

Overtourism in nature conservation areas?



Case study: the Greater Kruger Area

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Front cover photo: Kruger National Park (05-12-2022). Photo taken by the author.

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After coming back from my internship in South Africa in 2019 this country had a special place in my heart. During my time in South Africa in 2018-2019 I was shocked at the amount of inequality and separation that I witnessed. This motivated me to start my master's degree at Wageningen University & Research in 2021 and conduct more research regarding the impact of tourism. The past nine months have been quite the journey but I am so glad that I was able to travel to South Africa for my thesis and meet so many amazing people.

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It has been a long couple of months, but I am very proud that I completed this thesis. Enjoy the read.

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Abstract

This thesis is looking into the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area in South Africa, investigating the consequences of the tourism industry at the private nature reserves, located on the border of two provinces where poverty and unemployment rates are high: Limpopo and Mpumalanga. The Greater Kruger Area consists of nine private nature reserves, where high-end lodges offer all-inclusive luxury safari experiences to mostly international tourists. The reserves are surrounded by villages, where the local communities struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet. Tourism is often presented and seen as a solution against the poverty in these communities, mainly due to job creation. However, what are the consequences of the growing tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area for the local communities? And what are the ecological consequences of the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area? This thesis aims to answer the following research question: "Can the recent and continuing growth in the Greater Kruger Area be considered overtourism and is there a need for degrowth? Why or why not?"

This thesis contributes to existing literature since overtourism has been studied a lot in urban settings, but not yet in rural settings like nature conservation areas. The concept of degrowth is relatively new in the tourism literature and therefore has not yet been applied in the context of the Greater Kruger Area. This thesis argues that the growing tourism industry and the growth of foreign inhabitants in the area have unintended social and ecological consequences for the local communities surrounding the private nature reserves, the nature and wildlife in the area and Hoedspruit's central town. Lodges on private nature reserves work on philanthropic projects with good intentions to support the local communities, but lodge owners are often uneducated about philanthropy and unintentionally maintain separation by keeping racially unequal labour relationships. I argue that the situation in the Greater Kruger Area is not 'overtourism' in the traditional sense, where there are too many tourists, but instead refers to the unintended social and ecological consequences due to the rapid growth of the tourism industry. For example, racial unequal labour relations are kept into place, there is lack of infrastructure and development in the villages. The current conservation model in the Greater Kruger Area is excluding local communities from entering the reserves, thereby separating humans and nature from each other. With regards to the ecological consequences direct space is being taken away from wildlife by building establishments, many smaller reptiles die on construction sites and there is an ongoing water shortage. Lodges create large amounts of waste, which is not properly managed, and the ecological footprint of lodges is very large which directly contributes to climate change.

This thesis investigates the impact of degrowth, whereby a shift is made from focusing on growth, to focusing on the wellbeing and empowering of local communities, which can create a more equal and mutually beneficial relationship between the communities and the private nature reserves since the needs of the community will be taken into account. This could be achieved by using the African worldview Ubuntu, which can be translated to: "I am because you are". In Ubuntu the relationship between humans is a core element, as well as the relationship between humans and the environment. Communities living according to Ubuntu principles want to make sure that they conserve their land and farmland and cattle for future generations to come, like these were conserved for them by past generations.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Overtourism is a phenomenon that goes back decades, but the term overtourism has only been used in recent years. As early as 1975 researchers have been investigating the negative impacts that tourists can have on destinations and its residents (Butler, 1980; Doxey, 1975; Pizam, 1978). However, recently news articles about overloads in Large European cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona and Venice have skyrocketed. In these cities excessive numbers of tourists are larger than the carrying capacity of these cities and are the cause of residents protesting, since tourists are causing nuisance in the form of noise, inflation, and a lack of available housing (Mihalic, 2020; Milano et al., 2018). Overtourism is defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2018: 4) as: "The impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors' experiences in a negative way." Thus, according to this definition, overtourism is much more than only too many tourists. Although urban overtourism is gaining a lot of attention these days, overtourism is causing problems in nature conservation areas too. For example, recent news articles have shown concern over extreme droughts in the Zion national park in Utah caused by the presence of too many visitors, since tourism requires large amounts of water (Canon, 2022). According to Sæþórsdóttir et al. (2020: 3) the consequences of overtourism in natural areas could result in "damage to vegetation, littering, wildlife and ecosystem disturbance, water and marine pollution and contributions to climate change." Besides these ecological consequences, overtourism also causes social consequences, especially for host communities. This thesis focuses on the consequences of the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area (GKA) in South Africa, which will be further elaborated on in the methodology.

An approach to mitigate the effects of overtourism is degrowth. Degrowth is a fairly new approach within tourism literature hence only a few studies have been conducted up till now (Andriotis, 2018; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2019; Milano et al., 2019). This research will contribute by further exploring the possibilities to implement degrowth in the tourism literature by using the Ubuntu philosophy. Degrowth focuses on downscaling production and consumption, believing that there are already enough resources for all of us on the planet, and that growth is unnecessary. However, the resources are currently unequally distributed (Hickel, 2018; Schneider et al., 2010). The tourism industry is mostly focused on continuous growth and development and tourists are constantly seeking new experiences. In the Greater Kruger Area, the case study of this research, much privatisation of nature and wildlife has happened over the last two decades. This privatisation has resulted in the development of many tourism lodges and businesses. Within tourism there is a growth

mentality, this urge to develop and grow can be explained by the capitalist system that is at play in many industries, including the tourism industry (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). According to Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) degrowth can curb the tourism industry by giving local communities more rights than the tourists who are visiting and the tourism corporations who prioritize making profits. Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019: 1936) propose to redefine tourism, taking degrowth into account as “the process of local communities inviting, receiving and hosting visitors in their local community, for limited time durations, with the intention of receiving benefits from such actions.” Hereby the local community would have more influence in the decision-making process than tourism operators. One example of how to implement degrowth in the South African context could be by using the African worldview of ‘Ubuntu’, meaning: “a person is only a person in, through and with other people (Mabelea et al., 2022)” or the shorter translation that is used in day to day language: “I am because you are”. Applying Ubuntu to tourism and nature conservation would be different from the Western conservation concept, which is traditionally referred to as “fortress conservation”. This traditional conservation style has seen many developments over the years like transfrontier conservation or community based conservation. However, due to militarization we see a conservation style in South Africa that goes back to the traditional fortress conservation. In this conservation approach humans and nature are separated from each other, by fences and armed rangers who try to protect nature from external threats (Brockington, 2015). When applying the Ubuntu philosophy to conservation, nature and humans will be reconnected with the goal of preserving land and animals for future generations to come (Mabelea et al., 2022).

The case study for this research takes place in the Greater Kruger Area in South Africa. This area has seen huge development in the last decade, especially the growth in the tourism industry skyrocketed over the last two decades. The Greater Kruger Area consists of nine private nature reserves that are located on the west of the famous Kruger National Park: Sabi Sand, Manyeleti, Thornybush, Timbavati, Klaserie, Balule, Umbabat, Letaba Ranch and Makuya Nature Reserve. In this study I investigate up to which degree tourism in the Greater Kruger Area can be considered overtourism, and what the social and ecological consequences of the tourism industry are.

Research questions

The main question that this research aims to answer is as follows:

- Can the recent and continuing growth in the Greater Kruger Area be considered overtourism and is there a need for degrowth? Why or why not?

To answer this main question, three sub questions have been formulated.

- What are the social and ecological consequences of the growth of tourism in the Greater Kruger Area over the last two decades?
- How can degrowth potentially have an impact in the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area?
- Can the worldview of Ubuntu have an impact in the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area, and if so, how?

Chapter 2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter the theories and definitions that will be used for the research will be introduced and explained.

2.1 Tourism and conservation

Private nature reserves are used as a tool to conserve nature and wildlife. Wildlife is managed on privatized pieces of land, and landowners make a profit through wildlife activities including trophy hunting, which is a type of tourism, and ecotourism. Revenue that is earned through these activities is invested to conserve certain wildlife species and nature (Van Hoven, 2015). A study by Cousins et al. (2008) showed that private landowners play a large role in nature and wildlife conservation in South Africa, mainly because government funds are limited. Ecotourism is essential for these private game reserves. Different definitions of the term ecotourism have been used in literature in recent years. Broadly ecotourism is defined by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (2018) as: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people and involves interpretation and education." Studies have shown benefits from ecotourism to conservation (Kavita & Saarinen, 2016; Mnini & Ramoroka, 2020; Pegas & Castley, 2014; Snyman, 2017), however (eco)tourism is part of a capitalist industry, where growth and money have priority. Several scholars have therefore, argued this neoliberal system in ecotourism to be a bad thing: to consume communities and ecosystems to conserve them (Fletcher, 2009; Saville, 2014; Stronza et al., 2019). Scholars have highlighted negative socio-economic consequences of ecotourism and nature conservation areas. In South Africa an example of these consequences is inequality, which is a result from the separation of humans and nature and unfair labour relations in the wildlife economy (Thakholi & Büscher, 2021).

However there are not only social and economic consequences related to the growing tourism industry in the private nature reserves. There are also environmental consequences from ecotourism in protected areas, like the increased generation of waste, which is often not properly managed. Wrong disposal of waste has a direct impact on nature and wildlife, it can lead to biodiversity loss, resource depletion and groundwater pollution (Roos et al., 2022). The negative impact of waste affects the visitor experience and the neighbouring communities as well (Przydatek, 2019). Studies (Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2012) have shown that littering is a direct impact of tourism in protected areas. Littering can create hazardous pollution to (endangered) wildlife and can also directly pollute soil and water (Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2012). Another environmental consequence of the ecotourism industry is a lack of water. In South Africa, and more specifically the region where the Greater Kruger Area is located, water shortage is a problem, due to prolonged droughts since 2015 (Smith & Fitchett, 2020). A study

by Swemmer et al. (2018) has shown that the effect of droughts on the environment tend to last longer than the effects of other climatic events. Research Grobler and Mearns (2019) has shown that tourists use about eight times the amount of water compared to local communities. Furthermore, the tourism industry, and the associated international travel contribute significantly to carbon emissions. Research from United Nations Climate Change (2018) shows that if no steps will be taken: “the required reduction in emissions to avoid catastrophic climate change will not be reached.”

