

Ecotourism success story in Zimbabwe: The case of Tsholotsho CAMPFIRE project

Oliver Chikuta^a Botho University, Botswana,

Mark Russell^b National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe,

^cFelicity Ncube, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study exposes the untold success story of Zimbabwe's ecotourism projects. Literature is awash with publications on the failure by Zimbabwe to come up with, and run sustainable ecotourism projects that significantly benefit the community with very little or no effort being put on telling the positive side of the ecotourism story. It is against this background that the researchers, using an exploratory design, investigated the story of the Ngamo CAMPFIRE project in Tsholotsho to establish the nature, and extent of its contribution to the environmental, socio-cultural and economic well-being of the local community. A qualitative research methodology was adopted which involved interviews with key informants (headman, Rural District Council [RDC] representative, headmaster), and panel discussions with local residents. The study revealed that indeed tourism has significantly impacted on the livelihoods of people in Tsholotsho especially in the Ngamo settlements which share a boundary with Hwange National Park. The key benefits include the construction of schools, employment, and training of local guides, scholarship programs, to mention just a few. The researchers recommended that other CAMPFIRE projects take a leaf from this project.

KEYWORDS

Tsholotsho, Ngamo, CAMPFIRE, ecotourism, success

1. Introduction

This paper unveils the virtually known successes that have been achieved by the usually condemned Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) program. It is true that while the program looked bright at its inception, there were a lot of factors that worked against its noble tenets, and led to its failure to sustain itself in some of the districts. These factors include the sudden end of international funding, and the beginning of Zimbabwe's severe political and economic crisis (Balint & Mashinya, 2008). Among the most affected was the iconic Mahenye project which was the marvel of all. This failure by some of the CAMPFIRE projects made more headlines than the successes that had been achieved. Many were made to believe that the whole program was a failure yet this is not true. Among the unsung success stories of the CAMPFIRE program is the Tsholotsho North project. This study unearths the story of this CAMPFIRE project in the context of the principles of ecotourism.

2. Ecotourism

Ecotourism is one of the most discussed among the so-called alternative tourism concepts (International Ecotourism Society [TIES], 2015; Honey, 1999; TIES, 2004). It is sometimes referred to as nature tourism or nature-based tourism. Between 1994 and 2004, ecotourism was growing three times more than the industry average, and it is still continuing to grow at an unprecedented rate (WTO 2004 cited in TIES, 2006). Ecotourism has been identified as one of the four areas of 'new tourism', and its associated production practices, and consumption patterns (Poon, 1993). The other three are heritage/cultural tourism, adventure tourism, and visiting theme parks or mega shopping malls (Shaw & William, 2004; Mowforth & Munt, 2003).

Just like any other concept, ecotourism is fraught with definitional crisis with different authorities defining it differently. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) is the most referenced authority on ecotourism and has defined ecotourism as travel to natural areas that responsible and conserves the environment, sustains the well being of the local people and involves interpretation and education (TIES, 2015). Sorakaya (1999 p.171) defined ecotourism as "a new form of non-consumptive educational and romantic tourism to relatively undisturbed and under-visited areas of immense natural beauty and cultural and historical importance for the purpose of understanding and appreciating the natural and socio-cultural history of the host destination." According to this definition, ecotourism must be non-consumptive, which takes away hunting from the list of ecotourism activities. This works against one of key pillars of ecotourism where tourism must contribute financially to the local community. Normally, hunting is a key contributor to financial well-being of the communities where it happens.

Honey (1999) also defined ecotourism as travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to be low impact, and usually small scale. It helps educate the traveller, provides funds for conservation, directly benefits the economic development, and political empowerment of local communities, and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.

The key thrust of ecotourism as derived from the above definitions can be summarised by the following principles of ecotourism:

- involving travel to natural destinations;
- minimise impact on the environment;
- build environmental and cultural awareness and respect;
- provide constructive quality experiences for both visitors and hosts;
- trigger the provision of financial resources for conservation;
- make available economic benefits and empowerment for local people;
- raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental and social climate;
- respecting local culture; and
- supporting human rights and democratic movements in terms of travel (Honey, 1999, 2008; TIES, 2015).

