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# Universal Accessibility of National Parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe: Park Management Perceptions

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to establish the perceptions of the management of National Parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe with respect to making their parks universally accessible. This study was set against a background of many people with disabilities who are willing and financially able to patron national parks being denied the opportunity to do so due to various barriers. Using a qualitative approach, the researchers explored the views of the management of South African National Parks (SANPARKS) and Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) regarding the universal accessibility of National Parks. The study revealed that, generally, the management of the said parks appreciate the plight of people with disabilities who want to visit their parks and would have wanted the parks to be accessible to all people. However, the managers from SANPARKS seemed more willing and prepared to make their parks universally accessible compared to their counterparts from ZimParks.

## KEYWORDS

Park managers; universal accessibility; national parks; Zimbabwe; South Africa

## Introduction

People with disabilities (PwDs) have become a growing tourist market globally despite the fact that many tourist destinations have not capitalised on this market (Luiza, 2010). According to Rains (2009), American adults with disabilities spend an average of US\$13.6 billion on travel each year. Kotler (2009) estimated that the 54 million PwDs in the US represent approximately US\$1 billion in buying power; this is by no means a small figure in economic terms. A study conducted by Bowtell (2015) revealed that by 2025, the disability market in Europe will be worth around 88.6 billion Euro. These figures indicate the magnitude of the disability market. Among these and others globally, the love for nature, as encapsulated in national parks and other protected areas, is as much a motivation for travel as for people without disabilities (Chikuta et al., 2018). Ensuring access to National Parks by people with disabilities is however dependent on the availability of an enabling physical environment (Darcy, 2010), social acceptance of people with disability as well as a general shift in people's perceptions regarding the same. While studies have emphasised the need for an universal design of the physical and cyberspace while reducing the poverty amongst people with disability, little has been published (if any) on the perceptions of service providers on the issue of universal

accessibility (Chikuta, 2015a). Using a qualitative design, this paper interrogates the views held by managers of national parks on making their parks accessible. A brief review of literature on the subject is presented in this paper, followed by the methodology, the findings and the recommendations.

## Literature review

Universal accessibility is a concept derived from the principles of universal design as propounded by the Centre for Universal Design and expanded by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in February 2001 (Mace et al., 1991; Null, 2013). It involves making all products accessible to all regardless of their ability or lack thereof. The concepts of universal accessibility and universal design have suffered from implementation paralysis due to two major misconceptions: (a) the “no market” and the “it is expensive” syndrome (Dong et al., 2004; Fuglerud et al., 2015; Mace et al., 1991, p. 4). These syndromes have influenced current design approaches. The *no market* misconception assumes that there is no reason for making tourism facilities and environments universally accessible because people with disabilities do not go out much (Mace et al., 1991). It also assumes that PwDs are either not employed or do not need jobs, therefore they are poor and cannot afford to travel for leisure and hence do not constitute a viable consumer market. It further purports that PwDs do not have families, are not married and have no children; therefore, a single room is sufficient for them. According to the *no market* misconception, PwDs require access to medical facilities and disability institutions only. This misconception largely borrows from the medical and charity models of disability (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011; Harris & Enfield, 2003; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Oliver, 1996).

The *it is expensive* syndrome, unlike the *no market* philosophy, acknowledges that PwDs are an important market (Dong et al., 2004; Fuglerud et al., 2015; Mace et al., 1991). However, there is a general misconception among tourism and other operators that making products and facilities universally accessible is very expensive and not feasible in practice. Such thinking is based on the fact that the accessible facilities have to be added to the usual costs of construction, renovation and adjustment (Dong et al., 2004; Fuglerud et al., 2015; Mace et al., 1991). On the contrary, studies undertaken by the National League of Cities and the United States General Accounting Office (GAO, 1983) reveal that the cost of accessibility features is less than half of one per cent of the cost of new construction. Some experts argue that the costs of accessibility are often exaggerated and are normally traded off. For example, the cost of a wider doorway is usually less than the cost of the wall it replaces (Center for Universal Design, 2003).

Apart from construction costs, another common cost regarding accessibility is the cost of training staff to respond to the needs of PwDs (Chikuta et al., 2017; Mace et al., 1991). While it might be costly to train employees, litigation is more costly and unnecessary. Organisations that advocate for universal accessibility may sue for non-compliance. Furthermore, a universally accessible tourism facility saves staffing costs. The number of employees who spend time assisting PwDs may significantly be reduced since there will not be much need for assistance when people with different disabilities visit the destination or attraction.

Universal design needs to be embraced from the very beginning if it is to become cheaper and more effective. It should be incorporated into the business plan since

renovations to ensure accessibility may be unaffordable. At times, complete demolition may be necessary to make the facilities universally accessible. Therefore, organisations should not wait until national or international legislation catches up with them (Mace et al., 1991).