Inequality in South Africa has a long historical background but is unfortunately still very relevant today. A study by the World Bank (2018) has shown the following: “South Africa, the largest country in the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), is the most unequal country in the world, ranking first among 164 countries in the World Bank’s global poverty database (World Bank, 2018).” This can be considered the legacy of Apartheid. which officially ended in 1994.

During Apartheid groups of people were forced to live in certain areas based on their race. The opportunities that people got were also based on race. The black majority had to move to so called ‘tribal homelands’, these were small areas that were not suited for farming. These, and other, factors ensured that even after Apartheid officially ended in 1994, the segregation and inequality still continues today (Larson, 2019). Many black South-Africans live in poverty in townships with poor access to education.

Over the past two decades, land in South Africa has been bought by private philanthropists for conservation purposes. Large parts of these pieces of land belonged to local communities before the colonial times and Apartheid (Ramutsindela, 2015). In the post-Apartheid era the majority of the land is still possessed by a white minority. Large parts of these areas have post-Apartheid been affected by land claims from black minorities who want to have this land back. Fairhead et al. (2012) introduced the term “green grabbing” to explain the phenomenon of private philanthropists creating nature conservation areas. Green grabbing means: “the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends.” The private philanthropists justify the alienation of resources from communities by building on the importance of conservation.

The type of conservation that we see in the Greater Kruger Area is mostly what is termed as ‘fortress conservation’. Fortress conservation is a colonial model of conservation whereby humans and nature are separated from each other. Protected areas are created by removing indigenous communities from designated pieces of land, and putting a fence around it (Duffy, 2016). The first case of this fortress conservation was the creation of the Yellowstone National Park in the United States with the claim that the only way to protect wildlife and nature was by keeping people out (Banerjee & Dunaway, 2023). In 2021 United Nations (UN) issued an

urgent policy brief for world leaders stating that: “Fortress conservation, is motivated by the mistaken belief that successful conservation outcomes require ‘pristine wilderness’ free from human inhabitants.” The UN described cases of human rights violations like forceful evictions, food insecurity, threats to cultural rights, as well as murder, rape and torture, in the name of conservation (Banerjee & Dunaway, 2023). A more recent approach to nature conservation is the 30 x 30 conservation plan. With this approach, communities opinions and indigenous knowledge should be involved in conservation. Not only opinions and indigenous knowledge should be used, but larger conservation areas would be created by using indigenous lands in conservation areas as well (Nature Conservancy, 2023).

Research by Thakholi (2021b) and by Koot et al. (2022) has shown negative socio-economic consequences of the expanding private nature reserves and the growth of the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area specifically. As Thakholi (2021b: 9) says: “private nature reserves subsume properties beyond their fence into symbiotic but exploitative labour relations.” Koot et al. (2022) describe the situation in the Greater Kruger Area as ‘green Apartheid’, which refers to the perpetuation of racial inequality in the post-Apartheid era. Specifically about the wildlife economy in the town of Hoedspruit they mention the following: “Hoedspruit’s wildlife economy also reinforces and often even worsens former Apartheid-driven structures of inequality and racial discrimination (Koot et al., 2022: 2).”

2.2 Overtourism

Different scholars have used different definitions of overtourism over the years. In this research we look at three different definitions to cover the core elements of overtourism as we know it in the contemporary tourism literature. First, in the Collins online English dictionary (2018) overtourism is very broadly defined as:

“The phenomenon of a popular destination or sight becoming overrun with tourists in an unsustainable way.”

Important to take away from this definition is that it highlights the core element that overtourism is unsustainable. This refers to being environmentally unsustainable, as well as socially.

Butler (2018) defines overtourism more specific as:

“Overtourism represents a situation where numbers of visitors overload the services and facilities available and become a serious inconvenience for permanent residents of such locations.”

Important to take away from the definition of Butler (2018) is the core element that overtourism has negative social consequences, for example on the permanent residents of a location, whereas this has not been mentioned in the definition by the Collins online English dictionary.

The final definition that will be used is by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2018):

“The impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors’ experiences in a negative way.”

The core element of this definition is that overtourism does not only affect the citizens, but also the visitors experience in a negative way.

These three definitions will be used as the foundation of this thesis. Highlighting the core elements of overtourism: it is unsustainable, socially as well as environmentally. It has negative social consequences for both residents as well as for visitors of a location and it has an environmental impact. Important to note is that the above definitions are conceptualized for research that has already been done on overtourism, which is mainly in the context of (European) cities, but in this thesis I apply overtourism to the context of nature conservation areas.

Overtourism has been studied a great amount in recent years, and there is a lot of existing literature on the topic, however most existing literature covers overtourism in (European) cities (Amore et al., 2020; Hospers, 2019; Koens et al., 2018). A study by Buitrago and Yñiguez (2021) on measuring overtourism confirms that the phenomenon of overtourism has mainly been studied in urban settings. Little research has been done on overtourism in nature conservation areas, with some exceptions (Butler, 2020) and some recent studies on rural areas and nature-based destinations (Ghaderi et al., 2022; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020). Butler (2020) therefore raised the question if a situation can only be considered overtourism when the residents are inconvenienced?

If a destination is growing in an unsustainable manner, this can have negative effects for visitors and residents of the destination and can potentially lead to overtourism. The tourism industry is based on continuous growth to gain financial benefits. The capitalist system that is driving the tourism industry has been described by scholars over the years (Fletcher, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019) and according to Fletcher (2019) tourism is “a key pillar of the capitalist economy.” This capitalist economy in the tourism industry entails that the tourists are never satisfied and are always looking for new tourism destinations and experiences, and to meet this consumer demand the industry wants to continue developing and growing (Higgins-

Desbiolles, 2010). This could possibly be argued to be in contradiction with the aim of ecotourism: to conserve the environment by travelling responsibly.

Recently the literature on overtourism has been influenced by the emerging of degrowth discourse (Milano et al., 2019). According to Milano et al. (2019) degrowth is mostly a bottom-up approach. Meaning that it is driven by a layer in society who has been disadvantaged by growth. The next paragraph will go more in depth on the degrowth discourse.

2.3 Degrowth and Ubuntu

This thesis investigates whether the continuous growth of tourism and development in the Greater Kruger Area has led to a form of overtourism. Even if the research shows that the situation currently is not overtourism in its traditional sense, studies have shown that the growth in the tourism industry has negative social and environmental consequences in the Greater Kruger Area (Koot et al., 2022; Thakholi, 2021b; Thakholi & Büscher, 2021). Therefore, a transformation from the tourism industry could be needed, nonetheless.

One approach to transform the industry and to mitigate the consequences of the growth in this area is degrowth, which as a broad concept can be defined as:

“an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term (Schneider et al., 2010: 512).”

Since the 1950s the tourism industry has seen a sustained yearly growth of around 4% according to the UNWTO (Fletcher et al., 2019). Scholars who support degrowth in tourism believe that communities and the environment have limits, when the industry grows beyond these limits, and we speak of overtourism, this can create a negative association of the host community towards tourism and tourists, which can therefore have negative impacts on the experience of the tourists.

Fletcher et al. (2019) say that:

“We identify this growth imperative in the basic structure of the capitalist economy, which demands continuous growth in order to stave off internal contradictions that would otherwise threaten its survival. From this perspective, tourism growth can be seen to provide essential support to the global capitalist system as a whole.”

As a response degrowth could be pursued, whereby a shift is made from this growth-based economy towards an economy that is not focused solely on growing. The unlimited growth of the industry has led to negative effects and the belief that growth is not the pillar to having a

healthy economy, and that the economic system will still function without growing (Andriotis, 2018). According to Andriotis (2014: 37) in a tourism context, degrowth “aims to ensure a high quality of life for people in a society where work, production and consumption are reduced.”

A large part of degrowth in tourism discourse relies on transformation in the management and development of the tourism industry. Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) propose a reconceptualization of tourism, to implement degrowth, see the model in figure 1 down below. The model proposes that degrowth in the tourism sector can be implemented by considering the local community as the middle point of the industry. The communities should be involved in the decision-making processes, the planning and the implementation process. There should be a social contract for doing business and right of access into the communities should be granted by community members themselves. Tourists must adapt to the mindset of being a guest in a community instead of being a consumer. Lastly tourism organisations should serve the public good instead of pursuing profits only. Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) therefore propose to redefine tourism as follows: “the process of local communities inviting, receiving and hosting visitors in their local community, for limited time durations, with the intention of receiving benefits from such actions.”



Figure 1: Framework Higgings-Desbiolles (2019)

The African worldview ‘Ubuntu’ could be a way of approaching degrowth in the Greater Kruger Area. The literal translation of Ubuntu is: “a person is only a person in, through and with other people” or “I am, because we are”. Ubuntu is an antithesis to the western conservation concept of separating nature from human lives, as well as to the individualization that comes with capitalism, through for example protected areas and national parks (Mabelea et al., 2022). Mabelea et al. (2022: 5) see Ubuntu as a decolonializing conservation strategy. They conceptualize Ubuntu as:

“The idea of promoting nature for, to, and by humans rather than protecting it from humans.” “With mutual caring and sharing, indigenous human beings benefit from nature through appropriate ways of relating and interacting with the nonhumans, as with Ubuntu, a person’s needs are met in relation to others’ needs.”

Ubuntu differs from the Western individualistic way of thinking. For the purpose of this thesis a clear distinction is made between a Western view and an African view (Ubuntu), however, in reality this separation is much more hybrid and Western and African groups do embrace certain elements from each other's ways of thinking. Generally in literature a distinction is made between individualism and collectivism depending on cultural differences. Individualistic cultures encourage people to develop goals, motivations and personality, independent from others. Collectivist cultures encourage people to prioritize good relationships over their own goals, people are encouraged to develop interdependent relations (Cohen et al., 2016; Hofstede, 1980). The Western culture is generally seen as individualistic and the African (Ubuntu) view is generally referred to as collectivist. According to Mabelea et al. (2022) three core elements of the Ubuntu philosophy are communion, relationality and reconciliation. Hereby focusing on an equal distribution of resources within communities.

