

# Role of Public-Private Partnerships in Enhancing Tourism Development and Conservation Efforts in National Parks in Zimbabwe: Insights from Gonarezhou National Park

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## Abstract

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have gained traction as innovative management strategies for national parks globally, yet their role in Africa, particularly within Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou National Park, remains underexplored. This study investigates the impact of PPPs on tourism development and conservation efforts in Gonarezhou National Park. The study used a qualitative methodology. The study conducted 20 in-depth interviews. The participants were purposively selected. Thematic analysis was employed to evaluate generated data, revealing significant findings. Results indicated that PPPs have substantially improved infrastructure, financial support, and specialized skills within the park, leading to enhanced visitor experiences and increased wildlife conservation effectiveness. Despite these advancements, challenges that continue to exist hinder the full realization of PPP benefits including economic instability, insufficient stakeholder consultation, and conflicting management objectives. Recommendations included fostering inclusive stakeholder engagement, addressing economic barriers, and developing adaptive management frameworks that align diverse conservation goals.

**Key words:** Public Private Partnerships, Tourism Development, National Parks

## Introduction

The concept of Public Private Partnership (PPP) has become a worldwide phenomenon in managing national parks (Boniotti, 2023; Litheko, 2022). According to Izaguirre (2011), cited in Sai, Muzondo and Marunda (2015), the World Bank Group's Private Participation in Infrastructure (PPI) database documented 231 infrastructure projects involving private investment totalling US\$170 billion across 41 countries. This significant growth underscores the growing significance of PPPs. In terms of total investment, Sub-Saharan Africa contributed only US\$12.6 billion, which remained consistent with the figures from 2009 but represented a decrease from US\$13.5 billion in 2008 (Izaguirre, 2011). Studies conducted in other environments indicate that PPPs are beneficial. Litheko (2022) states that the use of a partnership between the public and private sectors is a beneficial strategy for enabling the public sector to fulfil its obligations within budget constraints. Collaboration allows the private

sector to provide resources, expertise in management, and technological advancements, while the public sector enforces regulations and safeguards public interests (Cheng et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2021; Lindsey et al., 2021).

In their examination of partnerships, including those related to protected area tourism in Europe, Moore and Weiler (2019) observed that this subject has been under intense scrutiny by both researchers and practitioners over the past decade. The "corporatist model," which prioritizes perceived efficiency gains and reduced dependence on public funding, has led to an increased interest in partnering with the private sector (Pauly, Verschuere, De Rynck & Voets, 2021). This trend is particularly evident in collaborations between governments of countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. Additionally, partnerships with various stakeholders, including community members, conservation non-governmental organizations, and groups representing indigenous and environmental interests, have become essential components of contemporary strategic planning approaches in national parks management (Khan, et al., 2022). This indicates that Public-Private Partnerships are increasingly becoming popular as management models to ensure wildlife conservation and tourism growth in national parks.

Historically, African national parks were traditionally managed by government-run parastatals entrusted with the important duty of protecting these remarkable natural treasures (van Starden, 2023). There has been a noticeable change in recent times regarding conservation practices. Governments are now acknowledging the importance of incorporating private investment and specialized knowledge to safeguard these crucial ecosystems. African parks started to develop partnerships with African governments to manage protected areas.

Despite the growth of partnerships in park management in Africa, there is still limited literature on the role of the partnerships in tourism development and conservation efforts. In a study by Siporiti (2006) it has been highlighted that in Tanzania, the Chumbe Island Coral Park together with SANparks the partnerships were successful. The over fished and depleted reef adjacent to the marine park has been restocked and the reef has become one of the richest and most pristine in the region with 370 species of fish and more than 200 species of coral. The coral forest covering the island is one of the last intact in Zanzibar and has become a sanctuary for highly endangered species (Mohamed, Adam & Jackson, 2023).

Another notable study on PPPs was conducted in Egypt by Sarhan (2016). Sarhan (2016) posits that Wadi ei Gemal National Park in July 2014 entered into a partnership with DEG-KFW Development Bank to develop the ecotourism business in the area and promote the Park as an ecotourism destination for international tourists. The initiative successfully, managed to enhance local capacities and policy frameworks to support ecotourism through partnerships.