### ***Brief history of national parks***

According to Hall and Frost (2010), national parks developed in three phases. The first was at the end of the nineteenth century when the US and some English-speaking colonies adopted the concept. Secondly, in the first half of the twentieth-century Europe came on board with countries like Sweden, Italy, Romania, Greece, and Spain establishing national parks. Interestingly, the European power houses, i.e. Britain and France did not embrace the concept at this point. Instead, they introduced it to their African and Asian colonies. The third phase is represented by the period after the Second World War (1939-1945) when the idea of national parks spread globally like wild fire. Almost all countries had at least one national park and it was at this stage that these parks became recognised for conservation and their ecological benefits, in addition to the aesthetic and recreational perspective (Hall & Frost, 2010). It should be noted that, while the idea of national parks was mooted by the USA, there was no prescription in terms of how individual countries implemented it (Hall, 1988b).

### ***National parks in developing countries***

National parks began to develop in Africa and Asia after the Second World War (1939-1945); the primary reason was wildlife protection (Hall & Frost, 2010). The pace of national park development was determined by the colonial masters, especially Britain. For example, the British Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire (later renamed the Fauna Preservation Society) had elite members who included the Secretary of State for the Colonies. These powerful organisations heavily influenced the direction of park development in British colonies. They worked with influential Americans like the Crockett and Boone Club to champion the establishment of national parks in Africa and Asia. In 1933, the London Conference on African Wildlife resolved that national parks and sanctuaries were the best way to preserve wildlife. After the Second World War, most African and Asian countries gained independence and the newly independent nations readily embraced the idea of national parks (Hall & Frost, 2010).

For decades, overhunting and poaching by local people and some foreigners have been a major threat to wildlife conservation in Africa. The first body responsible for wildlife protection in Africa was the Natal Game Protection Association of 1883 in South Africa. In 1894, President Paul Kruger supported the establishment of the Pongola game reserve. These two initiatives laid the foundation for a wildlife protection system in Africa (Hall & Frost, 2010). Thus South Africa set the tone for wildlife protection in the continent.

After the First World War, Belgium was the first country to establish a national park in Africa when it established the Albert National Park in its colony, the Congo, in 1925. The major thrust of this initiative was to protect the Silverback gorilla (Jepson & Whittaker, 2002). In 1926, Kruger National Park was established in South Africa. The conceptualisation of these parks was completely different from that of the Yellowstone National

Park (the first national park) in that the main thrust was the preservation of African flora and fauna (Hall & Frost, 2010). At one point, some thought of getting rid of the ferocious predators such as lions and leopards but it was realised that visitors actually came to see them (Carruthers, 1995; MacKenzie, 1988). After the Second World War, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda established national parks. In 1939, the British government, which at that time still controlled many African colonies, appointed a Game Committee to study and make recommendations on the establishment of game parks in other African countries; this resulted in the establishment of many more parks in Africa.

### ***National parks and tourism in Southern Africa***

According to Zaradic and Pergams (2007), nature-based tourism is estimated to generate more revenue than farming, forestry and fisheries combined in southern Africa. Of all the nature-based tourism products, national parks are southern Africa's most common product. According to Eagles (2010), the term national parks, is closely linked to nature-based tourism to the extent that some use it as a synonym for ecotourism. Some tourism operators use the term to promote their offering to eco-tourists (Eagles & Wind, 1994). An important element of nature-based tourism, the absence of which makes the term nature incomplete, is fauna or wildlife (Darcy, 1998). Wildlife tourism is an important subset of nature-based tourism in which there are high levels of domestic and international interest (Darcy, 1998). It involves travelling to observe wildlife in natural environments, preferably in their native habitat as well as understanding different animal and bird species. This critical element is housed in the national parks, making them an indispensable part of the nature tourism industry. National parks are however not restricted to wildlife (fauna); they are also home to different plant species such as the flame-lily, protea, baobab and welwitchia which are also a great attraction to many domestic and international nature-lovers (Hall & Frost, 2010).

### ***An overview of tourism in South Africa***

Tourism in South Africa has been a positive growth trajectory for the past two and half decades. It is a significant sector to the South African economy, especially in the generation of foreign currency (South African Tourism, 2019). In the 2018–2019 financial year, South Africa received 10.4 million international tourists, a slight decline from 10.5million in the previous year. If domestic and regional tourists are added, the total number of tourists for the 2018/2019 period was 29million. The sector directly injected R116.9 billion into the economy through direct spending. Overall, the tourism sector contributed 425 billion to the country's economy, which is 8.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (South African Tourism, 2019). The sector also contributed 1.5million jobs to the South African economy, which is approximately 9.2% of the total employment. Among the many tourists who visit South Africa are people with disabilities (Patton, 2013) and the question is, are they catered for? Are the tourism facilities in South Africa prepared to accommodate people with disabilities?

Unlike other countries in the region, South Africa seems to have made notable strides in terms of making tourism accessible to people with disabilities over the years. Apart from the Disability Rights Charter, South Africa has a tourism-specific piece of legislation

which promotes accessible tourism, the Universal Accessibility in Tourism Declaration (Department of Tourism, 2012). This declaration was part of the government's efforts in implementing the provisions of the UNCRPD. The document was guided by the provisions of the Promotion of Equity and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, Act 4 of 2000, which prohibits unfair discrimination on the grounds of disability (Department of Tourism, 2012). Among other provisions, the Declaration on Universal Accessibility in Tourism (Department of Tourism, 2012) mandates tourism service providers to: (i) Provide the same choices for all consumers to ensure the full participation of PwDs, the elderly and parents with young children and ensure the protection of individual rights, (ii) Ensure that PwDs have equal rights of access to all tourism infrastructure (including national parks), products and services, including employment opportunities and benefits offered by the tourism industry; (iii) Introduce universal accessibility as a criterion in the grading of hotels and restaurants.