With Ubuntu there is a belief in the Seventh Generations Principle. According to Da Costa et al. (2021) this principle states that "decisions people make in the present day should lead to a sustainable world seven generations into the future." Degrowth and Ubuntu can be helpful tools in trying to overcome the separation of humans and other species in nature conservation areas.

Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter the methods that have been used to conduct the research will be explained. Starting with an introduction about the area where the research has been conducted. Followed by the specific methods that have been used and how they were used. Finally, the researcher positionality will be described.

3.1 Area of research

The case study in this thesis is the Greater Kruger Area in South Africa. This covers the area that borders the western side of the Kruger National Park, consisting of nine private nature reserves: Sabi Sand, Manyeleti, Thornybush, Timbavati, Klaserie, Balule, Umbabat, Letaba Ranch and Makuya Nature Reserve (see figure 2 and 3). In 1994 some of the fences between the Kruger National Park and the adjacent private nature reserves were dropped, allowing the wildlife to roam around freely. The Kruger National Park, which is the largest protected area on the African continent, receives 1.8 million tourists annually (Brett, 2022). The private nature reserves in the Greater Kruger Area have seen a massive



Figure 2 area of research

growth in mostly high-end tourism in the last decade. Since the 1960s, there has been a steady growth of the private possession and use of wildlife in South Africa, and there has been much privatisation of nature. According to Brooks et al. (2011: 260) private landowners “grasped the opportunity to benefit from the growing ecotourism-based leisure market.” Ecotourism and conservation are combined in private nature reserves, a tourism industry that has been growing rapidly in South Africa over the past years. Since 2014 the number of tourists visiting private nature reserves in South Africa has doubled from less than 150.000 to around 300.000 annually (Brett, 2022). Private nature reserves cover 12% of the land in South Africa and are accountable for over 60% of employment, tax, and GDP contributions (Chidakel et al., 2020). In figure 4 the economic value of the private reserves in comparison to the Kruger National Park can be seen (Geographic, 2020). Tourism, and specifically ecotourism, is seen as a way to contribute to the conservation of nature and wildlife. It does benefit conservation in some cases: the protection of endangered species, the creation of more diversified livelihoods for local communities and it creates awareness towards resource scarcity. It also benefits residents who work in the ecotourism industry and it can strengthen local institutions (Stronza et al., 2019).



Figure 3 the Greater Kruger Area

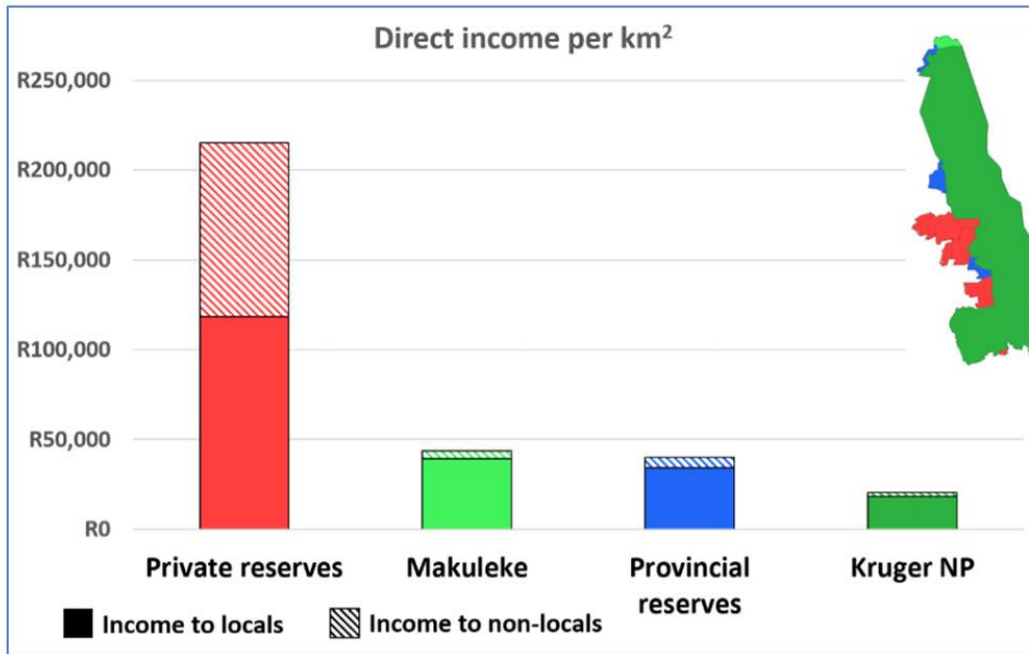


Figure 4 Economic value of private reserves

The town of Hoedspruit, located in the Greater Kruger Area and a self-declared 'wildlife haven', has experienced a massive growth in tourism and inhabitants in the past two decades. The town is surrounded by private nature reserves and the recently developed and growing wildlife estates; estates where villas and guest houses are surrounded by free roaming wildlife. The history of Hoedspruit, before tourism businesses originated in the town, lies in farming. The farms would be used for agriculture and sometimes hunting purposes. Tourism and conservation only developed years later when many farms were turned into private nature reserves (WAH, 2020). Besides the farms a big part of Hoedspruit originated from the Airforce Base that was in town. Due to foreign investments in the town, the development of wildlife estates, the nature reserves, and the close proximity of the town to the Kruger National Park, Hoedspruit has turned into an ecotourism hotspot (Büscher, 2021). Besides that, a big attraction of the town is that it is advertised as being one of the safest towns in South Africa. It is located on the border of the provinces of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. Both of these provinces suffer from high unemployment rates, poverty and inequality, as do most regions in South Africa. The World Bank (2018) says about South Africa in general: "Inequality of opportunity, measured by the influence of race, parents' education, parents' occupation, place of birth, and gender influence opportunities, is high."

Thakholi (2021b) has shown that there are negative consequences attached to the fast growing tourism industry in Hoedspruit. First of all she points out the political unrest that is at play in the conservation industry, which maintains social and economic inequality. She argues that

this unrest has the power to create a hierarchy, deciding which human or other species is more important to conserve (Thakholi, 2021a). In the towns surrounding the private nature reserves, home to the laborers, there are social issues like high unemployment, not enough resources, e.g. drinking water, poor healthcare and an ill-maintained infrastructure (Thakholi, 2021b). Research regarding the wildlife estates that surround Hoedspruit by Koot et al. (2022) has shown that these estates contribute to the segregation in town. The wildlife estates are inhabited by mainly white middle- and upperclass South Africans and foreigners. Plans to develop affordable housing in and around the wildlife estates have been voted against by the residents, maintaining the segregation. Some residents and developers from the wildlife estates, important to note that this does not include all residents, tend to think that affordable housing will result in more criminality in town which will be a threat to the image of Hoedspruit being the safest town in South Africa (Koot et al., 2022).

Many of the tourism businesses in the private nature reserves run philanthropic projects to try and help local communities living in the villages bordering the reserves. There are different varieties of these community projects, from feeding schemes to craft workshops to offering scholarships to students. Most of these communities used to live on the land of the reserve. However due to the fortress conservation that took place with the creation of the Kruger National Park, these communities now live outside the fences of the nature reserves. Fortress conservation is about conserving nature by separating humans and nature, and therefore restricting the access to certain nature conservation areas (Brockington, 2015).

3.2 Methods

For this case study qualitative research has been conducted since the research of this thesis is exploratory in nature. Data has been collected using ethnographic research by using the following two methods: qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Semi-structured interviews (19) have been used because this method allows “to collect open-ended data, to explore participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic and to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). For this thesis the research population varied and therefore, it was important that all individual thoughts and opinions of the different stakeholders would be collected. Interviews give the researcher the opportunity to learn about respondents life through the perspective of those living it (Boeije, 2010). Before the interviews an interview guide was prepared, consisting of different topics that every interview had to cover. This list of topics can be seen in appendix I. Before every interview the guide was adjusted to match the specific interviewee. Interviews

with different respondents went into different directions and therefore the follow-up questions varied in the interviews. Since I was based in the area of research, most interviews were done face-to-face in either a coffee shop or at the respondents work or house. Some interviews however, were conducted in an online setting. The advantage of face-to-face interviews is that it is easier to capture emotions and behaviour and it creates a more comfortable surrounding for the interviewee in which it is easier to stay focused on the interview for both interviewer and interviewee (DeFranzo, 2023).

Participant observation, one of the key methods in ethnographic research, has been used (Bernard, 2015). During participant observation data is collected in everyday situations, instead of in laboratory conditions (Boeije, 2010). By moving to the area of research for the period of 10 weeks in November and December of 2022, I was submerged in daily interactions, culture and behaviour. By staying in two different places I was in touch with the daily lives of different cultural groups. I stayed in the Hoedspruit wildlife estate, where I was surrounded by wealthy, mostly white residents. But I also stayed in a small eco-village close to the town Acornhoek, here I was surrounded mostly by black labourers. By participating in, and observing the daily lives of both these cultural groups I could approach the research very holistically. The results of the everyday participant observation were written down in a diary. The further I got into my research, the more I started to understand the different perspectives. These results were then incorporated in my interview guides to gather more opinions and perspectives on certain topics.

3.3 Research population

The research population consists of different stakeholders and actors that are part of the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area. The participants can be divided into different groups. Participants have been selected from:

- Non-profit organizations that are involved with conservation.
- Field guides
- Owners and/or managers from lodges in the private nature reserves.
- Owners from lodges and guest houses in wildlife estates.
- Owners from tourism businesses in the Greater Kruger Area.
- Organisation Kruger 2 Canyons biosphere.
- Destination marketing / managing organisations.

All in all the participants form a balanced representation of the different stakeholders that operate in the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area. In appendix II the anonymized list and timeline with additional information about the interviewees can be seen.