Menbere and Admassu (2020) explain the concept of ecotourism as a form of tourism in which natural areas are the main attraction. They further highlight that it is responsible travel that is concerned with conservation of the natural environment, and benefits the local people. The popularity of ecotourism has been growing with its role in livelihood improvement, poverty alleviation, and fostering environmental conservation in rural communities. It is more important to communities that fringe national parks, and protected areas (Menbere & Admassu, 2020). According to Ismail et al. (2021) ecotourism is travel concerned with the protection and conservation of the natural environment while not overlooking the well-being of the local communities, and educating the tourist about the local culture, and traditions.

Ecotourism, therefore, concerns travel to a natural area involving local people, feeding economic profit into local environmental protection, and contributing to the maintenance of local environment, and species diversity through minimum visitor impact, and promoting tourist education (Valentine, 1993; Western, 1993; Fennell, 2001, 2003). Swarbrook (1999) supports this assertion by arguing that, for ecotourism to be considered sustainable, it should respect both the visitors, and the local

communities/hosts together with their cultural heritage, and biodiversity. The principles of ecotourism can further be explained using the triple-bottom-line approach

3. The triple-bottom-line (TBL) of ecotourism

The triple-bottom-line is a phrase introduced in 1994 by John Elkington as a model for measuring the impact of an organisation in a more holistic manner. Instead of looking at the financial bottom line (profitability), the concept looks at impact from three perspectives which seeks to broaden the focus on the financial bottom line by businesses by including social and environmental dimensions (Elkington, 1998). Elkington (1998) defined triple-bottom-line as primarily about an entity adopting performance standards not only in regard to its economic activities but also to its social and environmental activities. In essence, the triple bottom line of a business would measure the company's degree of social responsibility, its economic value and its environmental impact. In other words, TBL provides a framework for measuring the performance of the business and its success using the economic, social, and environmental positions (Goel, 2010). The term has also been referred to as the practical framework of sustainability (Rogers & Hudson, 2011).

An ecotourism business venture can, therefore, be regarded as sustainable (which is a key tenet of ecotourism) if, and when it is positively planned with, and achieves three goals, that is, economic well-being, environment conservation, and socio-cultural sustainability. This would then mean that ecotourism has three key components/bottom lines, sometimes referred to as the 'triple-bottom-line' or 3BL (TIES, 2004), that is, environmental, socio-cultural and economical:

- a) Environmentally, ecotourism should minimise damage to the natural ecological environment, and ideally tries to benefit the environment by way of contributing actively to the conservation of the natural environment.
- b) Economically, ecotourism contributes to the economic well-being of the local community, owners, employees, and as many other stakeholders as possible. This means the business itself has to be viable in order to afford something for the community.
- c) Socially and culturally, ecotourism contributes actively to the conservation of the cultural heritage and/or social structure of the community, in which it is located. It involves locals, and indigenous communities, tour operators, government institutions, and relevant stakeholders in its planning, development, operation and monitoring phases (TIES, 2004).

According to Marunda and Chaneta (2014) ecotourism should not be another buzz word but live up to its tenets. They argued that a game drive, for instance, in the Hwange National Park does not amount to ecotourism unless that drive benefits the park, and the people living in its vicinity.

Despite its positive attributes, ecotourism has been blamed for contributing to environmental degradation in the long term. According to Page (2002) today's ecotourism is likely to be tomorrow's mass tourism. His argument is based on the fact that ecotourists target pristine, and virgin ecosystems, and their presence disturbs the very ecosystem which makes ecotourism a success. Wheeler (1993) argued that the 'true' motive of ecotourists may not necessarily be conservation but venturing into the pristine, which in itself destabilises the original ecosystem, and defeats the very tenets of the concept. Any ecotourism venture, therefore, has to ensure that all the potential and inevitable negative effects of their operations are foreseen and proactively avoided.