### ***Tourism and national parks in South Africa***

South Africa is a haven for nature tourists due to its vast natural endowments. The country's protected areas attract those who love the Big Five, birdwatchers and nature lovers in general (Hall & Frost, 2010). The national authority responsible for wildlife management in South Africa is South African National Parks (SANParks). SANParks owns slightly more than half of South Africa's protected areas, including the two giant national parks, Kruger and Kgalagadi. The first national park in South Africa was located in the Drakensberg area of KwaZulu-Natal. In 1903, 8,000 hectares of land near Giant's Castle was earmarked for tourism as a game reserve. This was later named the Natal National Park (Carruthers, 1995, p. 53; Perry, 1929, pp. 9–10). Surprisingly, today KwaZulu-Natal does not have a protected area managed by SANParks beside the pace-setting role it played.

Kruger National Park was established in 1926 and combined two game reserves in the then Transvaal Colony. This was the same time that the National Parks Board of trustees (now SANParks) was established. At this time, the term park was not very palatable to most conservationists since it had connotations of leisure and recreation as opposed to conservation (Hall & Frost, 2010). The word "national" was however more acceptable especially after the Second World War because it was closely related to democracy. The term "national park" therefore became closely related to sovereignty and was a selling point. Today, South Africa has 20 national parks (South African National Parks, 2014) and the question is: are these national parks universally accessible? If not, what are the reasons? This study sought to answer these questions by getting the views of park management.

### ***Tourism in Zimbabwe***

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in southern Africa bordered by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Mozambique. These are also the countries that contribute much to regional tourist arrivals into Zimbabwe (ZTA, 2019). Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe's tourism industry has experienced a gradual growth, with the peak being in 2007 when 2.5million tourists visited the country. In 2019 the country received approximately 2.3

million tourists with the bulk being from the region followed by Europe and the Americas (ZTA, 2019). During the same year, an estimated 1.2 billion dollars were received from tourism and the sector contributed 6.3% to the country's Gross Domestic Product (lower than 7.2% in 2018). In terms of contribution to employment, tourism in Zimbabwe contributes 3.7% to employment in 2019, 1.5% lower than the 2018 contribution. Contribution to exports remained the same at 4.7% compared to 2018. While in general, there is a growth trajectory, the year-on-year figures show fluctuations in tourism as the key performance indicators. Figure 1 below shows the trends in international tourist arrivals and depicts the fluctuation in year-by-year arrivals.

While there has been a general growth in tourist arrivals to Zimbabwe since 1980, the issue of universal accessibility has not been on the tourism sector's agenda (Chikuta, 2015a; Chikuta, 2015b; Chikuta & Kabote, 2018). This is exhibited by very little or no mention of universal accessibility or related issues in the country's National Tourism Strategy, Tourism Policy and other important national documents (Chikuta & Kabote, 2018). This means people with disabilities remain excluded from tourism participation in Zimbabwe. This is even worsened by the fact that tourism in Zimbabwe is primarily nature-based, which makes physical accessibility a big issue, even for the so-called able-bodied.

### ***National parks and tourism in Zimbabwe***

Like South Africa, Zimbabwe is endowed with a diversity of natural attractions which range from the Victoria Falls to the Big Five (Elephant, Lion, Leopard, Buffalo and the Rhino) (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2012). The Big Five are housed in the many national parks, sanctuaries, and game reserves around the country. Hwange National Park was the first to be established in 1928, as a game reserve. In 1949, after the passing of the National Parks Act, Hwange was upgraded to become the first national park in the country (Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, ZimParks, 2014). The then Rhodesia Game Section was formed in 1952 and later became the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management in 1964. Today, it is called the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA), commonly known as ZimParks.



**Figure 1.** International tourist arrivals since 1980.

In 1975, the Parks and Wildlife Act was enacted. This marked a change of philosophy in as far as wildlife management is concerned because the Act shifted ownership of wildlife from the state to the owners of the land upon which the wildlife lives. In other words, if one has a piece of land and that land has wild animals, the animals on that piece of land become his/hers. This changed perceptions of conservation. The fact that the animals are now theirs made people view them as an asset rather than a nuisance or a quick meal (ZimParks, 2014).

Under the 1975 Act, state-owned land was to be protected and utilised at various levels. A system of Recreational Parks, National Parks, Sanctuaries and Botanical Gardens was put in place in order to avoid haphazard and irresponsible hunting of animals. Each has its own target market of tourists, both locally and internationally. From time to time this Act has been amended to allow for new developments in wildlife protection systems. It is very important to note that the Parks and Wildlife Act of 1975 impacted not only Zimbabwe; it also had a serious impact on the rest of Africa in the sense that it was also adopted by other countries as they came up with their own acts (ZimParks, 2014).