By using the snowball method the participants referred to other potential participants in the field. Other participants have been recruited by sending emails to stakeholders operating in the Greater Kruger Area and by contacting participants via LinkedIn and phone.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded with permission and some additional notes were taken during the interviews. Immediately after the interviews the most important take-aways would be written down since it is fresh in memory immediately after conducting the interview. Later on, using the recordings the interviews would be transcribed using the program Otter. By transcribing the interviews relatively soon after conducting them, it gave me the opportunity to make small changes to interview questions and the structure for the next interview, to ensure that I would gather the data that was needed. After transcribing the interviews the transcripts were stored in Atlas.ti, the program that I used for the coding of the interviews. In the program Atlas.ti I started by conducting open coding on the interview transcript. Hereby reading carefully through all the transcripts and code all the relevant fragments, which resulted in a coding scheme (Boeije, 2010). The coding scheme was thereafter subdivided into different groups. Hereby all the data that was needed to answer a sub research question was stored together.

3.5 Positionality

Within qualitative research it is important that the researcher is aware of their positionality. In this paragraph I will reflect on my positionality going into this research.

First of all it is important to be aware that I am a white, Dutch female who studies at the Wageningen University & Research, the Netherlands. With this position I acquire certain privileges. Especially during fieldwork, it is important to be aware of these privileges. The research was conducted by going to South Africa for 10 weeks. In South Africa, where Apartheid only ended in 1994, social and racial inequality are sensitive topics. Considering this, and having former experience with living in South Africa for an internship in 2019, I did not expect that 10 weeks would be enough for especially the local population to share confidential and sensitive information with me, due to cultural differences. I expected white operators in the tourism industry would be more trustworthy of me, since I might be expected to share a similar (Western) background with them and they would be able to better identify with me. I have experience with living in South-Africa, having worked on a private game reserve

myself during previous education. I have experienced there the privilege of being white and being from a Western-European country.

Going into the field with this in mind, I expected to not gain too many opinions from the local population. However during the fieldwork I made very good connections with some local residents, which made it easier for me to use their opinions and views in the research and therefore I could have a more holistic view on the situation than expected beforehand.

Chapter 4 Social and ecological consequences of the growth of tourism

In this chapter the results of the first sub-question: What are the social and ecological consequences of the growth of tourism in the Greater Kruger Area? will be shared. The consequences are divided into different topics and paragraphs, starting with the social consequences, followed by the ecological consequences of the tourism growth in the Greater Kruger Area. These consequences can be both positive and negative.

4.1 Social consequences Hoedspruit

The growth of the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area has an impact on the town Hoedspruit. Over the years Hoedspruit has changed from being a community of mainly farmers and conservationists, to being a massive tourism hotspot. Hoedspruit is a rich, white enclave in the middle of black communities like Bushbuckridge, Acornhoek and the Oaks. Hoedspruit is inhabited by rich South-Africans and foreigners. Many of them have moved to Hoedspruit over the past five years, especially during COVID-19, when working from home became a new lifestyle. Consequently, life in Hoedspruit is becoming more expensive. Over the years several plans to create affordable housing in Hoedspruit have been turned down by some of the wealthy residents, Hoedspruit is therefore left with expensive villas on wildlife estates. Some of the town's residents do not want affordable housing because in their view that would lead to crime rates picking up, which is not appealing for a town that advertises as being one of the safest towns in South Africa. It is important to mention here that this does not include all Hoedspruit's residents. By not giving permission to build affordable housing in Hoedspruit a segregation between Hoedspruit and the nearby communities is kept in place since they do not have the financial means to live in Hoedspruit. When asking one of the interviewees her opinion on creating affordable housing in Hoedspruit, she replies the following: "Yeah, I don't know, it is quite a safe town. Let's keep it like that." With this answer she implies that she feels that affordable housing would make the town less safe.

4.1.1 Crime in Hoedspruit

Some respondents pointed out that with the growth and development of Hoedspruit, crime increased, for example house break ins are very common nowadays. As one of the respondents, a resident of Hoedspruit, explained:

"We've really seen, like crime pick up quite a bit. Break ins, house break ins, especially when people are not home. So, a lot of internationals own homes, but they don't live here [in Hoedspruit]. So, they are empty. Even South Africans that own a second home here, like holiday homes. Or they own a home, but they work in the bush, so they are

at work there and then their home is vacant when they are working. So yeah, there has been an increase in house robberies.” **Interview 1**

Crime statistics from the area also show that in 2021 there was an increase in burglaries at residential premises of 125% (Nkhwashu, 2021).

Another concern that the residents in Hoedspruit face are poachers. Poaching is organized crime that is affecting the Greater Kruger Area. A resident of Hoedspruit describes the consequence of poaching for Hoedspruit as follows:

“I think that is something that will come with the money as money comes in. So, it’s not necessarily organized crime, but there is organized crime happening around us with like the rhino poaching. And when that goes down, because there are few animals, what does that organized crime turn to? Where does it go? Because it is there, the network, everything is there. So, what will those people end up doing? That is a concern. Cause we live next to, or on the reserves that have target species.” **Interview 1**

4.1.2 Infrastructural developments

With the increase in tourism and residents living in a small town, there is demand for facilities and services. Hoedspruit was never meant to house this many people, therefore the current infrastructure and facilities can’t cope. There is a lack of sewage capacity and electricity. The overload of services and facilities is an inconvenience for the residents, as well as for the tourists visiting. Both of these, the overload of services and facilities, and the inconvenience for residents and tourists, are core elements of overtourism (Butler, 2018) . During the time of conducting the fieldwork in Hoedspruit (November - December 2022) a new shopping mall was being developed just outside of the Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate. During this period the mall was the talk of the town, many residents had opinions, positive and negative, about this mall. One of the respondents, that lives in Hoedspruit, said the following:

“But I think it’s, it’s almost like killing the goose that lays the golden egg being a little bit more remote. Being outside of urban areas, people were attracted by those qualities, smaller, quiet, it’s out in the bush now. Everything’s becoming busier, with more services, like the shopping centre, more traffic. And that’s really taking away from I think, what attracted people.” **Interview 1**

Interestingly, there was a divide in town regarding who had a positive and who had a negative attitude towards the mall. Respondents owning tourism businesses in town, and most of whom originally are not from Hoedspruit are very positive towards the development of the mall. However, the respondents that work in non-governmental organisations and the conservation

sector, or respondents that have lived in Hoedspruit their whole lives, are negative about the development of the mall, because it is bad for conservation, and because it takes away from the small town feeling.

One respondent, who manages a hostel and lives in Hoedspruit, mentioned the following about how she thinks Hoedspruit will turn out:

“So obviously the spirit of Hoedspruit was really the wildlife and the community and obviously any growth to a certain level do change that, I mean every big city that we know today: Phalaborwa, Nelspruit.. did begin as just a small town. So, in Hoedspruit we already kind of know how Hoedspruit will probably end up as a new Phalaborwa or Nelspruit.” **Interview 8**

Besides the development of the mall, there is also talk in town about expanding the R40, which is the road that cuts through town. The R40 is a fairly dangerous road, especially the crossing in the middle of Hoedspruit. Therefore it might be changed into a fly over which means that it does not cut through town anymore, for safety reasons. However many tourists that use this road stop in Hoedspruit to have lunch or to support the small shops. A business owner and resident of Hoedspruit says the following about the development in town:

“But development unfortunately, as much as I hate it, is something that you can’t stop, not easily. There is plans now to build a big highway system through the town. And always these kinds of concerns means that traffic will be diverted around the town and not through the town, that can have a very bad influence on tourism. A lot of people that are driving through the town on their way to Kruger Park stop and have lunch here. And then they support the local curio shop and they buy the goods and all these kinds of things.” **Interview 2**

Another resident and lodge owner in Hoedspruit says the following about the growth of the town and the developments in town:

“But now that it is, it is growing in a sense that we are also not happy with it, the mall, nobody is happy with the mall coming up. Nobody is happy about the road that they want to go to. It is taking away their small, small-town feeling, which is why Hoedspruit is so special. So if they are going to start expanding, the more people moan about it expanding, but the people that move here they are moaning about it.” **Interview 7**

Two other developments that are likely to happen over the next few years are the development of a private hospital and an old age care home, which are developments that most of the residents in Hoedspruit are happy with. However both of these are private facilities and are too expensive to benefit anyone from the local communities that live in the villages outside of

Hoedspruit. Therefore, there might be a chance that these developments will only make the separation between the residents of Hoedspruit and the residents of the villages bigger.

4.1.3 Eastgate Airport

Another major development that might happen in the next few years is the expansion of the airport. Currently the Hoedspruit Eastgate Airport is very small but functional. It is a domestic airport, there are daily flights to and from Johannesburg and Cape Town, however they want to become an international airport. The closest international airport in the area right now is in Nelspruit, which is about a three-hour drive from Hoedspruit. The Eastgate Airport used to be a military air force base, meaning that the landing strip they have is large enough for international airplanes to land and take off. Having an international airport would have as an effect that more tourists would arrive in Hoedspruit and that all must be accommodated, which could be an issue. To the question if tourism numbers would go up by having an international airport, one of the respondents, who has years of experience working as a tourism destination coordinator, replies:

“It would, but it would, you know, I would not like to see. I mean, the Air Force Base can handle that, it is massive. And they’ve worked with the facilities and the runway, the runway was big enough, it could have landed a spaceship. So, I mean, that’s how big it is. But it’s, I don’t know if we can accommodate that amount of people, so that is a concern.” **Interview 16**

4.2 Social consequences villages

The growth of the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area has an impact on small villages and communities. The local communities of these villages are essential to the tourism industry since the inhabitants fill in most of the jobs. Over the years a part of the residents of the local communities have also become extremely dependent on the tourism industry. However what are the consequences of this mutually beneficial relationship between the tourism industry and the local communities?

