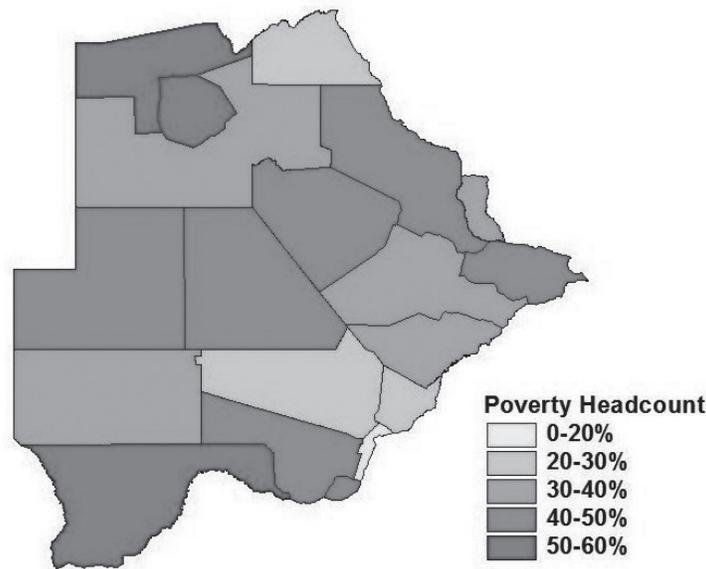
### Poverty levels in the Okavango Delta

Although tourism is a lucrative industry in the Okavango Delta, poverty in the wetland is reported to be widespread (CSO, 2008). CSO (2008) indicates that poverty headcount in western Okavango stands at 50–60% (Figure 2). Interestingly, poverty rates are rather higher in the western parts of the Okavango Delta. These are areas which are in tourism are popularly referred as the panhandle and middle regions of the Okavango Delta. Much of the accommodation establishment (i.e., hotels and lodges) are located in this region. Most of the big multinational hotel companies like the Okavango Wilderness Safaris, & Beyond, Desert and Delta, Ker & Downey, Lodges of Botswana and Landela Safaris operate in this area. Ironically, the Okavango Delta is a rich biodiversity area which supports

Botswana's exclusive and expensive multi-billion dollar wildlife-based hotel industry. There are several factors that contribute to high poverty levels in rural settlements in the Okavango Delta, these include: the exclusive and enclave nature of wildlife-based tourism (Mbaiwa, 2005a); the lack of access to land by people living in the Okavango Delta; policy changes that created zones like national parks and game reserves which are no longer accessible to local people (Mbaiwa et al., 2008). This therefore shows that while tourism is a multi-billion industry in the Okavango Delta, it has somehow failed to eradicate poverty in the wetland.

### Environmental impacts

The hotel industry in the Okavango Delta, though new, it is beginning to have negative environmental impacts. All the lodges and camps in the Delta have their own private airstrips. As a result, small engine airplanes carrying tourism to and from the lodges and



**Figure 2** Poverty map of Botswana

Source: CSO (2008)

camps are reported to be causing noise pollution (Mbaiwa, 2002). Noise pollution by small engine aircraft is also related to that caused by engine boats in the area. Roodt (1998) states that a total of 32 power boats of which 26 belong to safari operators and six to government, are currently licensed for use the Xakanaxa area. The fast movement of motor boats creates wakes which disturb nesting birds, mammals and reptiles which live in water. Crocodiles and hippos seek undisturbed areas and the presence of too many boats in the Okavango Delta disturbs these species. Roodt (1998) states that hippos, which were in large numbers seven years ago, have already moved out in the Xakanaxa lagoon. The disturbance of animal habitats by motorized tourism presumably impacts the wildlife numbers negatively of the delta.

The high volume of tourists visiting the Okavango Delta has reached levels where the amount of garbage generated has increased and is beginning to negatively impact on the delta environment (Mbaiwa, 2002). The problem of waste is characterized by failure to dispose domestic waste following proper waste-disposal procedures in tourist camps. Septic tanks for wastewater collection in hotels is posing threats of ground-water contamination and pollution (McCarthy et al., 1994). Studies (e.g., by McCarthy et al. (1994) and Aqualogic (2009)) indicate that septic tanks for human waste are not constructed following any environmental standards, and in some camps such tanks do not exist except for the 'pit latrines'. Many tourist camps in the Okavango Delta rely on borehole water to supply camp needs, and moreover discharge waste and sewage effluent into the ground-water (McCarthy et al., 1994). This situation creates the potential for contamination of drinking water supplies. The water table in the Okavango Delta is high and the soils are sandy with

a high permeability. Pollutants can thus travel much greater distances into the soils. The water table in the Okavango Delta is usually less than 1 m below the surface during flood seasons; as a result, discharge of effluent into ground-water is unavoidable (McCarthy et al., 1994). Bluegreen algae (*Microcystis* sp.) have been recorded in the Okavango system, and these can be toxic under bloom conditions (NRP, 2000). As a result, the potential for ground-water contamination with nitrate from septic tank drainage in areas where ground-water is close to the surface (10 m or less), and contamination by faecal bacteria and possibly viable pathogens could occur if septic tanks are situated in areas where ground-water is at 1 m or less beneath the surface (NRP, 2000). This scenario suggests that water pollution might be possible in areas around tourist camps and lodges in the Okavango Delta.

## CONCLUSION

The tourism industry has stimulated the development of a variety of allied infrastructure and facilities, such as hotels, lodges and camps, airport and airstrips, in the Okavango region. Through its backward linkages, wholesale and retail businesses have also been established, especially in Maun, to offer various goods to the tourist industry. Tourism in the Okavango Delta also provides employment opportunities to local communities and it is a significant source of foreign exchange for Botswana. Despite its positive socio-economic impacts, the industry is beginning to have negative environmental impacts in the area such as the destruction of the area's ecology through driving outside the prescribed trails, noise pollution and poor waste management. This, therefore, suggests that tourism in the Okavango Delta has socio-economic and

environmental impacts, issues which are addressed in order to achieve sustainability in tourism development in the wetland.

### BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Mbaiwa holds a Ph.D. in Tourism Sciences from Texas A&M University. He is currently holds a position of Associate Professor of Tourism Studies at the University of Botswana's Okavango Research Institute based in Maun, Botswana. His research interests are on tourism development, rural livelihoods and conservation.

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