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Meaningful Tourism in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the application of the Meaningful Tourism paradigm in Africa, a continent experiencing the world's fastest tourism growth yet capturing only 5% of global arrivals. Through a qualitative, multi-case study analysis of Cameroon, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Zanzibar, it investigates how this framework addresses critical challenges including economic leakage, environmental pressure, and uneven community benefits. The findings demonstrate that Meaningful Tourism provides a practical toolkit for fostering inclusive growth, enhancing destination resilience, and ensuring measurable value for all six core stakeholders: visitors, host communities, employees, businesses, government, and the environment. The study concludes that adopting this stakeholder-centric approach is essential for transforming Africa's tourism from quantitative expansion into a force for sustainable development and long-term competitiveness. The research offers practical pathways for policymakers and contributes to academic discourse on sustainable tourism in emerging economies.

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1. Introduction

In the first nine months of 2025, Africa registered the highest growth rate as global tourism destination, leading all regions with international arrivals at more than 10% year-over-year through, double the average global growth rate of 5%, with Morocco, Ethiopia, South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Egypt as the fastest growing destinations in terms of international arrivals (Travelandtourworld, 2025).

However, while Africa is home to almost 20% of mankind, the 75 million visitors it welcomed in 2024 still represented only about 5% of all international travellers in that year

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(UN Tourism, 2025). The growth is fuelled by the improved air connectivity, relaxed visa regulations, an increase in intra-African travel and a growing interest in cultural authenticity and sustainable tourism offers. These factors help to diversify destinations visited and products offered beyond safari and beach holidays. Urban tourism is gaining importance in hubs like Cape Town, Nairobi, and Addis Ababa. Still, there are major problems related to governance, expensive transport and accommodation infrastructure and a lack of coordinated planning and international cooperation. A high percentage of the revenue from tourism does not stay in the destinations and many management jobs are filled with non-African persons.

Africa is by far the youngest continent, with the median age of the population at just 19 years compared to the global median age of 31 years, which is lower than the median age for all other continents. Women play an important role in pushing the industry towards more sustainable, diverse and resilient business models. With tourism in many places not very much developed yet, there is a chance to avoid the mistakes other destinations did in the future. There is also a chance to leapfrog in the development of tourism with the help of AI, as already is happening for example in fields like online banking. A clear perspective, SMART KPIs and other Meaningful Tourism tools are a prerequisite for holistic approaches and sustainable solutions. This article looks at different aspects of the development of Meaningful Tourism in Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

2. Case Description and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-case design to investigate the application of the Meaningful Tourism paradigm. The research is based on participatory observations conducted in six African nations: Cameroon, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Zanzibar, and Zimbabwe. This method involved researchers directly engaging with and observing tourism operations, community interactions, and stakeholder workshops within these distinct destinations.

The participatory approach enabled firsthand documentation of how core Meaningful Tourism principles such as equitable benefit-sharing, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship are interpreted and implemented in diverse local contexts. Observations focused on the dynamics between the six key stakeholder groups (visitors, communities, employees, businesses, government, and environment) at heritage sites, community-based enterprises, and during strategic planning sessions. This immersive methodology was essential to move beyond theoretical policy analysis and capture the practical challenges, adaptations, and lived experiences that define the transition toward more meaningful and sustainable tourism models in Africa.

3. Case Analysis, Findings, Discussion

3.1 Cameroon: From Sustainable Tourism to Meaningful Tourism - “All of Africa in One Country”

Cameroon is an example for geographical, ecological, and cultural diversity and is often described as “Africa in miniature.” With approximately 930 officially recognized tourist sites, the country offers a wide range of tourism experiences, including coastal, rainforest, savannah, mountain, wildlife, and culturally rooted forms of tourism. This diversity constitutes not only a comparative advantage for tourism development, but also a rich cultural and social context in which tourism experiences can generate meaning for visitors while reinforcing identity, pride, and agency among host communities.

Sustainable tourism development in Cameroon, as in many African contexts, remains an evolving and ongoing process. Progress has been uneven and continues to depend on

improved governance structures, innovation, and management approaches that integrate environmental protection with local socio-economic realities. While sustainability frameworks have provided an important foundation, their implementation has often remained fragmented and uneven across regions and stakeholder groups.

Over the past decade, Cameroon has made notable advances through international cooperation, most prominently through collaboration between the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife and the German government under the Programme for the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (PSMNR). This initiative aimed to strengthen institutional mechanisms for managing natural resources sustainably, with positive implications for nature-based and community-linked tourism development. Such initiatives demonstrate an increasing awareness of the need to align conservation, livelihoods, and tourism practices (Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, n.d.).