4.2.1 Labour

There are many job opportunities in Hoedspruit. Many people in nearby villages therefore have jobs that are based in Hoedspruit. However, for these labourers it is not possible to live in Hoedspruit due to the costs of living. Many labourers are therefore bussed in and out of Hoedspruit every day, which takes hours. On regular weekdays at 5am, about 20 busses transport labourers from Acornhoek into Hoedspruit, where some people still have to wait several hours until work starts (Thakholi, 2021b). The money that the labourers must pay for

their daily bus tickets takes up a huge amount of the salary. As one of the respondents, who owns a small lodge, mentions about her staff:

“Elsie stays in Acornhoek, she takes the bus every day. Mabar as well, but her bus is, well it is about 60km from town. So, she wakes up really, really early in the morning, and it is very expensive for her. Well I pay it, but I mean usually that would not be the case.” **Interview 7**

Other labourers have organised themselves in a squatter camp below the bridge when entering Hoedspruit. Living conditions here are dangerous, and people live in self-created structures from trash. Another option is for the staff to live on the reserves when they are working. Research by Thakholi (2021b: 6) describes:

“Resident staff live on the reserve for 21 days and in return get seven days off. The hostel-style living arrangements, distance from schools and general inaccessibility of the nature reserves meant that a low-wage workers family could not live with them on the reserve. Consequently, workers spent protracted periods of time away from their family.”

Research from Alasow (2020) found that by these living arrangements, the employers have large control over the lives of the employees. Something that can very clearly be seen in the labour structure is the difference between black and white employees. The higher, better paying jobs are carried out by white people, and the hands-on low paid jobs are carried out by black people. Koot (2016) conceptualised these racial inequalities in the tourism industry as paternalistic.

So why do the labourers keep up with this inequality? From observation and conversations with staff in the accommodation during the fieldwork, it can be said that many of the staff fears speaking out to the (white) managers because they do not want to lose their jobs. Unemployment is very high in the villages, and usually one salary feeds a family of up to ten people, which was mentioned often during the interviews. As one of the respondents, that works on a private nature reserve, mentions:

“The biggest, the biggest thing I always tell people is that one staff member that we employ, that one salary feeds about thirteen people in the community. So we have 115 employees, that suddenly you are now feeding 130 times thirteen: you are looking 1500 people that you are feeding in terms of running a business.” **Interview 4**

There are different views from the respondents on the job creation of the tourism industry. On the one hand, if businesses grow there are more job opportunities, which is beneficial. On the

other hand, many businesses use job creation as a way to justify the negative impact that growth has. However, as one of the respondents, who works as a field guide, says:

“I don’t think we can, we can’t just use jobs to justify what is happening in terms of impact, I think we need to take responsibility for the impact itself. And unfortunately, I feel the only pressures come from bottom up, so from the guests. Because the lodges seem to out compete each other.” **Interview 1**

So, job creation is used by lodge managers to highlight why the growth of the tourism industry is positive and necessary. Lodge owners will argue that they are benefiting the local community a lot by giving them job opportunities that they desperately need. However, what is left out here is that the lodge owners need the labour, if the local community would not work at the lodges then they would not be able to operate. The labourers are essential for the lodge to run, which is often not mentioned when talking about job creation. Aside from that, lodge owners usually pay staff the minimum wage, this cheap labour provides lodge owners with luxurious lodges and lifestyles, for themselves as well as for the tourists. Job creation is also used to justify the environmental impact that ecotourism has, according to one of the interviewees:

“Because jobs that’s a critical concern in this country, jobs so it’s like, there’s the feeling that it’s okay. Our environmental impacts are okay, because we create jobs. That’s like an open cost mine, you know, also creates jobs, but it has a horrible impact on the environment.” **Interview 1**

4.2.2 Infrastructure

With the growing number of tourists arriving at the Eastgate Airport, the road from the airport into Hoedspruit is being used more and more. This road is not in good condition and has many potholes. Over the next few years, it is very likely that this road will be improved due to the growing number of tourists having to use it. However, the roads that lead from Hoedspruit to the villages, for example to Bushbuckridge where many labourers come from are far worse. These are roads that are vital to the everyday life of the residents of Bushbuckridge. The roads are in such bad condition that cars break down , and it takes hours to get from one place to the other. Over the last few years the residents of the villages have had several protests to create awareness for this road and to get it improved, however with no luck. The road leading from the airport to Hoedspruit is a smaller road that is in better condition but is most likely going to be improved first, even though way less people actually use this road. The founder of a non-profit organisation that closely collaborates with residents from a small village mentions the following about the roads:

“Hundreds of thousands of people live and use that road [leading to Bushbuckridge]. This is Eastgate airport road, which is frankly used by rich people to get to the lodge or

to get to the airport: if you can afford either of those you are pretty wealthy. And that road [Eastgate airport road], I am telling you, to the airport is going to be fixed before the village road.” **Interview 13**

Especially when looking at the previous results, regarding the development of a mall, hospital, international airport and the expansion of the road R40, it can be said that the priorities are with the development of the tourism industry and not with the well-being of the host community, since the other developments do show that there is money available for maintenance and improvement.

4.3 Social consequences of the private nature reserves

The final part of the social consequences are the consequences of the growth in the private nature reserves. These are consequences that have an influence on the town of Hoedspruit, as well as on the local communities in the villages that surround the reserves of the Greater Kruger Area.

4.3.1 Private airstrips

Over the last few years, some of the private nature reserves also established their own airstrips and are receiving direct flights from Johannesburg or Cape Town. This means that there is no reason for the guests of the high-end all-inclusive lodges to visit town. The guests most likely will stay in the lodge for the duration of their trip since it is all-inclusive, and they don't have their own transportation.

So, the amount of tourists in the area may be increasing, however they don't directly spend their money in town or in the adjacent villages. On the other hand, respondents argue that the lodges have a large spin off effect. They use suppliers in town for their groceries, gas, errands and so on, meaning that through this snowball effect the money indirectly goes to the town as well. However where does this money go? Who in town does this benefit, since the labourers in town make minimum wages. During an interview, a tourism destination coordinator commented the following on this:

“There's, I mean, yes, the lodges are paying money to buy food here and fuel and services here. But those people [tourists] will never get to see the communities.”

Interview 16

This quote shows that some respondents justify the fact that tourists do not leave the lodges by saying that lodges buy their errands in town, implying that this money will benefit the right people in town. However, this does not mean that the money is going to the local communities or the labourers. It is not shown who this money actually ends up benefiting.

4.3.2 Local community projects

Lodges on private nature reserves try to have a positive impact on the local communities by working closely with them in collaboration with non-governmental organisations. The unintended consequences of these philanthropic community projects will be further elaborated on in chapter five.

4.3 Ecological consequences

Aside from the social consequences of the growing industry, the environment is also affected by the growth of the tourism industry. South Africa is already struggling with water shortage and long lasting droughts, causing nature and wildlife to suffer (Smith & Fitchett, 2020). The development of new tourism establishments requires large amounts of water, which causes water streams run dry. Dry water streams make it very hard for animals to get access to water, resulting in animals suffering and dying. One of the interviewees, a field guide, mentions the following about the ecological impact of tourism according to him:

“I think it is huge [the ecological impact]. I think it’s massive. I think for me, the primary concern is water. Even though we’ve got access to Blyde river, you know, hydration, the waterworks, irrigation scheme and so on. A lot of people further out of town are not dependent on that, but on underground water, and it is drying out. So, there is reports from Moditlo, Kapama [private nature reserves] that their boreholes are very low and drying out.” **Interview 1**

Studies have shown that the amount of water that tourists tend to use is about eight times the amount of water that the local community would use (Grobler & Mearns, 2019). One of the interviewees, a resident of Hoedspruit, mentions the following with regards to water shortages in her experience:

“Yeah, there is not enough water already. I mean, we already spend a lot of each month without water, because the reservoirs, this town was never supposed to be a town.”

Interview 3

A study on the effects of the 2015-2017 drought in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, a reserve in the Greater Kruger Area, has shown that the environmental impact was perceived very high. As an effect tourists had negative experiences seeing animals suffer from dehydration (Smith & Fitchett, 2020). However, since 2017, development in the Greater Kruger Area continued, exhausting the water pumps in the area, combined with the high-water usage of tourists this can have negative impacts on the area. A study by Grobler and Mearns (2019) has shown that the average water consumption of guests in the wildlife tourism industry across Namibia, Botswana and South Africa was 2,073 litres per guest per night, which is extremely high

compared to the water consumption of local communities, which was between 88 and 317 litres per person per day (Grobler & Mearns, 2019).

Another consequence from the growing tourism industry in South Africa is the amount of waste that is created. Roos et al. (2022: 1) mention the following about waste:

“The mismanagement of waste in protected areas may lead to significant and irreversible environmental, economic and social impacts, such as land degradation, resource depletion, surface and groundwater pollution, loss of biodiversity and impacts on the aesthetic value of these areas.”

A study by Roos et al. (2022) conducted in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve, in the Greater Kruger Area, shows that the management of the reserve faces several challenges when it comes to waste. Lack of funds and lack of human capacity for waste management turned out to be the biggest challenges. Waste management was also not seen as a business priority within the reserve. The private nature reserves rely on private waste collection, while the communities bordering the reserve rely on the municipality for waste collection. Often the municipal waste collection services are inadequate, which results in littering and dumping waste in the communities (Roos et al., 2022).

All of the respondents agreed that the ecological consequences of the growth of the tourism industry can have a huge negative impact on conservation, wildlife and nature. A sales manager of a high-end lodge comments the following on the growth of tourism:

“The only negative downside to it [the growth] is this, the ecological point of it that comes along, obviously, there is a bigger carbon footprint of getting people here with the extra flights. There is now more people coming to the lodge so there is more wastage, there is more carbon footprint, in that terms there is more water usage.”

Interview 4

Research (Aigbavboa et al., 2017) has shown that the construction industry is harmful to the environment and uses many non-renewable resources. During construction of new establishments many smaller reptiles, like snakes and spiders die because their natural habitat is taken away. The owner of a local reptile rescue centre says the following about this:

“We had a lot of conservation programs around spiders that we would remove from building sites, golden brown baboon spider, that is a certain species that lives in a hole under the ground. Bulldozers used to come in and flatten everything and the spiders would die. We would then extract these tarantulas and try to relocate them. So we used to go to these building sites, rescue lizards, rescue snakes, and I just saw it [construction] as an absolute disaster for conservation.” **Interview 2**

By developing more tourism establishments and by developing infrastructure, space is directly being taken away from animals. One of the interviewees, who works as a field guide, says the following about the environmental impact of the development:

“In terms of further infrastructure development, I think it comes with the obvious environmental impact, both direct: so, space, just in terms of clearing. And I am even talking about the estates, the wildlife estates, yes. Because it is a natural place, but now we are making space for holding roads, and so too, with reserves for private sectors, new lodges, new footprints, new roads and there is a lot of driving around here.” **Interview 1**

This is what another interviewee mentioned about the environmental impact of the growth of the lodge that he works at:

“So you are actually physically taking away land and structure and building structures from that is directly impacting animal movements, for example. So, from that point, it is negative.” **Interview 4**

The ecological footprint of a high-end lodge is very large. Guests are being flown into the lodge but also many other necessities are being flown in from Johannesburg or Cape Town.