4. The CAMPFIRE program and ecotourism

Zimbabwe has been hailed globally for being amongst the few countries to have instituted a program that was meant to bring tourism, and natural resources in the hands of local communities. The Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) program was initiated in 1988 in Zimbabwe as a means to ensure that local communities benefited from natural resources in their area. This was necessitated by the growing antagonism between protected areas and local community as a result of the deprivation that was caused by the creation of national parks (Child, 1993). The colonial regime in Zimbabwe declared some areas as strictly for wildlife conservation, and went on to force local people to move from their ancestral land to pave way for wildlife conservation (Child, 1993). By doing so, the local community was deprived of their access to wildlife and related natural resources which used to be their source of livelihood. This was also interpreted by the local inhabitants as a symbol of oppression. Some viewed it as wildlife management 'against' the people (Balint & Mashinyira, 2005; Child, 1993). In retaliation, the communities began to poach and indiscriminately kill animals –a move that defeated the cause of conservation.

After realising that local communities were antagonistic to the move by the state to distance them from their sources of livelihoods, the government introduced the WINDFALL project (Child, 1993) which was meant to ensure that the monies that accrued from hunting in communal areas was given to rural district councils. While this seemed to be a step towards linking rural communities with their resources; the program fell short in the sense that the hunting projects were still run by the state (not the communities), and the benefits did not directly benefit the affected people. Child (1993) called this 'wildlife management for the people', however, it was the district council which benefited the most, and only a small portion would end up in the hands of the local communities. This was a failed attempt to achieve sustainable wildlife conservation.

In 1975, the Parks and Wildlife Act was enacted with the aim of devolving authority to manage wildlife from the state to private landowners, most of whom were the elite whites (Balint & Mashinyira, 2005; Metcalfe, 1993). While this move devolved authority from the state, there were no provisions to allow district councils and the communal people, who had no land tenure, to have control over the wildlife within their vicinity (Murphree, 2001). In 1982 (two years after Zimbabwe attained independence) the revision of the Parks and Wildlife Act of 1975 was done. This revision provided the statutory framework CAMPFIRE. District councils were given authority over wildlife within their jurisdictions.

The CAMPFIRE programme has been studied repeatedly due to the fact that it was one of the first examples of Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) initiatives, to the extent that it has served as a model for many countries (Derman, 1995; Newsham, 2002; Muchapondwa, 2003). It devolves authority to the communities in a way that privileges the rights and concerns of the rural poor over those of powerful political, and economic elites (Bryand & Jarosz, 2004). This is opposed to domination of local resource management decisions by authorities outside which results in socio-economic injustice. With CAMPFIRE, the state plays a regulatory role while the rural district council, and the CAMPFIRE Association are advisors and facilitators. The idea was meant to give rural communities control of wildlife management as a means of ensuring ownership which would result in voluntary wildlife conservation. In return, the community would get dividends from any hunting or related activities in the area.

Under the program, the villagers, the local rural district council and the CAMPFIRE Association would work together to develop sustainable wildlife management programs based on hunting-controlled numbers of wildlife from their areas. Profits from the project are used for communal benefit or distributed to individual households at the discretion of the community. In essence, this is wildlife management 'by' the people, as opposed to the WINDFALL which was wildlife management 'for' the people (Child, 1993; Balint & Mashinyira, 2005).

According to the CAMPFIRE Association of Zimbabwe (nd.), under the CAMPFIRE programme, rural district councils are authorised to market wildlife

resources in their districts to safari operators on behalf of communities. Safari operators sell hunting and photographic safaris to mostly foreign sport hunters and ecotourists, before paying the communities a percentage of costs which is essentially a dividend resulting from the sustainable management of their wildlife, especially safari hunting.

In 1988 the first CAMPFIRE project was noted and implemented in Zimbabwe, with the Mahenye (South East Lowveld) and the Nyaminyami (Zambezi Valley) projects being the pioneers (Metcalfe, 1993). Between 1989 and 2004, the CAMPFIRE program nationally earned approximately \$30 million. Of this money, only about half of it benefited the local community. In 2001, it is estimated that each household under the program received about US\$5 as benefits. This was despite the very high contribution the program made to the national GDP (Balint & Mashinyira, 2005). In some communities, benefits came in the form of community infrastructure like roads, grinding mills, clinics and schools. Other benefits included job creation, empowerment and diversification of livelihoods for rural communities (CAMPFIRE Association of Zimbabwe, nd.).