From an economic perspective, the tourism sector is gradually recovering following the COVID-19 pandemic. Projections indicate that tourism revenues will exceed USD 258 million by 2025, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. International tourist arrivals reached over 800,000 in 2021, although these figures remain below those recorded in 2019 and are still largely dominated by business-related travel. At present, tourism contributes approximately 4% to Cameroon's GDP, with policy ambitions to strengthen its role as part of broader economic diversification strategies.

Current Challenges for Tourism Development

Despite these positive developments, Cameroon's tourism sector continues to face significant structural and strategic challenges. In an era characterized by rapid digitalization and the increasing use of artificial intelligence, tourism systems in Cameroon struggle to modernize destination management, digital infrastructure, and international visibility. According to the Cameroon Airports Authority (2024), Africa recorded approximately 74 million international arrivals in 2024, while Cameroon accounted for only 1.77 million, representing about 2.3% of the continental total. This disparity highlights the country's largely untapped tourism potential.

The government's economic, financial, social, and cultural programme for the 2026 fiscal year acknowledges these challenges and outlines intentions to raise public awareness of tourism and leisure, support local initiatives, decentralize resources, and mobilize funding for tourism and leisure infrastructure. While these policy directions signal commitment, their effectiveness depends on local implementation capacity and the extent to which communities are meaningfully involved (Government of Cameroon, 2025).

A particularly persistent challenge is the limited level of awareness and capacity building at the community level. Sustainable tourism practices are often perceived as abstract or externally imposed, and the long-term environmental and socio-cultural implications of tourism-related activities are not always clearly understood. Without broader engagement and shared understanding, sustainability risks remaining a technical objective rather than a lived and culturally embedded practice.

The Relevance of the Meaningful Tourism Paradigm for Cameroon

In this context, the Meaningful Tourism paradigm offers a complementary and potentially transformative perspective. Meaningful Tourism addresses what has been described as "sustainability fatigue" by shifting the focus from restriction and harm mitigation toward positive, achievable, and measurable contributions to well-being for all stakeholders. It integrates objective benefits with subjective experiences, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of tourism (Arlt, 2025; Subadra, 2025).

For Cameroon, the relevance of Meaningful Tourism lies in its emphasis on stakeholder alignment and lived experience. Rather than treating sustainability solely as a set of external constraints, Meaningful Tourism frames tourism as a relational and culturally embedded practice that can generate meaning for visitors, reinforce community identity, and foster a sense of stewardship toward local environments. The use of SMART KPIs that capture both material outcomes and perceived benefits provides a practical mechanism for operationalizing this paradigm.

In culturally diverse contexts such as Cameroon, Meaningful Tourism is particularly applicable because it allows tourism development to be grounded in local values, narratives, and everyday practices. Its effectiveness, however, depends strongly on education, awareness-raising, and capacity building. When local populations understand how tourism can contribute to personal fulfilment, community well-being, and cultural continuity, they are more likely to actively support and sustain tourism initiatives.

Cameroon has already made important progress in sustainable tourism through community-based conservation initiatives that link environmental stewardship with local empowerment around key natural and cultural heritage sites. Building on these foundations, the integration of a Meaningful Tourism perspective could strengthen the social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of tourism development. In doing so, tourism in Cameroon may evolve not only as an economic activity, but as a meaningful practice that contributes to well-being, identity, and long-term resilience.

3.2 Meaningful Tourism and Sustainable Development in Kenya

Tourism is one of Kenya's most significant drivers of economic growth, community empowerment, and environmental conservation. Internationally recognized for its wildlife, cultural diversity, and scenic landscapes, Kenya consistently ranks among Africa's leading tourism destinations. In recent years, the tourism sector has demonstrated strong recovery and steady growth, supported by rising international arrivals and expanding domestic travel, alongside growing interest in sustainable and responsible tourism experiences (UNWTO, 2023; Kenya Tourism Board [KTB], 2022).

Key Tourism Attractions and Market Growth

Kenya's tourism appeal is rooted in its diverse destination portfolio, including iconic wildlife areas such as the Maasai Mara, Samburu, and Amboseli, as well as coastal destinations like Diani and Lamu. Investments in new air routes, improved transport infrastructure, and digital marketing initiatives led by the Kenya Tourism Board have enhanced accessibility and global destination visibility, strengthening Kenya's competitiveness in international tourism markets while supporting domestic tourism growth (KTB, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Sustainability Challenges in Kenya's Tourism Sector

Despite notable progress, Kenya continues to face challenges in balancing tourism growth with environmental conservation and equitable community benefits. While tourism contributes significantly to employment and national income, it also places pressure on ecosystems and cultural heritage sites. Visitor flows remain uneven, with destinations such as the Maasai Mara attracting the majority of tourists, while other regions, including Meru National Park and emerging circuits, remain under-promoted, limiting inclusive regional development (UNEP, 2021; UNWTO, 2023). Altogether, 2.4 million arrivals were recorded, 2/3 of which entering the country via the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) (TRI, 2024).