“If you speak to a lot of lodges that are like a yeah it’s a lodge, but then you start looking at impact like, obviously, the footprint of the lodge like I said, the roads, the vehicles, the drivers of diesel usage, the water usage...” **Interview 1**

4.4 Discussion

The findings show that there are unintended social and ecological consequences happening due to the growth of tourism in the Greater Kruger Area. Firstly, cost of living in Hoedspruit is becoming even higher, since more foreigners and rich South-Africans are moving to Hoedspruit and with this increase in inhabitants crime is picking up. Secondly, for the labourers that come from the villages outside of the Greater Kruger Area it is impossible to live in Hoedspruit and therefore they are bussed in and out every single day or they live on site of the lodges in staff housing. This creates an unequal labour structure. These findings confirm existing literature about Hoedspruit and the Greater Kruger Area by Koot et al. (2022) and Thakholi (2021b) who argue that the wildlife economy in Hoedspruit is “highly unequal and there are racialised state of affairs that is deeply unsustainable”. They even go as far as to argue that unintentionally a new ‘green Apartheid’ is being created through the unequal systems. The findings from this thesis show for example that there is unequal decision-making in deciding which roads will be maintained, were roads that are used by tourists will be prioritized over the roads leading to the villages, which are therefore neglected. It is also

interesting to see from the results that there are funds available to develop a mall, to expand the road R40, to build a hospital and even create an international airport. However there seem to be no funds available to maintain the roads leading to the villages. This is also confirmed by Thakholi (2021b) when explaining about the unequal labour relations in the Greater Kruger Area. Labourers are receiving an unequal treatment in the Greater Kruger Area currently, often they can't live with their family and are paid minimum wages.

The findings show that often the unintended social consequences of the labour relations are justified by lodge owners because they create jobs. Also the development of a big mall and private hospital are justified because of job creation. Hereby it is not taken into account that the labourers are essential to the creation of a mall, hospital or new lodge. Aside from that, the private hospital that is going to be built is likely to increase the separation between Hoedspruit residents and tourists on one side and labourers from villages on the other side. Since it is a private hospital the rich and wealthy can afford to use this healthcare facility and the labourers and residents of the villages cannot. These findings are in line with the theory from Thakholi (2021b) on conservation labour geographies in which she argues that environmental products [in this case the private nature reserves] are realized through unequal, unsustainable social conditions. Ramutsindela (2015) already argued that the participation of the private sector in conservation is usually driven by capitalist interests. This has an impact on the social conditions, like the power that managers and owners of lodges can exert over labourers. This is also argued by Thakholi (2021b) since unemployment in the villages surrounding the Greater Kruger Area is very high, lodge owners can get away with underpaying their staff, which can also be seen from my findings, where observation showed that the staff is scared to speak up to managers since they fear losing their jobs.

The findings show that the ecological footprint of the lodges are very large. Many of the tourism lodges find themselves in a contradiction. Lodge managers argue that tourism is important for conservation and saves nature and therefore they advertise themselves as ecotourism. However considering the footprint of the lodges they still contribute to global biodiversity loss, even if the nature on a local level is saved. This is confirmed by the research on ecotourism by Büscher and Fletcher (2017) in which they argue that using the label ecotourism can be considered greenwashing in some cases. According to Meletis and Campbell (2007) using the label ecotourism in relation to wildlife "masks the ways in which ecotourism can consume resources and result in broader negative environmental impacts, beyond those that occur on-site in ecotourist destinations." This can also be seen from the findings, where tourists fly into the lodges using private airstrips, many other necessities for the tourists are being flown in and yet the lodges still advertise as ecotourism and as conserving nature and wildlife.

Chapter 5 Impact of degrowth

Degrowth can have an impact on the tourism industry in several ways. Degrowth is a way of transforming and reshaping the tourism industry as it has developed over the past few decades.

5.1 Contemporary philanthropic community projects

To reshape the tourism industry, it is important to look at how the industry is run today. Currently the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area can be considered an unequal industry. Some stakeholders benefit greatly from this industry and other stakeholders suffer from the negative consequences. Stakeholders that benefit are for example lodge owners at the private nature reserves (Thakholi, 2021b). Most of the lodge owners run philanthropic community projects in collaboration with the local communities in nearby villages. Although these lodge owners have good intentions, these projects come with unintended consequences. Many, important to note not all, of these projects are run by unqualified people. One of the respondents, who has a qualification in socio-economic development describes philanthropic projects from lodges in the Greater Kruger Area as follows:

“Look, often it comes from the wife of the owner because she wants to do good. You often see, and this is not a negative thing, but this is just an observation that most of these projects are a female, led by a women. It is quite really, really extremely rare men working from the lodge side into the development department. You will often find men in the hierarchy and like the professionalization like web, or conservation or government like a professional job. Some of these heartfelt initiatives often come from the wife because the man he is running the business, and then the women has to do all the work, which is a horrendous observation, but sometimes this [South Africa] is still quite a conservative country. An old school country. That’s, that is everything. ... Most of the projects, people find it bizarre that you are employed in development because they are like, oh well I do a soup kitchen every Saturday for free. Well because it is not your job, you are just running a soup kitchen, my job is socio-economic development. So yes, I am allowed to get paid for that job. And so I think that’s often where there is a confusing thing coming in. There is nothing wrong with a lodge doing charity, but they should not sit in the same discussion as people who are talking about socio-economic development in the area. Because doing a soup kitchen is not the same as creating a system for a rural community.” **Interview 5**

Many of the contemporary projects revolve around feeding schemes and donations. However some of the respondents argue that this is not enough: the projects should not just be about

feeding the local communities every day. It should be about upskilling people in local communities and giving them opportunities.

“So these kinds of projects [philanthropic community projects] usually involve around feeding schemes. They revolve around schools or painting schools. They think that education comes from a good building, from a comfortable building. These projects include things like veggie gardens and a school.” **Interview 5**

However, literature shows that in order to implement degrowth the local communities need to have more rights than the tourism businesses and the tourists (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Or how it is phrased by March (2018: 1695): “In the interest of equity and justice, tourism should be better defined as the voluntary hosting of visitors in local communities for the benefit of locals.” Also, the values of the tourism industry should change, and should be about connecting with the locals and hospitality instead of the industry solely focusing on making money through exploiting local communities (March, 2018).

When referring to degrowth, and the rights of the local communities, one of the respondents who works in the sales and marketing team of a big lodge mentioned the following:

“So to even just give you sort of clarity on our orders, it is always the communities first and then our guests. When we had zero income for six months, not a single cent, and when I say zero income it was even less because we are refunding people as well. So it was actually negative income, we are still running our projects, feeding it [the local communities]. We have one project we operate in, we feed about 280 orphans in a day, daily basis, we’re still feeding them, we’re still around our old age centre. Where there’s about 70 citizens that we’re still looking after, still paying the nurses full salaries.”

Interview 4

Another respondent working for a different lodge has the following to say about the projects they are involved in:

“We are partnered with a local school and we run a nutrition program there. A lot of children who go to school they’ll have their only meal of the day at school. And a lot of the time the school meals don’t have meat or you know, don’t have protein because schools can’t really afford it. So we provide it. It is called a cozy bar. And it is like a super healthy bar and it is just packed with so many nutrients that you get. It is like nine times the amount of protein that a chicken wing has that kind of thing.... So we’re really focusing on nutrition. So in the last year, we’ve just been fundraising to provide kids with these super bars.” **Interview 15**

The respondents are justifying that, yes, they do put the needs of the communities that they support first, by still feeding them. However, when talking about degrowth in the tourism industry it is not about just feeding the local communities. It is about collaborating and transforming the industry by upskilling people. When looking back at figure 1 the reconceptualization of tourism from Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) the four requirements demand that the local community would be the centre of the tourism industry, which is not the case in the above mentioned philanthropic community projects. In paragraph 5.3 an overview is given of the current situation in the Greater Kruger Area compared to the framework of Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019).

5.2 Degrowing in the Greater Kruger Area

There are some examples of projects in the Greater Kruger Area that show more of the elements of degrowing in tourism and could be examples of implementing degrowth in the Greater Kruger Area. One of the respondents talked about a lady who started doing homestays in the mountains near Bushbuckridge; hosting guests from her own home. It was a very primitive experience for him, and out of his comfort zone however he was very keen on going back there (personal communication, 08-11-2022). Homestays are a good example of a project that is run by a host from a local community, and the host is profiting directly from this. Homestays are a great possibility for tourists to be guests, instead of consumers (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019).

One of the respondents talked about 'Jaba ladies' which is a project from a lodge focused on upskilling women from a local community:

“We try and recycle the elephant dung that we have in a very unique way. So one of the ways you can recycle elephant dung, is soap or paper. So we taught the ladies how to make products from that material. And they just made various items that we then sold and we're able to give them a salary and these are women who did not have jobs before.” **Interview 15**

Another project that can be seen as a start of degrowing tourism is the eco-village Nourish, which is located between Hoedspruit and Acornhoek. The founder of Nourish says the following about her collaboration with the village:

“And quite early on we started doing community-based tours in a way that we felt was authentic, you know, so we met with the chief and asked what would be important in his village that he would like to showcase to tourists. We found a local guide Martin, from the village. So we tried to create a tour, we don't allow driving, so it is not like this zoo experience. So we thought we could do tours that obviously bring us [Nourish]

income, but also bring an income to a few households in the village. So we have tried to be real grass roots.” **Interview 13**

Showing that she created an experience for tourists by making decisions together with the people from the village, and implementing these decisions in collaboration with the village as well as, by having a local guide (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). She also mentioned that with every decision that the organisation makes they keep the local community in mind: “We need to remain authentic to the fact that our purpose is to provide a service to our community (personal communication, 16-11-2022).” However, in the end, the power is still not with the local community here. They are involved, yet not in charge.