The Government of Zimbabwe has championed the recognition and application of PPPs as a vehicle for domestic growth (Short Term Emergency Recovery Programme, 2009; Zimbabwe National Budget, 2013; Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation 2013-2018). There are also PPP schemes which are being implemented in wildlife conservation and tourism development in Zimbabwe such as Gonarezhou Trust (ZPWMA and Frankfurt Zoological Society) (ZPWMA, 2018). According to Musakwa, Gumbo, Paradza, Mpofu, Nyathi & Selamolela (2020) one of the programs that builds on these experiences involves the collaboration between the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA) and Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) in overseeing the management of Gonarezhou National

Park. This joint effort aims to engage local communities in establishing a comprehensive and participatory approach to managing the national park.

Despite the implementation of this innovative PPP, there is limited academic research in line with the role this partnership is playing in tourism development and conservation efforts in Gonarezhou National Park. Musakwa et al. (2020) opine that while previous studies have explored various aspects of Gonarezhou, such as livelihoods, poaching, ecosystem services, climate change, human-wildlife conflict, and tourism, there remains a notable gap in research focusing on cooperative management strategies within the park. The existing study by Musakwa et al. (2020) was dedicated to examining this involves the collaboration between the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA) and Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) as a means to enhance the existing understanding of protected area management. Thus, it is against this background that the study sought to examine the role of PPPs in enhancing tourism development and conservation efforts in Zimbabwe National Parks using Gonarezhou National Park as area of study. The study therefore specifically sought to attain the following objectives:

1. Assess the impacts of Public Private Partnership on tourism development and conservation efforts in Gonarezhou National Park.
2. Identify the challenges that are faced by Public Private Partnerships in delivering tourism development and conservation goals in Gonarezhou National Park.

## **Research Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology. Existing literature in Zimbabwe on PPPs was still limited and was mostly concerned about infrastructure development (Chigumira, 2010). The impact of PPPs on conservation and tourism has largely escaped the academic radar, hence the need for an exploratory study. The sample of this study was 20 interviews. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants. Relevant data were collected during in-depth interviews with key informants from ZPWMA, tourism establishments in the GNP, Frankfurt Zoological Society, and members of local communities surrounding GNP as well as the academic community. Data were collected using interview guides with structured questions. A thematic data analysis was used to analyses data. Data were arranged into themes and sub-themes.

For research ethics, the researchers applied and got a research permit from Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (2019). After selecting and finalizing the tools for data generation, the researchers communicated through electronic mail to the key informants at Gonarezhou National Park under investigation for taking prior permission.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Perceived Impact of Public Private Partnership on Tourism and Conservation in The Gonarezhou National Park**

The study findings revealed a plethora of changes brought about by PPPs in Gonarezhou National Park.

## **Improved Infrastructure**

Findings of the study indicate that the provision of adequate and exclusive infrastructure in the park to the presence of the PPP model is significant. Improved infrastructure is a necessity for tourism growth. Respondents highlighted such improvements as construction and rehabilitation of roads, bridges, and lodges. One most noted advantage of such improvements has been captured in the following voices:

*Through the construction of roads and bridges has made national parks accessible all year round, including during rain seasons where most protected areas become inaccessible due to poor road networks or absence of bridges while most rivers would be in flood. (Respondent 19).*

*The provision of diversity of accommodation facilities such as lodges, tented camps, and developed camp sites has been important in boosting tourism in protected areas as it leads to an increase in bookings. (Respondent 14).*

The foregoing opinions indicated that the PPPs have improved the product and service offerings at Gonarezhou National Park. It has become the catchphrase of today's tourists to seek out satisfying adventures through better infrastructure. Furthermore, the upgrades have boosted tourists' perceptions of Gonarezhou National Park and its attractions. According to the literature, the framing of tourist perceptions is influenced by events occurring or perceived to occur at a given protected area or tourist facility (Sarr, González-Hernández, Boza-Chirino, & de León, 2020), so the implementation of PPPs in protected area management may promote positive perceptions about management and accountability issues through the development of infrastructure in protected areas.