Zimbabwe's most renowned national parks are Hwange, Mana Pools, Victoria Falls and Gonarezhou National Parks. Apart from the Victoria Falls, statistics show that national parks are the second best tourist draw card to Zimbabwe (ZTA, 2012). Today Zimbabwe has 11 National parks (ZimParks, 2014). Again questions remain; are these national parks accessible to all, regardless of ability or lack thereof? Are park authorities willing and prepared to make the parks universally accessible? It is the object of this study to investigate and answer these questions, among others. However, is there a need to make these national parks universally accessible in the first place? The following section addresses this issue.

### ***Is universal accessibility of national parks economically worthwhile?***

Studies have shown that the call for universal accessibility in tourism and related sectors is not only based on humanitarian grounds, but it is also economically sound (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011; Chikuta et al., 2017; Chikuta et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2013). The aforesaid invalidates the *no market* mentality (Mace et al., 1991). There has been a marked increase in the number of people with disabilities in the past few decades, largely a result of ageing which normally results in some form of disability (Darcy, 2002a; Turco et al., 1998; Yau et al., 2004). This number is expected to increase exponentially by 2050 (Dobriansky et al., 2007; Dwyer, 2005).

While in the least developed countries, PwDs are generally poor and neglected (Chikuta, 2015a; Choruma, 2007), the case is different in the more developed world. For instance, in Europe, by around 2004, tourists with disabilities in Germany alone spent about 2.5 billion Euro per year and by 2025, according to Bowtel, the disability market in Europe would be generating around 88.6 billion Euro per year (Bowtell, 2015; Buhalis et al., 2005). Bill Forester, in his *Travel Ability* blog argues that

Accessible tourism is no longer about building ramps and accessible bathrooms. It's about building products and services for a larger and rapidly growing market. This is no longer a niche, but rather, a segment that is approaching 25% of total tourism spend. (Forester, 2015 in White & Childs, 2016)

These figures indicate the nature and extent of the disability market globally.

## ***Nature-based tourism and PwDs***

According to Chikuta et al. (2017; 2018) and Lais et al. (1992), people with disabilities have very similar travel motivations to their non-disabled counterparts. They equally want adventure, nature and scenic beauty among other pull factors. Symonds (1998) revealed an emergence of a new crop of retirees who are keen to travel off-the-beaten-track; this has contributed to the growth of adventure tourism. Gretzel et al. (2006) add that this new generation of the aged is looking for more meaningful, challenging and authentic experiences than before. National parks, among other natural settings, provide the kind of experience that these elderly people are looking for; hence the need for making the parks accessible to all (Chikuta, 2015).

A report by the United Nations in 2006 lamented the very low number of visits to national parks by persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). This is so even though PwDs are interested in nature-based tourism. This could be a serious indication of the extent to which national parks are inaccessible to people with disabilities. Debates have been raging between universal accessibility advocates and environmentalists on the question of whether or not to make national parks accessible to people with disabilities. While the former group argued that it is the right of every individual regardless of their abilities or lack thereof to access all tourism and recreational facilities as espoused in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of People With Disabilities (UNCRPD), the latter believes that making national parks universally accessible will make the parks less attractive since this would disturb the very ecosystem upon which nature-based tourism depends (Bricker, 1995; Jaquette, 2005; Lais et al., 1992; Lovelock, 2010; McAvoy et al., 1989; Noss, 1991; Ray & Ryder, 2003; Zeller, 2008).

While the views of environmentalists, accessibility advocates and tourists (Chikuta et al., 2018) have been heard, as indicated in the literature above, several questions arise. What are the perceptions and opinions of the national parks authorities regarding this issue? Do they want the national parks to be universally accessible? What challenges are they facing when it comes to making their parks universally accessible? This paper attempts to address these issues by engaging the supply side.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study took a descriptive approach. This was necessitated by the quest to understand the state of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2009), that is, universal accessibility in the national parks and the perceptions of park managers. In order to get detailed insights, the study made use of interviews to enquire about the perceptions of the management of national parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe regarding universal accessibility of national parks. The study adopted a qualitative approach since it was looking for views and opinions, which cannot be quantified. The sample for the study was made up of ten purposively selected respondents, five from each country under study. According to Baker and Edwards (2012), there is no fixed sample size for qualitative research. The sample size depends on many factors which include the quality of the respondents, i.e. their appropriateness for the interviews, given their knowledge and relevance to the study (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Other factors include the homogeneity of the respondents which

usually results in data saturation (Konstantina et al, 2018; Creswell, 2009). In this study, the key informant technique was used to select respondents. In order to ensure that findings and conclusions are representative, the respondents were also selected from national parks which are in different regions/provinces.

The interviews focused on two levels of park management. The first set of interviews were meant to establish the perceptions of the top management at the respective national parks headquarters of each of the two countries. Through this set of interviews, the researchers wanted to establish the corporate position on the subject of universal accessibility. At the headquarters, the park authorities in Zimbabwe referred the matter to the Business Development Office (Non-consumptive tourism) while SANParks referred it to the Projects Office (Tourism). The Business Development office at ZimParks was responsible for the non-consumptive side of activities in national parks which mainly deal with tourism marketing while at SANParks, the Project Office is responsible for issues of universal accessibility, among others. The respective offices of the respondents made them key informants in this study.