Some scholars, like Milano et al. (2019) believe that degrowing is a bottom up approach, which means that the pressure to transform the tourism industry into a more responsible and sustainable industry is coming from the tourists. The same thing was seen by the manager of a lodge:

“I do believe, because people are more responsible tourists as well. Want to know what are you giving back? How are you benefiting? People ask questions. And I think the lodges see that and try and put forward an image that they are aware and are responsible. So, I think people are trying to be more responsible.” **Interview 8**

To implement degrowth in the Greater Kruger Area, the four requirements from Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) need to be taken into account in the management process of tourism. It is important that the people from the local communities are given a voice in the planning of tourism and that their needs are acknowledged. In the following chapter I will go more in depth on how this can be done by implementing the African worldview Ubuntu into the tourism industry.

5.3 Discussion

In chapter two the model of Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) was introduced. This model is a community centred framework for approaching degrowth in tourism. To see whether degrowth can have an impact on the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area this model will be used to give an overview of the current situation. The first element is: governments must involve community in decision-making, planning and implementation. At the moment in the Greater Kruger Area the communities are hardly involved in this process. Decisions about the communities and the use of their land are being made for them by the private sector and the government and are often disadvantaging for them. For example when the Kruger National Park was established the local communities living on the land where expelled and had to move beyond the fences (Dlamini, 2020). The second element from Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) is: Tourism Industry Businesses should seek social contracts to do business and negotiated

right of access. In the Greater Kruger Area this is happening to some extent. Not many businesses are looking for access to the local villages, but some do by offering community tours, which would usually be done in collaboration with some community members. However many villagers are not trained in business and this can result in them feeling exploited.

The third element of Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) is: Tourism Industry Associations and DMOs must transition to service mindset for communities and serve the public good. Currently the mindset and goal of tourism in the Greater Kruger Area is focused on growth. One of the interviewees who works in destination management, said the following about the governments approach to tourism: "It's money. Yeah it's all about money. It's, it's making as much money out of it [tourism] as possible. (personal communication, 08-11-2022)." Many of the lodges try however to serve the communities, by philanthropic community projects, more on this will follow in the following subchapter. The last element of Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) is: Tourists must transition to mindset of guest rather than consumer. Currently tourists visiting the high-end safari lodges are discouraged of leaving the lodge and visiting local communities. Therefore there is barely any interaction between the villagers and tourists. And as can be seen in the quote used before, the interactions that they do have are based on tourists buying crafts or curios from villagers.

All in all these elements of Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) and the examples of the current situation in the Greater Kruger Area show that there is a need for degrowing in the area.

The findings from this thesis show that the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area is currently unsustainable and unequal. The philanthropic community projects that are ran by lodge owners have unintended social consequences that maintain a separation between people. These unintended consequences of philanthropy are also talked about by Koot (2021) who argues that this philanthropy can also be called philanthrocapitalism, referring to rich people 'doing good'. Quoting Raddon (2008): "Philanthrocapitalism's effectiveness has so far not been proven, and has been heavily critiqued. For instance, it allows for a concentration of power and prosperity among the wealthy." The findings of the interviews show that the respondents truly believe that their community projects have a positive outcome. However it could be argued that by just sustaining a village on a day-to-day basis you are keeping the village poor and underdeveloped. According to Edwards (2008) philanthrocapitalist projects can be recognized by commercial management styles, short term targets, quantitative goals and technical solutions for environmental and social challenges. Whether the philanthropic community projects in the Greater Kruger Area can be considered as philanthrocapitalism is beyond the scope of this research and could be interesting future research.

The results show that currently in the Greater Kruger Area degrowth is only happening in very small steps within some non-profit organisations. My research on degrowth in the Greater Kruger Area aimed to investigate whether degrowth could have an impact in the Greater Kruger Area, and the results showed that degrowth has the power to transform the whole tourism industry in the area. By using the framework from Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) as the foundation of the management in the tourism industry, the industry could be shifted towards a more sustainable and equal industry.

Chapter 6 Impact of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an African philosophy and worldview that can be translated to: I am because you are. Ubuntu has a different personal meaning for different people.

6.1 Meaning of Ubuntu

The following examples show what Ubuntu means to the different respondents and that interpretations of Ubuntu are very personal. The first quote is by a respondent who runs an eco-village:

“So to me, it just means our shared humanity. So we are one people, you know, beyond colour, race, religion, sexual orientation, belief, we all deserve to not suffer. You know, we all deserve to be treated right. So it really just speaks to me of that thread that runs through all of us.” **Interview 13**

The following quote describing Ubuntu is by the owner of a tourism organisation in Acornhoek:

“So in South Africa when we use that [Ubuntu], we use it as a form of unity, oneness. Meaning that we are one people, so we like to refer to each other when we meet each other in a different town. We always say when we greet each other: my mother’s child, how are you? Because we come from the same mother at the end of the day. So Ubuntu it means that I care for strangers as well, if you are in need and I can help you I will definitely help you regardless of what it is. It means that I must also show a character of welcoming, openness, willingness to share, that is why we are a very friendly nation, which is also why we are so welcoming at the end of the day.” **Interview 17**

The final quote describing Ubuntu is by the manager of a lodge:

“I am because you are, so we do not live in isolation. So it’s really whatever you may do in your life will actually impact other people and what other people do around you will also impact your life itself. So it does not make sense to actually live by yourself when it’s not how it works. So really Ubuntu it is actually realizing that working together and larger has been positive, it will impact someone else as well. So there is really that aspect of I am because you are.” **Interview 8**

These are all personal descriptions of Ubuntu in general. However some respondents also described what Ubuntu in the tourism industry means for them. The first quote is from a respondent who works for a big lodge.

“Ubuntu is that feeling of local belonging. We even have a special that we call for South Africans, we call the Ubuntu special. And it was kind of saying to South Africans: maybe these are lodges that they weren’t able to afford in the past, not because lodges want

to charge a higher rate, it is just because they got so many initiatives that they are looking after. It was giving local South Africans the opportunity to come and experience our property and other properties. So it is a feeling of local belonging and that we are all a community, it does not matter in which part of South Africa, we are all South Africans. It does not matter which nationality or race, we are all South Africans, that is what it means to me.” **Interview 15**

The following quote is from a respondent that owns a tourism business in Acornhoek:

“So that’s why even in terms of tourism it is very easy, especially for the landscape that I can bring tourists, for example my business, I do horseback safaris for tourists. I can bring tourism into the community and have them ride on the horse, or walk, in the community and they are welcomed and they can ask questions, they can engage with the community, it is not something where its scripted. You can openly speak to people in the community and you are welcomed and they would not mind you taking photographs and it is not something that I have gone out to prepare people for. We are just a welcoming nation.” **Interview 17**

These quotes from South African respondents all conceptualize Ubuntu slightly different from each other. However a common theme is the sense of community, instead of individualism as also described by Mabelea et al. (2022). As Mabelea et al. (2022) argue to properly conserve nature, humans and nature should be reconnected, instead of separating them. This reconnection of humans and non-humans comes from the Ubuntu philosophy.

6.2 Ubuntu in the Greater Kruger Area

The goal of the private nature reserves in the Greater Kruger Area is to conserve the nature and wildlife, the contemporary way of doing this is by keeping the residents separated from the reserves and by earning money for conservation through (eco)tourism. Before colonial times in South Africa many of the local communities used to live on the lands of what later became protected areas, like the Kruger National Park. During colonial times and the rise of fortress conservation they were forced to move to villages surrounding the protected areas and access into the areas was restricted (Dlamini, 2020). However, this separation between the private nature reserves and the local communities creates inequality and is not sustainable (Koot et al., 2022). Ubuntu is therefore argued by some scholars to be a conservation tool as well as a decolonialisation tool, stepping away from the Western view on how to conserve nature (Mabelea et al., 2022). Etieyibo (2017) argues that: “Ubuntu promotes a much better attitude towards the environment or environmental sustainability than the current dominant ethical orientation that is welded to capitalism [trust humans and the environment as ‘resources’].”

In order to conserve the nature for future generations, nature and humans need to be reconnected. Ubuntu can build on degrowth. It is about reconnecting humans and other species and thus connecting the local communities and the private nature reserves. Whereas with degrowth the focus is on the four elements of Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019), Ubuntu can also be related to some requirements of degrowth. Like: "Governments must involve community in decision-making planning and implementation (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). To implement Ubuntu in the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger area, there needs to be collaboration between the operators in the tourism industry and the service providers in the local communities. One of the respondents mentions that as an operator in the tourism industry himself he thinks trust is important in deciding who to collaborate with in the tourism industry. He says the following:

"But I see a more of a cry out form the rural communities to the tourism industry to be more involved. Whereas passionate I know that the tourism industry was [before COVID-19] quite involved in community development. So like this whole de-risking thing. Being involved economically through tourism with the local communities and underdeveloped areas is risky. It is very risky. You use a local service provider for safaris. I don't know what condition that guy's car is in, and I don't know the quality of this presentation. Whereas with a lodge there's a certain level of quality that comes with that lodge. I mean they've, they've got stars or it is based on reputation, whereas in the village it is just business, just got to get food on the table." **Interview 5**

He explains that a reason for him to work with a big, in his opinion trustworthy, lodge because it contains less risk. For him working with someone from a local community comes with a certain aspect of risk, since in his opinion they are not always trustworthy (Personal communication, 14-12-2022). This contemporary mindset and way of thinking in making decisions does not align with the core elements of Ubuntu, being communion, relationality and reconciliation (Mabelea et al., 2022) and maintains a structure of inequality. By adopting the Ubuntu philosophy for conserving nature, the power of decision making could be shifted to indigenous local communities hereby focusing on African discourse and research. Quan-Baffour et al. (2019) suggest that Ubuntu can be used to "revitalise African traditions which stress connectivity with humans and a connectivity with nature." Emphasising that Ubuntu is not only focused on human to human interactions, but also has a big environmental aspect to it. Research by Adyanga and Romm (2016) on indigenous knowledge has led to the following quote from an elderly living in Mpumalanga:

"So, our ancestors lived on this land and we inherited it from them with the ways [knowledge] to make this land productive and regenerative for many generations

ahead. The ways to make this land regenerative is what I will talk about here [in this interview] as knowledge. This knowledge is rooted in our culture and spiritual domain and it is our way of life (as cited in Adyanga and Romm, 2017).”