From the discussion above, one can conclude that the CAMPFIRE program generates three primary benefits; it improves the livelihoods of rural people, promotes environmental stewardship among the rural folk by providing an incentive for wildlife conservation and, promotes social cohesion by focusing on that which benefits the community as a whole. If one was to look closely, these are the very tenets of ecotourism as espoused in the triple bottom line concept. In other words, if practiced in the context of sustainability, the CAMPFIRE is a typical ecotourism program.

After the initial hype had faded, scholars began to critically analyse the sustainability of the CAMPFIRE program, with some arguing that it was a mere smoke screen (Hasler, 1999; Newmark & Hough, 2000; Bond 2001; Hughes, 2001). Findings from some researches revealed that most CAMPFIRE projects suffered from structural and political challenges. Others concluded that the whole program was dependent on donor funding, and the withdrawal of such, after the controversial fast-track Land Reform Program led to the demise of many projects. A case in point was the demise of the envied Mahenye CAMPFIRE project which was the flagship of this initiative (Balint & Mashinyira, 2005).

The demise of Mahenye CAMPFIRE Program

According to Balint and Mashinga (2006), in 1991 the Government of Zimbabwe authorised the Chipinge District's CAMPFIRE program making Mahenye one of the first officially recognised sites for implementation of the program. According to Tchakatuba et al. (2019), the Mahenye project benefited the local people both at household and community level. At community level, infrastructure was developed while at household level, the community received dividends from the proceeds from tourism activities with the CAMPFIRE project. They also benefited from game meat. The same sentiments were shared by Balint and Mashinga (2006) who highlighted that there were social and economic benefits accrued to the local community as a result of the CAMPFIRE project. However, most of these benefits were short lived.

In their study Balint and Mashinga (2006) highlighted that the Mahenye community no longer received the flow of significant social and economic benefits reported in earlier studies of the CAMPFIRE project. They attributed the central failure of the Mahenye CAMPFIRE project to the breakdown of participatory decision-making processes due to undemocratic takeover of the committee that had initially managed the project. Following the withdrawal of NGOs, and government agencies responsible for capacity building, and overseeing the program, the traditional community leaders in Mahenye usurped power from the elected CAMPFIRE committee, and then co-opted benefits, and otherwise, mismanaged the project activities (Balint & Mashinga, 2006).

Balint and Mashinga (2006) further highlighted that Zimbabwe's broader crisis also contributed to the adverse outcomes of the project in Mahenye. They found evidence of significant negative impact from the national crisis which included lower revenues from the lodges, challenging problems of financial management during a time of hyperinflation, and both reduced services, and increased pressure for higher shares

of project income from the Rural District Council. Yet, they concluded, that the national, political and economic disruptions were not sufficient to explain the full extent of the collapse of Mahenye's CAMPFIRE project.

However, Tchakatumba et al. (2019) attributed the significant reduction in benefits to the loss of donor funding following their departure at the height of the land reform programme and subsequent economic, and political crises. Their study shows that the dividends went down to insignificant levels and in some areas, to nothing.

One may, therefore, conclude that, while there was national economic, and political crisis, the demise of the project can mainly be attributed to the combination of local failures in leadership and the withdrawal of outside agencies that were responsible for overseeing and assisting with the program. This speaks to the general weakness of most ecotourism projects; they usually fail due to overdependence on external funding and management (Mnini & Ramoroka, 2020).

Today, the flames of the CAMPFIRE seem to have faded away, with very few, of the over fifty projects still viable. Very little, if anything, has been published on the Tsholotsho CAMPFIRE projects, particularly the Ngamo project, let alone, the untold successes achieved. This study sought to expose the success story of the Ngamo project in Tsholotsho North amidst the failure by many.