The second set of interviews involved regional park managers (or their representatives) at the selected national parks in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. These managers oversee affairs at the different national parks in the two countries. These interviews sought to establish the opinions of regional park managers with respect to making national parks universally accessible. The main purposes were triangulation and to establish if the policies are implemented on the ground. Consistencies or inconsistencies between strategic management decisions and tactical and operational management decisions were identified. In other words, the major question was: Would the park managers echo the sentiments of the park's headquarters? Eight national park managers were selected for the study: four in South Africa, and four in Zimbabwe. In South Africa, managers from the Marakele, Mountain Zebra, Addo Elephant, and Kgalagadi parks were chosen. On the Zimbabwean side, Hwange, Gonarezhou, Victoria Falls and Mana Pools national parks were chosen based on their geographic locations so as to cover the entire country.

### ***Data collection and interview schedule***

For SANParks, the interview with the Projects Manager (Tourism) was held on 25th February 2014, while for ZimParks, the interview with the Business Development Manager (Non-consumptive) was conducted only on 26th May 2014. Appointments were made with the respective regional park managers or their representatives and telephonic interviews were conducted. On average, each interview took about 15 to 20 minutes and all the details were recorded in an interview questionnaire. While it was relatively easy to phone managers in South Africa, this was more difficult in Zimbabwe since most of the national parks in Zimbabwe are located in very remote areas where there are no landlines available for the park manager. If there is one, the network is so poor that making a phone call is a waste of time. The researcher had to drive around the country and conduct face-to-face interviews with the park managers. The researcher also took advantage of the trips to make personal observations of what was really on the ground.

To establish the perceptions of park management, open-ended questions were asked. The questions sought to establish what the managers think about the current accessibility

of the park, whether they think it is essential to make the parks universally accessible, what type of disabilities they usually witness among tourists who visit the parks, and to identify the challenges they face in trying to make the parks accessible. Lastly, the managers were asked what they think could be done to make the national parks universally accessible.

## **Data analysis**

The data were analysed using Creswell's six steps of thematic content analysis (Creswell, 2013; 2009). Step 1 involved organising and preparing the data, including transcribing the interviews as well as cataloguing visual materials. In Step 2 the researchers had to read through all the data. This was done to get the overall meaning of the data before analysing it (Creswell, 2013). The third step involved the coding of the data. In this case, researchers organised the collected data by categorising the images and text and then labelling the categories with an appropriate term. In the 4th step the researchers then used the coding process to generate a description of the setting or the people as well as the categories or themes for analysis. In Step 5, the researchers outlined how descriptions and themes were to be presented in the qualitative narrative and Step 6 involved making meaning out of the data, that is, data interpretation.

## **Results and discussion**

The following were findings drawn from the two sets of interviews conducted with the management of national parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The first part covers the responses by managers at the headquarters of each country's national parks.

### ***Headquarters of national parks***

These interviews took place with the project Manager of SANParks and the Business Development Manager of ZimParks. The six questions presented to these managers revealed the following responses.

#### ***Universal accessibility policy***

Asked whether the corporation has a plan or strategy to make the parks accessible, SANParks, through its Project Manager highlighted that it has a universal accessibility strategy/policy and a universal accessibility protocol. The policy is however still in draft form and has not yet been passed by the SANParks board. Nonetheless, both the strategy and the protocol are active on the SANParks portal and are used and reviewed by the organisation's parks and employees in conjunction with the many support appendices pertaining to the required universal accessibility standards and industry doctrine. However, the organisation conceded that the policy has not been fully implemented throughout the country.

The Business Development Manager (Non-consumptive tourism) (BDM) revealed that it had neither a universal accessibility policy nor strategy. Asked why there is no universal accessibility policy, the BDM argued that policies are normally a response to

situations, risks, threats, and opportunities and the organisation had not perceived any problem or opportunity in the area of accessibility. Since others are seeing an opportunity for serious tourism business in PwDs (APEC, 2013; Jaquette, 2005; United Nations, 2009), it is surprising that ZimParks has not yet realised that this opportunity exists. One could, however, attribute the response of ZimParks to a lack of an international approach to tourism marketing. Perhaps the organisation views disability from a local perspective where the majority of PwDs are poor and marginalised (Chikuta, 2015; Choruma, 2007; Khupe, 2012).

### ***Accessibility of South African and Zimbabwean national parks***

The Projects Manager at SANParks highlighted that South African national parks are accessible both to a moderate and greater extent. He explained that some disabilities are adequately catered for while others need greater attention. Tourists with mobility impairments are better catered for than any other disability. The findings concur with the SANParks 2013 Status Report on universal accessibility (Patton, 2013) and the website information which shows that most of the national parks in South Africa are more accessible to people with mobility impairments than other impairments. This confirms the thinking that people with mobility challenges have been used as the standard to measure disability in many spheres; no wonder most disability symbols have pictures of people in wheelchairs (Chikuta et al., 2018; Mace et al., 1991; Null, 2013). However, the statement that some disabilities are adequately catered for might be an overstatement given that even the mobility impaired still complain that there are too few accessible units, especially if groups of people using wheelchairs are involved (Patton, 2013).

