

Nature-Based Tourism as a Rural Development Strategy in Southern Africa

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As an economic geographer, I look at the effects of trade on poverty and inequality and my main current project examines nature-based tourism as a rural development strategy in southern Africa.

Many African countries have tried to boost their economies by emphasizing agricultural exports. Because this has had limited success, governments are looking increasingly to tourism as a source of growth. My study looks at Namibia and Mozambique, which have tried to emphasize nature tourism: tourists coming to see wildlife and the natural environment, and some others coming to hunt large animals such as lions and elephants. Namibia is a pioneer of using community-based nature tourism as a development strategy, while Mozambique has more recently embarked on this.

This study asks how nature tourism affects poverty and inequality in Namibia and Mozambique at the regional, community, and household levels, while also accounting for environmental, economic, and cultural diversity between and within countries. The study involves collaboration between the University of Florida, the University of Namibia (UNAM), and the Pedagogical University of Mozambique (UP). From February to August 2009, working with professors and students from UNAM and UP, I conducted four case studies: two in Namibia and two in Mozambique.

In each case study area, my research teams



and I interviewed the heads of local households, asking about their economic wellbeing and how it was affected by the emphasis on tourism. Positive effects include employment by hotels and other businesses that serve tourists. But there are also negative effects, often involving interactions with protected wildlife. Elephants can destroy crops, while other animals attack livestock, and even sometimes humans. The research teams collected

data on such conflicts between humans and wildlife, as well as conducted about 1,300 detailed household surveys.

The study makes four key contributions to our understanding of rural economies in southern Africa. It investigates how well trade theory explains the effects of tourism on poverty and inequality in rural regions, assesses the effects of nature tourism on poverty and inequality, investigates how experiences of rural development strategies are influenced by community organization and empowerment, and uses an iterative, mixed methodology to explore the impacts of export-led rural development strategies at multiple scales. The project will thus enhance our understanding of the dynamics driving rural development in countries such as Namibia and Mozambique. Research results will also be integrated into teaching at all three universities. For more information, see the project website (www.clas.ufl.edu/users/jasilva/project/index.html).

Julie A. Silva is an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and the Center for African Studies. Her research was funded by an NSF CAREER grant, a program that supports faculty in early career development.