5. Methodology

The researchers adopted a qualitative method of enquiry by conducting interviews with key informants, and conducting focus group discussions with local residents. The key informants were the Ngamo Headman, the Headmaster of Ngamo Primary School and the Environmental Officer of Tsholotsho Rural District Council (responsible for CAMPFIRE). Focus group discussions with local women (who sold their wares to tourists) and with local community were also conducted. The interviews were both audio and video recorded while the researchers also took notes. Each of the researchers had their notes from the interviews and the focus group discussions. After the data collection, the audio records were transcribed and compared with the written notes to check for consistency and accuracy. The data was finally analysed using the thematic content analysis as prescribed by Creswell (2012).

6. Findings

The findings of this study are presented using the three pillars of sustainability or the tripple-bottom-line to effectively assess the successes of the project. The three pillars are economic, socio-cultural, and environmental (ecological). Before going into the details of the findings, a brief description of the Tsholotsho CAMPFIRE project particularly Ngamo area would suffice.

The project is the brainchild of Imvelo Safaris, a safari operator, and the local people in the Ngamo area under the administration of Tsholotsho Rural District Council. The project involves the Camelthorn Lodge which is run as an ecotourism project by Imvelo Safaris in the Ngamo area. The Ngamo area, primarily dominated by *acacia prestine* woodlands, is located in Tsholotsho north district on the edge of the south-eastern corner of Hwange National Park (Zimbabwe's largest National Park) on Latitude 19.107553 and Longitude 27.462591.

Environmental Conservation

From an environmental perspective, Camelthorn Ecolodge has successfully adopted the principles of ecotourism by doing the following:

Camelthorn Ecolodge construction and operations

The main lodge, and its eight (8) forest villas are built from natural stone with thatched roofs, and the main lodge is built under a huge ancient Camelthorn Tree-the lodge's namesake. The aesthetic setting of the ecolodge is evident as it blends

well with the environment in which it is located. In fact, observations show that one may fail to see that there is a lodge except within 20 meters of its perimeter. The walkways/pathways within the lodge vicinity are cemented with elephant dung. During the lodge's construction phase, the woodpeckers' habitat was disturbed, and mitigation was done by way of remoulding the birds' habitat, for example, providing suspended logs with carved cavities for its habitat. Electricity is provided by a sound-proofed diesel generator, and lighting by solar power. Gas is used for refrigeration, and heating, whilst dead firewood is used for cooking. All these show how environmentally sensitive Imvelo Safaris is.

Imvelo Safaris is also running a sport hunting camp (Mtshwayeli Camp) about 20km south-east of Camelthorn Lodge. Both Camelthorn Lodge, and Mtshwayeli hunting camp lie in the 170,000-hectare CAMPFIRE concession of Tsholotsho north. Mtshwayeli camp uses solar energy for lighting, and also for pumping water for domestic and wildlife use.

Safari area

Within less than a kilometre from Camelthorn is Ngamo pan in Hwange National Park where Imvelo conducts game drives, and walking safaris. They also built an underground blind with an *en-suite* flush toilet near the water pan where wildlife can be viewed/photographed from toe-level, and silhouetted against the sky at a distance of eight meters. All this is done to ensure minimum disturbance to the natural setting as well as the natural lifestyle of wildlife.

According to the Tsholotsho RDC representative, throughout the dry season (May to November), Imvelo operates eight (8) boreholes, (four boreholes in the park and four more in the communal land in which they are located) which provide essential water to the wildlife during the season. During the drought period of 2012, they pumped about one million litres of water every day to watering pans. This helped in averting a major catastrophe in the southern part of the park. Imvelo also maintains over 100km of fireguards annually. That is along the park's south-eastern boundary and within their concession in the communal land. The fireguards also provide habitat protection for wildlife. Imvelo also fights fires alongside local communities, National Parks and Forestry Commission rangers. The presence of Imvelo on the edge of the park enables them to quickly detect and react to any wildfires.

Conservation awareness

Imvelo, together with Tsholotsho RDC, and local traditional leaders are often involved in many community meetings. Such meetings are meant to foster increased awareness, and commitment, to wildlife conservation by all levels of the community as they develop an appreciation for the value of wildlife, and the benefits associated with wildlife and natural conservation. Resultant benefits also discourage poaching by the locals. According to the Ngamo village head, Imvelo has also encouraged school children, and the locals to re-use snack wrappers by making crafts. This results in a clean environment, school and neighbourhood, and such crafts can be sold to ecotourists at their local craft centre. Furthermore, Imvelo actively contributes towards the maintenance of an anti-poaching team, together with other operators such as wilderness safaris (who are based in the park), and also the local communities in general policing of their areas.