## **Increased financial support**

Study findings pointed out that the success of the PPPs was as a result of the increased financial support from other partnered players. Respondents highlighted that the willingness of partners in the PPP model in Gonarezhou National Park to bear the burden of financing weight of conservation efforts has been crucial for tourism development. These sentiments can best be captured in the voices presented below:

*The government was struggling to provide funding to undertake anti-poaching activities. However, now that funding has improved, we now have adequate manpower and financial resources to undertake joint operations with the police. (Respondent 10).*

*Financial resources have made it easier to monitor our wildlife and carry necessary activities. (Respondent 20).*

Though some of the aforementioned "necessary activities" are not explained, the study findings appeared to indicate that the availability of adequate financial support catapulted tourism development in the right direction, allowing tourism operators in the Gonarezhou National Park to reach milestones in the provision of quality services that promote client satisfaction. The findings reflect Boniotti's (2023) conclusion that PPPs bring together both financial and non-financial support for cultural protection.

## **Skilled manpower**

The results revealed that the cooperation resulted in stakeholders with diverse goals and talents. Respondents report that combining these talents resulted in improved service delivery and park management. To that end, park officials stated that between 2010 and 2019, there was an annual tourism growth of 20% to 30%. During the same time period, local tourism in the park climbed by 45%, regional tourist by 40%, and international tourism by 15%.

The study findings indicated that the collaboration led to a boost in the overall appeal of Gonarezhou National Park. Respondents pointed to improvements in the park's product and service offerings as clear indicators of this improvement. These improvements include the development of new lodges, upgrades to existing accommodation facilities, increased tourist safety measures, and a noticeable decline in poaching incidents. Furthermore, the surge in visitor numbers, as illustrated by the aforementioned statistics, was highlighted by respondents to underscore the park's newfound status as a preferred tourist destination for both local and international travellers.

*"The collaboration has undeniably enhanced the attraction of Gonarezhou National Park. We've seen tangible improvements in the park's facilities and services, such as the introduction of new lodges and upgraded accommodations. Safety measures have also been meaningfully boosted, making it a more secure destination for tourists."* (Respondent 9)

*"It's remarkable how the partnership has transformed Gonarezhou National Park into a top choice for travellers. The notable decrease in poaching incidents and the steady rise in visitor numbers speak volumes about the park's growing popularity. Locals and international tourists alike now see it as a must-visit destination."* (Respondent 2)

The research results suggest that the park's enhanced attractiveness as a tourism spot can be attributed, at least in part, to improved financial support stemming from the partnership (Musakwa et al., 2020). In this regard, various activities were identified as having been either upgraded or revitalized through the partnership's funding.

### **Improved product packaging**

According to the research findings, collaboration between the public and private sectors has brought about enhancements not limited to just services or infrastructure upgrades, but also influenced the overall quality of tourist experiences. Respondents recognized notable advancements in accommodation infrastructure, such as the creation of various camps, wilderness campsites, and self-catering options. Additionally, the emergence of traditionally-built lodges has become a prominent trend in numerous national parks across Zimbabwe.

*"New activities have been added to existing ones in order to enrich tourist experiences as well as extend their stay."* (Respondent 1)

Respondents noted such new additions as enriched guide tours which emphasise experiences, improved game drives, and helicopter flights, among others. These findings were tandem with literature as Swarbrooke (2009) argues that product enrichment enrich tourists' experiences as well as extend their stay hence enhancing revenue generation. Thus, one may conclude from the findings that product development and enrichment was vital in improving tourist's visitation of Gonarezhou National Park.

## Effective conservation through improved law and order enforcement

The results from the interviews showed that there was a positive trend in the state of conservation of Gonarezhou National Park. This has been attributed to improved law enforcement which has reduced both poaching and veld fires through improved fire management skills. This general improvement in conservation efforts can generally be captured through the following voice:

*Over the previous decade, wildlife numbers in Gonarezhou National Park have showed a constant upward trend, with the park being home to around 11 000 elephants across its 5,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The Great Elephant Census showed major elephant population losses in key wildlife regions in Zimbabwe, such as Mana Pools and Sebungwe, over the last decade, but Gonarezhou had a 130% increase in elephant numbers during the same time period. Predator populations have also recovered, with the endangered wild dog numbering approximately 12 packs. These figures suggest a robust prey base as well as decreased poaching. (Respondent 6).*

Following constructivism, this response has to be understood in context. The wildlife populations across Africa have been on the drop due to poaching, human-wildlife conflict and even trophy hunting (Sai et al 2015). Conservation was impacted negatively by the lack of financial, technical and human resources which are essential in conservation. The threat of wildfires for instances cannot be curbed without adequate resources which are aimed at mitigating the effects of wildfires on the park. It is against this background that the above cited response should be conceptualized.