Like SANParks, ZimParks said that their national parks are accessible to a moderate extent. However, according to the researchers' observations in the national parks, the parks are either not accessible at all or accessible to a very limited degree. This is due to the following observations: (i) there are no designated parking areas for people with disabilities in most of the national parks. Where parking is available, it does not meet the universal accessibility requirements in terms of width; (ii) while some of the national parks (e.g. Gonarezhou, Hwange) have pavements at the reception or office area, there are no ramps into the offices which makes them inaccessible to people with mobility challenges and the blind; (iii) game viewing platforms and bird watching hides are inaccessible to people with disabilities, especially at Hwange National Park where the platforms are very high and only accessible via steps; (iv) no bedrooms or lodges are designed to cater for PwDs. In other words, when these accommodation facilities were built, PwDs were not borne in mind. The same applies to public toilets.

### ***The need to make national parks universally accessible***

The managers of both SANParks and ZimParks believe that universal accessibility is a worthwhile cause for national parks. In the words of the SANParks Projects Manager:

Worthwhile is not strong enough a word - it is imperative. Universal accessibility means accessibility to everyone, regardless of one's physical, sensory, and cognitive ability and thus achieving it means you are providing a destination accessible to everyone.

His ZimParks counterpart had this to say:

Yes. Because the nature of the Authority's operations is that it offers a service to the public. This, therefore, means that the public may not be discriminated against in any way. Universal accessibility caters for all people (especially citizens) and enables the public to have meaningful interaction with the Authority and the resources therein. Tourism, being one of the pillars of the economy requires a certain level of access by the public at any time.

These responses clearly show that it is not debatable whether or not national parks should be universally accessible. The major question may be the motivation for making national parks accessible to all. According to SANParks, there is a sustainable demand for universally accessible national parks. This is confirmed by previous studies that show that PwDs are indeed a viable market and a niche worth pursuing (APEC, 2013; Bowtell, 2015; Buhalis et al., 2005; Darcy, 2002a; Darcy et al., 2010; United Nations, 2009). The issue was whether it is worthwhile or not to make parks accessible, in other words, besides the issue of disability rights, it makes economic sense to make national parks universally accessible. However, the ZimParks interviewee held the opinion that the disability market is not a viable one and that universal accessibility should be based on legislative obligations rather than a business perspective. As alluded to before, the perspective of the ZimParks interviewees seemed to be mainly based on the nature and status of PwDs in Zimbabwe, who are mainly poor and relegated to the margins of society (Choruma, 2007; Khupe, 2012; Mandipa, 2013).

### *Type of disability to be prioritised*

According to the ZimParks management, access priority should be given to people with mobility impairments since they are most affected by the terrain and landscape of national parks. SANParks management felt that, while all disabilities should be prioritised because access for mobility-impaired visitors requires the greatest modification to physical facilities, it has received the most attention in the form of ramps, adapted accommodation, and public ablution facilities, nature trails, hides and picnic sites. Ensuring that all people, regardless of their disabilities, have access to national parks falls in line with the principles of universal design and universal accessibility (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011; Dong et al., 2004; Fuglerud et al., 2015; Mace et al., 1991; Rains, 2004).

### *Challenges faced in making national parks universally accessible*

According to the ZimParks BDM, the major challenge is the absence of specialised skills and equipment to cater for the visually and hearing impaired. He further argued that universal accessibility requires substantial financial resources for procurement and training, which are not easy to mobilise at the moment. The Projects Manager at SANParks said that knowledge and understanding are the most serious challenges. However, he believes that this awareness is gradually gaining momentum as universal accessibility is recognised as the right and sensible thing to do from both an equity and economic point of view. One can perhaps conclude that on the Zimbabwean side, the challenge has more to do with human and financial resources while in South Africa, it is the lack of awareness among stakeholders.

### ***How to make national parks more universally accessible***

Asked what could be done to make national parks more universally accessible, the SANParks respondent had this to say:

It is a process that SANParks has paid a lot of attention to over the last decade and more, but there is always more that can be done as society's understanding of how to provide universally accessible facilities expands and improves. In some cases more money and effort invested in the process is required, but in others it just requires a little bit of attention and knowledge passed on by those familiar with the requirements.

The respondent from ZimParks said:

First a policy to make them more accessible would need to be developed, and then resources be mobilised to ensure that all the areas that are targeted and the key to universal accessibility are prioritised for development.

Neither of the authorities of the two national parks disputes the need for universally accessible national parks. SANParks has already made strides in this respect as reported in the SANParks status report for 2013 (Patton, 2013).

### ***Interviews with park managers/hospitality managers***

This section reports on the results of the interviews with regional park managers in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. The main reason for interviewing regional park managers was to obtain the perceptions of the people on the ground as well as to verify some of the responses from the park headquarters. Seven questions were posed to the park managers relating to universal accessibility of the national parks they manage.