The Environmental Officer at Tsholotsho RDC also weighed in, and stated that the CAMPFIRE project has indeed created awareness on natural resource conservation. Wildlife conservation, in particular, has been improved as evidenced by the reduced level of poaching in the area. He attributed the reduction in poaching to the realisation by local communities of the value derived from wildlife conservation. There has also been improved conservation of natural resources especially indigenous resources. The officer also highlighted that there has been a reduced strain on natural resources as there is a reduction of competition between wildlife and humans for resources like water. This has been achieved mainly through drilling of boreholes for local communities.

Socio-cultural contribution

Any sustainable ecotourism project must contribute towards the social wellbeing of the local communities (TIES, 2004). Camelthorn lodge and Mtshwayeli camp (hunting camp) as ecotourism projects are both part of the CAMPFIRE initiative, which is meant to empower the local people living within the natural resources and improve their well-being as a result of sustainable usage of those natural resources. Imvelo's ecotourism programme has provided portable water for both domestic use and for livestock use. 25 boreholes, and wells have been drilled, equipped, and are maintained by Imvelo. Beneficiaries of boreholes include the local Chief, the Zimbabwe Republic Police base, schools, and the local communities. Imvelo has also contributed to improved sanitation in the local community (Imvelo safari lodges).

Provision of health assistance by Imvelo to the local people has been overwhelming according to the Ngamo Headman as well as the women in the focus group. They have routinely assisted in the provision of drugs to local clinics, and they annually conduct a mobile dental safari in the Ngamo area. In 2015, Imvelo provided eye care to the local communities. Imvelo has also assisted in critical issues that arise, for example, in payment of hospital bills for local people, and in ferrying injured/sick local people to hospital. They also assist pregnant women to access the nearest clinic in times of emergency.

Education Support

The village headman said that benefits of CAMPFIRE projects were first seen through refurbishment of Ngamo Primary School which was in a dilapidated state. The CAMPFIRE project assisted in the construction, and furnishing of classroom blocks, as well as the provision of textbooks. The primary school also managed to build a library and furnish it through the CAMPFIRE project.

From 2010 to 2011, the construction of the first Ngamo Secondary School classroom block, an ablution block and three (3) teachers' cottages were built; a water pump was also installed. Two (2) more classroom blocks were built for the primary school, and electrification of both schools was done. Ziga Primary School got a classroom block, five (5) teacher's cottages and an ablution block built with a water pump installed whilst Kapane School had (3) three classroom blocks re-roofed. Mlevu Primary School had one (1) classroom block under construction during the time of this study. The panel discussion members testified that an early childhood development centre was constructed and furnished by Imvelo Safaris, at Ngamo Primary School and recently, the local communities requested for Imvelo to construct and equip a local vocational training centre in the area.

According to the Headmaster of Ngamo Primary School, the ecotourism project has seen eleven (11) local students (8 girls and 3 boys) sponsored for their university education by Imvelo Safaris. Support to the teachers and schools was ongoing, with teachers having been housed in comfortable accommodation, and receiving training support and financial incentives.

Other community benefits

According to the Ngamo Headman, and the focus group, Imvelo had maintained the local access roads within the communities, and has improved the main access route to Camelthorn, along the Bulawayo-Victoria Falls railway line. This had been done by way of re-surfacing/covering the Khalahari sandy road with used coal ashing for about 30km. Communities living along this stretch/route such as the Voshega and Mpindo locals, have tremendously benefited by way of easy access. Game meat from Mtshwayeli hunting camp was given to the local communities for free. Imvelo also provided lunch to all the school children (approximately 500) daily.

The village head representative said that currently the project is supporting the construction of the first clinic in Ngamo district. In the past years, the area was being serviced by Kapani clinic which is 15km from Ngamo. A community deep tank has been constructed for the locals as well. All these amount to the social infrastructure

for use by the local community.