The findings revealed that the good trends mentioned in the preceding response were made possible by the collaborative efforts of the partnership. As a result of partnership financing, ranger foot patrols have been supplemented by mobile patrols, allowing rangers to quickly move throughout regions designated as poaching hotspots.

The findings also revealed that access to drinkable water, which was historically seen as a major difficulty for scout patrols, has been addressed by custom-made patrol trailers built in Trust workshops. Each one included a water tank and recharge stations for GPS and radio batteries. These enabled rangers to work long hours in distant areas of the park, which were formerly hotspots for poaching due to patrol rangers' difficulty in accessing them. To that end, all ranger patrol groups were outfitted with digital radios, allowing them to maintain constant communication with the central control room. There was a canine squad that supports the park's patrol and anti-poaching efforts. This was proved to have a major positive influence on conservation at the park.

One of the responses states:

*A major step was the erection of a USD75 000 electrified fence on the north-western park boundary. About 3000 locals and 7 000 livestock had started living inside the park. This has of course, increased avenues of conflict with the moved communities. (Respondent 7).*

One of the programmes under conservation which was worthy to note is the Mpfuka movement. Following is one of the responses:

*We run the Mpfuka movement. Mpfuka is a Shangaan word that means travel. So these are meetings that we hold twice a year with the local communities. The primary goal is to meet with communities in order to identify concerns and challenges that are impeding the achievement of conservation objectives. This is done to try to walk together at every step. Mind you, everything comes down to human-wildlife conflicts. (Respondent 16).*

In order to achieve the conservation objectives at the park, the Trust implemented various strategies, including seeking community involvement. The research findings aligned with existing literature, as demonstrated by Musakwa et al. (2020) and Mutanga, Gandiwa & Chikuta (2021), who showed that the partnership between FZS and ZPWMA in Gonarezhou National Park resulted in enhanced law enforcement measures. Additionally, a boundary or veterinary control fence was constructed in the park's northern region to restrict poacher access, as highlighted in the studies. Furthermore, scholars point out that in the Zambezi valley, ZPWMA collaborated with the Hemmersbach Rhino Force, a private organization, for the joint management of the biosphere reserve housing various endangered animal species in a biodiversity hotspot. These collaborations led to significant enhancements in law enforcement efforts, particularly in combatting poaching, which posed a significant threat to biodiversity conservation in the Zambezi region.

### **Challenges That Are Faced by Public Private Partnerships in Delivering Tourism and Conservation Goals in Gonarezhou National Park**

The findings reveal a number of micro and macro hurdles to achieving the partnership's tourism targets in terms of GNP. The results are as follows:

#### **Economic challenges**

The study's findings revealed that the economy's weak performance hampered the smooth operation of PPPs. Respondents stated that issues such as price increases as a result of hyperinflation and fuel shortages had a detrimental impact not only on their functions but also on tourists' capacity to travel. According to the findings, while overseas tourists continued to arrive in large numbers, domestic tourism declined. The negative impact of a weakening economy is best expressed by the following voices:

*The country has been experiencing a severe economic crisis since last year (2018). This has left the country with the issue of hyperinflation and a gasoline shortage once more. This is a significant blow to our relationship aspirations. (Respondent 6).*

*Once again, the country is suffering global media reaction, which is likely to reduce the number of tourist visits to GNP. (Respondent 9).*

The results revealed that, despite the partnership's efforts, the success of the partnership's tourist aims was heavily influenced by macroeconomic factors, the majority of which are economic, as previously mentioned. As a result, this study discovered that political situations can have a negative impact on tourism, regardless of the collaboration agreements that a certain park may have.

One of the participants stated that in early 2019, the Zimbabwean government attempted to offset the difficulty of petrol price increases and their impact on tourists by establishing dedicated petrol pumps where tourists could pay with foreign currency. This has been found to cause a variety of logistical issues. As such, the current economic situation in Zimbabwe has been seen as a key hindrance to the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust's tourism aims (Dhliwayo, 2023).