#### ***Availability of a universal accessibility policy***

It was surprising to find that park managers in South Africa had different responses to the question of whether or not they had universal accessibility policies. One of the four park managers who were interviewed said they had a universal accessibility framework while two said they did not and the last said that, while their national park did not have its own universal accessibility policy, it was covered by the SANParks policy. This confusion supports the Projects Manager's statement that the draft universal accessibility strategy has not been fully implemented in all the SANParks national parks. When asked who is responsible for the implementation of the universal accessibility policy, one manager said that the Hospitality Services Manager was responsible. Another said that SANParks headquarters is responsible for the implementation of the policy. However, the national park that did have a universal accessibility policy lamented that the policy has been only partly implemented; for example, a few rooms (two in every 20) are adapted to meet disability needs. This echoes the sentiments of previous studies that argue that the implementation of disability policies has always been a problem (Chikuta, 2015; Chikuta et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2005).

In Zimbabwe, all four managers admitted that their parks did not have any policy on universal accessibility, echoing the Business Development Manager's position. This implies that, in Zimbabwe, there is a need for both the development of universal accessibility policy and its implementation. This could be attributed to the fact that the accessibility discourse is not very prominent on the national agenda (Chikuta, 2015; Chikuta &

Kabote, 2018). If the situation continues like this, universal accessibility will remain a pipe dream (Choruma, 2007).

When asked about the laws that govern universal accessibility in their national parks, two SANParks park managers said that universal accessibility is governed by the SANParks guidelines on universal accessibility. The other two were not sure which legislation governs universal accessibility. Their Zimbabwean counterparts were quick to say that the Constitution of Zimbabwe is the supreme law of the land and it governs universal accessibility in national parks. However, two managers said that no law governed universal accessibility in Zimbabwe. It is surprising to note that despite the fact that the two countries ratified the UNCRPD and its protocols, they have not yet implemented its provisions. According to the UNCRPD, everyone has the right to access all public facilities regardless of their ability or lack thereof (United Nations, 2006). It is however important to note that while the two countries have not fully implemented the provisions of the convention, South Africa is making notable steps in achieving universal accessibility.

### *Visitor patterns of tourists with disabilities*

Apart from one South African national park (Marakele) which recorded between 201 and 400 visitors with disabilities per year, the remaining national parks (among the selected in both Zimbabwe and South Africa) had less than 100 tourists with disabilities. One South African and all the Zimbabwean national parks did not keep statistics of visitors with disabilities. However, all the national park managers agreed that the number of tourists with disabilities in their parks was still very low. Surprisingly, the respondent at the national park that received more than 200 tourists with disabilities indicated that the number was increasing each year.

Asked whether they attributed the number of visitors with disabilities to the level of accessibility of the national parks, one respondent agreed and argued that the number of day-visitors to his national park was decreasing due to physical inaccessibility. The other park managers believed that more than one factor accounts for the visitor numbers. This echoes the findings of other researchers (Bi et al., 2007; Chikuta et al., 2017) who concluded that there are many factors that affect accessibility. These include lack of financial resources (especially in the African context), attitudinal barriers, poor access to relevant information, among others (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011; Chitima, 2013; Ross, 2004).

### *Dominant type of disability among visitors*

Regarding the type of disability that is dominant among persons who visit national parks. Mobility impairments were reported by all park managers as the most common type of disability in both South African and Zimbabwean national parks. This perhaps explains the frequency of respondents with disabilities in this study where 121 or 65% of all respondents had mobility impairments.

### *Perceptions on the viability of the disability market*

Asked what they think about the viability of the disability market, two SANParks park managers regarded the accessible tourism market as economically viable while one believed that the market is viable at national rather than individual park level, especially at parks in very remote areas. One manager bluntly stated that the disability market is not

viable at all. A park manager in Zimbabwe believed that the accessible tourism market could be viable if promoted while the others said that there is no market since most people with disabilities are poor. This finding concurs with the “no market” misconception outlined by Mace et al. (1991), Dong et al. (2004) and Fuglerud et al. (2015). Again, this shows that most of the park managers do not have a global perspective of the disability market.

### ***The extent to which national parks are universally accessible in South Africa and Zimbabwe***

Only one of the eight park managers admitted that their national park is not accessible at all. This national park is in Zimbabwe. The remainder believes that their national parks are fairly accessible. It is noteworthy that no-one said that their national park was universally accessible. The observations of the researchers indicate that the definition of universal accessibility varies from one park manager to another. Some of the managers hold the view that a ramp on the pavement despite steps to the bedroom is universally accessible. The term “fairly accessible”, as used by most park managers, is far from being applied properly and the researcher believes that the national parks are not accessible.

Of the eight national parks selected, only one (South African) had over 50% of the listed areas marked as accessible. The other South African parks had accessibility to only 31% ( $n = 1$ ) and 38% ( $n = 2$ ) of the listed areas. One Zimbabwean national park scored 37%, followed by 25% and the other two, 13% each. The listed areas included all areas of the park from transport to restaurants and public areas. These figures indicate that South African National Parks are more accessible than those in Zimbabwe.