Economic contribution

Any successful ecotourism project should benefit the community economically (TIES, 2004). The Ngamo CAMPFIRE project seemed to live according to the requirements of this principle. According to the Tsholotsho RDC representative, revenue from Imvelo, namely Mtshwayeli trophy hunting camp and from Camelthorn Lodge was distributed as follows; 60% to the local communities, 36% is retained by council for administrative purposes, whilst 4% of the revenue is remitted to the CAMPFIRE Association of Zimbabwe. This is per the requirements of the CAMPFIRE program countrywide. According to the environmental officer this 60% is used by the local community as agreed amongst themselves. This shows that the locals have a say, not only in the way they manage their wildlife, but also in how the returns are used.

Villagers who constituted the panel discussion agreed that village tours, and school visits by Imvelo's ecotourists did benefit the local community financially since the tourists pay certain fees for such tours. Ecotourists also visit the local craft market at Ngamo, where they purchase various crafts from the local people. Most of this craft is locally made by the local communities from natural or recycled materials and is a source of income for them. Other safari operators such as Wilderness Safaris who are based in Hwange National Park, also donate/assist the local communities and schools, as they also conduct school tours, and village visits within Tsholotsho communities. Game drives into Hwange National Park, and within the Imvelo Estate (communal land), including night driving in the communal land (for wildlife viewing particularly nocturnal animals) also generated revenue to the locals. Timber and thatching grass sales to Imvelo Safaris by the communities presents another source of revenue to the locals.

Imvelo Safaris employed almost 90% of its workers from within the local communities according to the local traditional leader (Headman). The same was echoed by the Rural District Council. Training of locals, and staff is also done by Imvelo for free. For example, some of the professional guides are from the local community, and were trained and employed by Imvelo Safaris. Labour to construct the lodge was mostly taken from the local communities, for example, the builders, thatchers, and general labour.

Future plans

Having appreciated the value of wildlife, and its associated benefits, the Ngamo community has approached its Rural District Council, through Imvelo Safaris, with the plan of setting up a wildlife conservancy in the Ngamo area. Seed animals will be sourced from neighbouring Hwange National Park.

The Environmental Office from Tsholotsho rural district council highlighted that in future they plan to reduce consumptive tourism, that is, hunting activities, and focus more on non-consumptive tourism in the form of photographic safaris. Furthermore, they plan to improve conservation of wildlife especially, through carrying out anti-poaching campaigns around Ngamo districts. They also plan to increase partnerships that support development of eco-tourism. The Environmental Officer expressed that it is strongly believed that these plans can only be a beginning of bigger things to follow in resources conservation and local community empowerment.

7. Conclusions and implications

Based on the study findings above, one can conclude that to date, of the CAMPFIRE projects still running in Zimbabwe, Tsholotsho is one of the least documented, yet one of the most successful. The program has managed to pass the triple-bottom line test of sustainability by its ability to positively impact the livelihoods of communities around it in a genuine way. There are tangible community facilities that can be directly attributed to the CAMPFIRE program. These include schools, roads,

boreholes, and a clinic (under construction at the time of reporting). Residents have also benefit by way of employment, craft sales, scholarships, and game meat, among other things. From an environmental perspective, the program has brought greater environmental consciousness among Ngamo communities, and poaching has gone down significantly. The communities now have a better sense the value of the value of sustainable use of the resources around them. While challenges are faced here and there, the Ngamo CAMPFIRE program has managed to stand the test of time, and remained viable, and relatively sustainable.

The other projects can take a leaf from the way the Ngamo project is organised and run, to remain sustainable. It can, therefore, be further concluded that the CAMPFIRE program remains one of the best models for community-based natural resource management if the locals are effectively empowered to make decisions pertaining to the wildlife resources in their vicinity. This includes giving them the necessary education, and tools to make informed decisions. The RDCs remain very pivotal in resource management by playing their advisory, and facilitation roles as well as helping in resolving any potential conflicts between the local communities and the safari/tour operators.

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