### **Lack of consultants with stakeholders**

The findings indicated that a general lack of stakeholder consultants presented a number of challenges to the success of PPPs. This could generally be captured in the voices presented below:

*Sometimes there is a general lack of wide consultation from the government on some projects for instance we were informed that the Chinese had mining interests in the park which were allegedly supported by government. (Respondent 5)*

*There is also talk of an electricity generation project from the Save river. Such projects would negatively affect the delivery of our conservation goals. (Respondent 2)*

The preceding discussion suggested that projects were often initiated without comprehensive consultations with local communities and other pertinent stakeholders. This phenomenon may be attributed to discrepancies within governmental legislation, resulting in a lack of coherence between policies. The resulting disharmony did not only precipitate conflicts in wildlife management practices but impacted the overall development of tourism (Kilonzi & Ota, 2023).

### **Conflict of management interests**

The findings stated that differences in conservation goals, is one of the major challenges facing conservation partnerships as government seeks to finance other government functions with revenue generated from protected area, but partner organizations always advocate for onsite revenue retention and the consistent ploughing back of conservation revenues to protected area management. Findings also state that there is a general conflict in resource use between the locals and management agencies.

These findings were corroborated by the literature (Nkomo, 2020). A typical example was the Gonarezhou Trust, whose management of the Gonarezhou National Park and other areas within the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park characterized by resource use and management conflicts (Partners have been at odds over whether trophy hunting in areas surrounding Gonarezhou National Park and the broader GLTFCA should continue or be banned entirely (Musakwa et al., 2020; Musakwa, Mpofu, & Nyathi, 2020). This has resulted in the suspension of trophy hunting operations in the Malipati Safari Area, which is a significant source of CAMPFIRE and hunting concession money for the Chiredzi Rural District Council (CRDC) and ZPWMA, respectively (Nkomo, 2021).

### **Socio-Political interference**

The study's findings also showed that political meddling impacted PPP implementation. The government ministry supports public-private partnerships. According to the study's findings, in some cases, successful PPP implementation has encountered "resistance from local



communities living in wildlife areas, including protected area staff" (Respondent 8). These findings are consistent with the views of Heslinga, Groote, & Vanclay (2021), who believe that local communities always want to be involved in protected area management and thus support partnership arrangements that recognize and respect local communities' rights as important stakeholders in protected area management.

### **Differences in management objectives**

According to the study's findings, one of the problems in implementing tourist management objectives was influenced by a variety of factors, including government tourism development policy. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that partners with competing management agendas rarely agree on specific tourism development activities such as packaging, price tactics, recruitment strategy, and client support services. Tourism managers have the difficulty of striking a balance between tourism and ecosystem integrity in protected areas. Respondents stated that in some cases, infrastructure development may be seen as harmful to ecosystems since it is related with habitat fragmentation. In the case of road networks, parties may be unable to agree on the degree of development that is sustainable in the protected region (Job, Becken, & Lane, 2020).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the study on public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Gonarezhou National Park revealed significant positive impacts on tourism and conservation efforts. Infrastructure improvements facilitated by PPPs, such as road and accommodation facility reconstruction, have enhanced accessibility year-round and elevated the overall tourist experience. These developments aligned with modern tourism trends that emphasize diverse and memorable experiences, positively influencing tourists' perceptions of the park.

Financial support increased as a critical outcome of the PPP model, addressing longstanding financial constraints in conservation efforts. Collaboration within the PPP framework mobilized additional resources for anti-poaching initiatives and wildlife monitoring, leading to improved service delivery and visitor satisfaction. Skilled manpower derived from these partnerships has also diversified, contributing to enhanced service delivery and attracting a growing number of tourists from local, regional, and international markets.

While PPPs have brought about numerous benefits, challenges persisted in the implementation within Gonarezhou National Park. Economic issues like hyperinflation and fuel shortages hinder tourism accessibility for domestic visitors and affect partnership operations. Concerns about stakeholder consultation and conflicting management goals between government agencies and partner organizations have also surfaced, underscoring the importance of addressing these barriers for successful tourism development and conservation outcomes. Collaborative efforts and adaptive management strategies were highlighted as essential for sustaining tourism growth and conservation efforts in the park amidst these challenges.

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