This quote shows the view on knowledge and environmental protection from an indigenous local community perspective and her relationship with the land, which is different from the Western scientific point of view.

6.3 Discussion

The findings show that Ubuntu is interpreted differently by different people. Especially the results on the meaning of Ubuntu within the tourism industry are different. Whereas one respondent points out that their lodge is working with an Ubuntu special: “giving local South Africans the opportunity to come and experience our property”, another respondent talks about doing horseback tours through villages whereby “in the community they are welcomed and they can ask questions, they can engage with the community, it is not something where its scripted.” I would argue that these two views on Ubuntu in tourism are quite different. The second view is more in line with the degrowing theory from Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) whereby the local community is involved in the tourism business. Whereas the first view on Ubuntu in tourism refers more to the literature from Koot (2021) where the lodge owners feel good about allowing a very small part of the local community to come visit their lodge. Importantly, this is still excluding many people since it is a very small part of the local community that actually has money to even pay the reduced special prices.

The results show that currently in the tourism industry everyone is aware of the meaning of Ubuntu, however not many businesses operate according to the philosophy of Ubuntu. The philosophy of Ubuntu is about a sense of community, instead of individualism. In line with findings from (Koot, 2021; Koot et al., 2022; Thakholi, 2021b; Thakholi & Büscher, 2021) my results show that many lodges in the Greater Kruger Area are managed with a capitalist mindset, focused on wealth and growth. The results also show that some respondents think that the philanthropic community projects mostly make use of a bottom up approach, and are implying that one of the main reasons that some of the lodges are working with the local communities is because there is demand from the tourists to do so. It has also been mentioned by some respondents that they believe that the lodges are working with the local communities to keep the peace. Since the villages are based just on the other side of the fence next to the reserves they could potentially be a form of nuisance to the lodges if they are not satisfied.

Chapter 7 Limitations and recommendations

In this chapter the possible limitations of this thesis will be discussed, as well as recommendations for future research.

7.1 Limitations of research

There are some possible limitations to this study. First of all the fieldwork was conducted during the months of November and December. December is a very busy time for the lodges in the Greater Kruger Area. Therefore some of the lodges on the private nature reserves, from which I wanted to interview the managers or the owners, did not have the time to sit down with me. Most of them offered to do interviews with me in the middle of January, which was after the time that I initially scheduled for my fieldwork. Therefore I could not do all the interviews that I planned on, within the private nature reserves.

Secondly, the timeframe of the thesis in general could be seen as a limitation of the study. For the fieldwork I scheduled six weeks, considering the timeframe that was needed to finish the proposal and write the final thesis. However if I would have had more time, I would have extended my fieldwork. Since in the last few weeks of the fieldwork I gained valuable relationships with the respondents, which could have resulted in even more valuable results.

A third possible limitation of this thesis is researcher positionality and researcher bias. Since I am a researcher coming from a Western University I could possibly approach my fieldwork with a certain bias. Because of my positionality I also interviewed more respondents with a Western background, because it was easier to gain their trust. I did certain interviews with local community members, I felt like they were not as comfortable with sharing all of their opinions with me.

7.2 Recommendations for future research

Since many topics are beyond the scope of this research, recommendations for future research will be given in this paragraph.

- This thesis has concluded that degrowth can have an impact in the Greater Kruger Area and has given some directions. However, future research on how to practically implement degrowth and a community-centred approach to tourism would be recommended.

- This thesis has concluded that the philosophy of Ubuntu could have an impact on the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area. However, future research on how to implement Ubuntu specifically in this context would be recommended.
- This thesis and the fieldwork focused on the tourism industry from the point of view of people operating in the tourism industry. It would be recommend for future research to investigate the point of view of the local communities towards the consequences of the tourism industry.
- In this thesis the negative social and ecological consequences of the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area have been highlighted. However for future research it would be recommend to investigate the impact of ecotourism in the Greater Kruger Area as well.
- Lastly as briefly touched upon in the discussion. An interesting topic for future research would be to investigate the philanthropic community projects in the Greater Kruger Area, to see if they could be considered as philanthrocapitalism.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to answer the research question: Can the recent and continuing growth in the Greater Kruger Area be considered overtourism and is there a need for degrowth? Why or why not?

This was investigated by conducting semi-structured interviews and participant observation in the Greater Kruger Area for a period of six weeks. While staying in the small town of Hoedspruit and close to the town of Acornhoek I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders that operate in the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area. The interviewees were a variety of lodge managers, conservationists, tour guides, small tourism operators and development workers.

The findings show that the situation in the Greater Kruger Area can be considered as overtourism. The core elements of overtourism that have been established in the theoretical framework are: the tourism industry currently is unsustainable, the tourism industry has negative consequences for residents of a location and negative consequences for the visitors of the location, as well as a negative impact on the environment. The small town of Hoedspruit has experienced a massive growth in inhabitants causing high costs of living, an increase in crime and the current services and facilities can't cope. The labourers that come from the villages next to the reserves are bussed in and out of their jobs on reserves every day, or they have to live on site, which keeps them separated from family. These labour relationships maintain inequality in the area. The infrastructure in the villages is in bad condition and is not being maintained, since it is not where the priority for development is. The ecological consequences are droughts that cause wildlife and humans to suffer, development and construction results in the decrease of living environment for animals, mismanagement of waste disposal results in littering and the ecological footprint of lodges directly contributes to climate change.

There is a need for degrowth since currently the industry is unsustainable and is harmful to nature, wildlife and residents. A transformation needs to take place in the management of the tourism industry and the inequality that is currently present in the industry in the Greater Kruger Area.

I argue that currently the lodge owners are not doing enough and are not qualified to prevent the unintended consequences that they are creating and therefore a change is necessary. By implementing degrowth according to the framework of Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) a shift in decision-making, implementing and planning can be made whereby the rights of the local

community are prioritized. Hereby degrowth is approached from a community-centred framework. It is argued that the philosophy of Ubuntu is very important to all South Africans, however in the tourism industry they are not implementing this to the fullest potential yet. Ubuntu is about relations between humans but also about the human environment relationship since it is important within Ubuntu philosophy to keep future generations in mind. With the Ubuntu philosophy humans and nature will be reconnected instead of being separated. I argue that for future research it is valuable to investigate how to implement degrowth according to the Ubuntu philosophy in the Greater Kruger Area, since this research showed that it can have a positive impact on the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger Area and the livelihoods of people living in the nearby villages.

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Appendix I. Interview guide

Important to address before:

Are you okay with me recording this interview so that I can transcribe the results later on?

Introductory question: Can you tell me a bit about your job, how long have you done it for etc?

Are you from Hoedspruit originally?

So my research is about the growth in tourism in the Greater Kruger area.

Today we will talk about the tourism industry in the Greater Kruger area. And specifically the continuing growth in this area.

Topic: the growth of tourism in the Greater Kruger area

- How would you describe the tourism growth in the Greater Kruger area over the past five years?
Particular growth in lodges
- Do you consider this a positive or negative growth? Why?
- What do you think is the impact of this growth of tourism in the area?
 - Social impact
 - Ecological impact
 - Economic impact
- How do you feel about the growing number of private game reserves and lodges that are opening in this area?
- Do you experience an impact (positive or negative) from tourists?
- Do you think tourism will continue to grow in the Greater Kruger area in the next 5 years?
- Are you familiar with the term overtourism?

- Do you think the growth in the Greater Kruger area tourism industry can be considered to be overtourism according to this definition? Or maybe in five years from now? Why/ why not?

Topic degrowing / community

- Who do you think benefits from the tourism industry here?
- Would you say that everyone benefits equally from the industry?
- What is your opinion on community projects?

Topic: implementing the worldview Ubuntu in the Greater Kruger area

- Are you familiar with the African Ubuntu worldview?
 - If yes, how would you describe Ubuntu?
 - If yes, what does Ubuntu mean to you?
- Do you think Ubuntu could be implemented in the tourism industry? How would you see this?
- Is there anything else that you want to talk about or want to share with me?

And then finally: do you have anyone that you know in the tourism industry who would be willing to do an interview with me on this topic, if you could share some names/ contact details with me that would be amazing.

Appendix II. List of interviews

Name	Function	date	Location
Interview 1	Guide at Lowveld trail company	2-12-2022	The Hoedspruit café
Interview 2	Owner Hoedspruit Reptile Center	25-11-2022	Hoedspruit Reptile Center
Interview 3	Head of responsible resource management department at Southern African Wildlife College	11-11-2022	The Hoedspruit café
Interview 4	Sales manager Dulini	25-11-2022	Online
Interview 5	Nourish Eco Village Programme Director	14-12-2022	Nourish Eco Village
Interview 6	General manager Dulini	24-11-2022	Online
Interview 7	Lodge owners Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate	30-11-2022	Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate
Interview 8	Manager Shik shack hostel / Nourish Eco Village	2-12-2022	Nourish eco village
Interview 9	Jubalani Safari	9-12-2022	Online
Interview 10	Suncatchers hot air balloon pilot	15-11-2022	The Fig and Bean
Interview 11	Founder cultural village	30-11-2022	Wildlife estate
Interview 12	Nomads Den (to be openend)	3-12-2022	Farmers market
Interview 13	Founder and executive director at Nourish Eco Village	16-11-2022	Nourish Office
Interview 14	Tanda Tula Lodge	18-1-2023	Online from NL
Interview 15	Media manager at HERD / Jabulani	9-12-2022	Online
Interview 16	Bought the website: Wild at Hoedspruit. Tourism destination coordinator: Kruger to canyons biosphere	8-11-2022	The Fig and Bean

Interview 17	Octopus riding school and Kruger to Canyons biosphere	18-1-2023	Online from NL
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