Asked what they have done to enhance universal accessibility in their national parks, all park managers in Zimbabwe said that they have not done anything in this regard. They were concentrating more on wildlife conservation than anything else. However, in South Africa, a number of projects had been initiated. One national park (Addo Elephant) manager said they had made great strides in this regard, including the building an interpretation centre, audio descriptive facilities (still on trial), and sound booths, among other things. The management of Mountain Zebra National Park has been working on making roads, paths and viewing points more accessible. There are also plans to build more accessible accommodation units. The same is true for Kgalagadi National Park where a maintenance plan was already in place.

### ***Opinions of park managers on making parks universally accessible***

The researcher wanted to obtain the views of park managers on making their parks universally accessible. All the park managers in South Africa viewed universal accessibility as worthwhile. One said that there is no option but to make national parks universally accessible. This is both a humanitarian obligation and a constitutional right. Another respondent believed that the whole idea of making parks national is to make them accessible to all people without discrimination. The last respondent argued from a business point of view and said that the more national parks are made accessible, the more they will attract visitors with disabilities.

Park managers in Zimbabwe had mixed feelings about the issue of universal accessibility. Of the three who think that it is a good idea to make national parks universally accessible, one argued that there is no demand for the accessible product. Another

manager said it is not worth the investment. He argued that it is very expensive to adopt the principles of universal design, yet there is no guarantee of business. These views are also raised by Mace et al. (1991) who refers to them as “no market” and “it’s expensive” misconceptions. To determine whether these are misconceptions or realities, one needs to study the economic arguments for accessible tourism. One park manager in Zimbabwe hailed the idea of universal accessibility as an answer to accessibility problems that have been bedevilling PwDs but the fourth manager thought that the whole idea is a waste of resources and time.

Six of the eight park managers said that, given sufficient funds, they would make their national parks universally accessible. The remaining two said that they would work on accessibility issues only after addressing “more pressing and core issues”. The majority of the park managers ( $n = 7$ ) are of the view that they would prioritise people with mobility challenges if they were given sufficient funds, while one said that he would prioritise the hearing and visually impaired. While the seven argue that people with mobility disabilities should be prioritised because they constitute the majority of people with disabilities, the other manager felt that much attention has already been paid to the mobility impaired at the expense of those with other impairments.

In order to successfully achieve universal accessibility, certain challenges need to be identified and resolved. All the park managers in Zimbabwe and South Africa lamented the lack of funds. While many would want to see their national parks become more accessible, funding remains a serious challenge. However, two park managers in Zimbabwe also argued that there is limited or no expertise in the discipline of universal accessibility; hence, there is a need for training. One respondent said that it is feared that there will not be sufficient demand for the accessible product; hence, there is a need for marketing support from stakeholders.

### ***The future of national parks in terms of universal accessibility***

The researchers asked the park managers where they think their parks would be in the next ten years in terms of universal accessibility. All the park managers in Zimbabwe were of the view that their future is dependent on the stance adopted by headquarters on the issue. As parks, they have no plans relating to universal accessibility. In contrast, the park managers in South Africa referred to their Park Management Plans, where universal accessibility is one of the key result areas. Accordingly, they all sounded positive and are likely to make significant strides in terms of enhancing access. According to one park manager, the park should have at least complied with the minimum accessibility standards. Another manager said: “we will be up there, and have it all”.

## **Findings and implications**

Considering the results, the following conclusions and recommendations of the study can be made. One can conclude that, in general, the management of the national in South Africa and Zimbabwe agree that it is essential for their national parks to be accessible to all, regardless of their ability or lack thereof. While national parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe are not very accessible, the South African authorities are making deliberate efforts to make their parks accessible to all. More awareness is required to make national

parks in South Africa, and especially in Zimbabwe, universally accessible as the absence of policies, strategic plans and, very importantly, implementation plans are evident.

The second finding highlights the financial challenges faced by the management of national parks to develop universally accessible parks and tourism products. To overcome these major hindrances, the skills and expertise in the area of universal accessibility and universal design are required in the formulation of policies and product development campaigns.

It is clear that both countries are not enjoying their full potential in as far as harnessing the market presented by tourists with disabilities. To fully capitalise on this market, it is of utmost importance to: (i) understand this market; (ii) provide suitable products; (iii) have skilled and trained employees understanding the needs of this market; (iv) and have an informative policy to guide the development, marketing and management campaigns of the parks.

As signatories of the UNCPRD and its optional protocols, the governments of South Africa and Zimbabwe should therefore make deliberate efforts to ensure that the national parks, like any other public good, are made accessible to all. The authorities of the national parks, at the corporate level, must come up with staged plans to make their parks universally accessible, beginning with those elements that do not require much capital expenditure.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that national parks in South Africa and Zimbabwe are yet to be universally accessible. While some parks (especially in South Africa) have made strides towards ensuring accessibility, there is still a lot to be done to make the parks universally accessible. The study further concludes that the national parks authorities, both at the corporate and park level, acknowledge the importance of ensuring access to all people regardless of their embodiments, however, lack of enforceable policy frameworks, funding, knowledge and expertise are major hindrances to the universal accessibility of national parks.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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