

First-of-its-kind hunting study sheds light on hunters' perspective

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The target is in his sights. In his mind, the buck's meat is already processed. He pulls the trigger gently and the shot rings loudly, echoing across the South African bush. For the hunter, it was an exhilarating experience, one he shares with thousands of hunters every year. But what does hunting tourism really mean for the local communities that live alongside it?





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A recent study by North-West University's (NWU) Tourism Research in Economics, Environs and Society (TREES) research unit examines this controversial and often misunderstood industry from an unusual angle through the eyes of the hunters themselves. This first-of-its-kind study was conducted by Prof Peet van de

Merwe and Prof Elmarie Slabbert and published in the journal *Development Southern Africa* under the title *The (ir)relevance of hunting tourism to rural communities: A hunter's perspective*.

The findings are provocative: hunters believe they are not just participating in a recreational activity, but actively shaping the economies, infrastructures, and social dynamics of South Africa's rural communities. Whether or not local communities share this perception remains an open question.

Hunting tourism is big business in South Africa. Each year, thousands of international and local hunters descend on game farms and reserves, spending large sums of money on guides, lodging and permits. International hunters visiting South Africa's shores are mainly from the United States and stay an average of ten nights per trip, compared to just three or four nights for their South African counterparts.

The difference in spending is stark, with foreign hunters investing up to four times more per visit. Their financial footprint extends beyond the confines of hunting lodges, spilling over into local communities in the form of employment, service contracts and donations. According to the study, nearly a third of international hunters donate meat from their kills to local communities, and a quarter contribute to schools and public projects.

But is this enough to call it a lifeline for rural South Africa?

The study's authors argue that hunting tourism does not exist in a vacuum, but sits at the intersection of economic survival, conservation policy and cultural preservation. More than 30% of South Africa's population lives in rural areas, where unemployment and poverty are widespread. Here, hunting tourism is a rare source of formal employment. Game farms and lodges create jobs for trackers, lodge staff, cooks, and artisans, providing opportunities where few alternatives exist.

Hunters see themselves as the driving force behind this development. Their presence, they argue, leads to improvements in infrastructure, better maintained roads and increased security in the areas where they hunt. They claim that crime decreases in hunting zones and that local pride in traditional cultural practices – such as sustainable wildlife management – flourishes under the influx of revenue. However, these claims remain largely untested from the perspective of the communities themselves.

For all its perceived benefits, hunting tourism is a polarising issue. Its critics argue that it prioritises short-term economic gain over long-term sustainability. Research outside South Africa, notably in Namibia and Botswana, has found that banning hunting tourism can lead to job losses and increased poaching as communities lose a legal means of profiting from wildlife. The South African study echoes these concerns: hunters overwhelmingly see themselves as allies in conservation, directly funding anti-poaching initiatives and wildlife management efforts. Yet conservationists remain divided over whether hunting and biodiversity conservation can truly coexist in the long run.

The NWU study categorised the impact of hunting tourism into three main factors: prosperity, empowerment and revitalisation. Economic benefits ranked highest, with hunters citing job creation, income generation and improved living standards as their top contributions. 'Revitalisation', the idea that hunting tourism physically transforms rural areas through development, came last. Even among the hunters surveyed, expectations for direct infrastructure improvements remained modest.

There was, however, a clear divide between foreign and domestic hunters. International visitors were far more likely to see themselves as key players in community development. They highlighted their financial

contributions, their role in maintaining game farms and their support for local projects. South African hunters, while recognising the economic benefits, were less inclined to see their role as transformative. This may be because they are local hunters and do not fully recognise their contribution. It's similar to people living by the coast not appreciating the ocean as much as people who visit the coast on holiday.

There is a simple reason for this. One of the findings of the study is that, although hunters are viewed as a collective, international hunters and local hunters have different perspectives on some of the impacts. The study showed that international hunting tourists perceive their impacts to be more significant than their domestic counterparts. Their spending may also influence their perceptions, as they spend three to four times more per hunt than domestic hunters.

However, there are fewer international hunting tourists than local hunting tourists in South Africa; the impact of local hunting tourists is more important because they are more numerous. Local hunters should therefore be made more aware of their impact on communities. In simple terms, local hunters hunt more, which dilutes their own perceptions of their impact on local communities. They think less about the impact of their contributions.

The study suggests that South Africa's hunting tourism model offers a potential blueprint for balancing conservation and rural development, but it also underscores how little is known about the actual on-the-ground effects. The voices missing from the conversation are those of local communities themselves. Do they see the same economic and social benefits as hunters? Are they benefiting equitably, or are the gains concentrated among landowners and tourism operators?

The study calls for further research, particularly from the perspective of those most affected. Until then, the debate about the place of hunting tourism in rural South Africa remains unresolved. But one thing is clear: the hunters who return year after year, their impact is measured not just in the animals they hunt, but in the communities they believe they are uplifting.

Volg die skakel vir die artikel in Afrikaans hier: <https://news.nwu.ac.za/af/eerste-sy-soort-jagstudie-werp-lig-op-jagters-se-perspektief>.

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