Sustainability has been positioned at the centre of Kenya's tourism agenda through national policy frameworks. The National Tourism Strategy (2030) emphasizes

environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, and economically resilient tourism development aligned with regenerative tourism principles. This vision is supported by institutional leadership and cross-sector partnerships aimed at embedding sustainability across the tourism value chain (Government of Kenya, 2020; UNDP, 2022).

Eco-Tourism Kenya has played a central role in advancing sustainable tourism practices through its nationally recognized certification framework. This program sets environmental and social standards for tourism enterprises and has expanded beyond safari lodges and conservancies to include urban hotels and city-based tourism facilities. This expansion ensures sustainability principles are integrated across Kenya's entire visitor economy rather than being limited to nature-based tourism alone (Eco-Tourism Kenya, 2022; UNEP, 2021).

Innovation and entrepreneurship are increasingly shaping Kenya's tourism transformation. Emerging tourism innovation hubs and organizations such as Popular Elephant Ventures promote regenerative tourism through climate innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology-driven solutions. These initiatives contribute to Kenya's positioning as a leader in meaningful and regenerative tourism, both regionally and globally (UNWTO, 2023; UNDP, 2022).

Skills Development and Inclusive Economic Growth

Kenya has made substantial investments in skills development, local empowerment, and institutional strengthening within the tourism sector. Development partners, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), support inclusive tourism growth through targeted programs in counties such as Kajiado, Narok, and Nakuru. These initiatives strengthen tourism value chains, enhance workforce skills, and improve market access for local entrepreneurs, particularly women- and youth-led enterprises, thereby contributing to decent employment and sustained local economic growth (ILO, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

Gender inclusion and social equity are increasingly recognized as essential pillars of sustainable tourism development in Kenya. Organizations such as the Kenya Association of Women in Tourism advocate for gender-responsive policies, fair labour practices, and women's empowerment across the tourism value chain. These efforts help promote dignity, equality, and opportunity within tourism workplaces, aligning with broader national and global inclusion goals and the SDG Sustainable Development Goals (UN Women, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

Application of Meaningful Tourism Tools

Meaningful Tourism tools strengthen Kenya's sustainability efforts by offering structured methods to assess impact, readiness, and inclusivity. Tools such as self-assessment frameworks and transformational workshops enable tourism businesses and destinations to evaluate performance in areas including community engagement, environmental management, and visitor experience. When applied alongside national sustainability frameworks, these tools support continuous improvement and measurable outcomes (Arlt, 2025; UNWTO, 2023).

Meaningful Tourism aligns closely with Kenya's long-term development objectives outlined in the National Tourism Strategy (2030). The strategy prioritizes regional development, inclusive growth, product diversification, and capacity building. Through structured training, stakeholder engagement, and innovation-driven approaches, Meaningful Tourism supports these goals by empowering local actors to adapt, innovate, and build resilience across the tourism value chain (Government of Kenya, 2020; Arlt, 2025).

Ongoing Challenges and Future Priorities

Despite significant progress, several challenges persist. Many rural and marginalized communities continue to receive a limited share of tourism revenues, while skills gaps remain within the hospitality workforce. Environmental pressures linked to climate change and resource use threaten savannah, marine, and coastal ecosystems. Governance complexities, limited financing for community enterprises, and persistent gender inequalities further underscore that sustainability is an ongoing process requiring long-term commitment and shared responsibility (UNEP, 2021; UNDP, 2022).

3.3 Meaningful Tourism Development in South Africa: Current Challenges, Opportunities, and a KPI-Based Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth

South Africa is a distinctive tourism destination offering rich biodiversity, cultural diversity, culinary experiences, and strong community narratives within a single journey. Despite these strengths, a key challenge remains ensuring that tourism generates benefits not only for visitors but also for local communities, employees, businesses, government institutions, and the environment in the short term rather than as a distant goal. This situation highlights the need for tourism models that move beyond aspirational rhetoric toward measurable and inclusive outcomes (Arlt, 2025; UNWTO, 2023).

Current State of Sustainable Tourism development in South Africa

South Africa has formally aligned its national development planning with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, embedding the SDGs into its long-term National Development Plan and coordinating implementation through multi-stakeholder frameworks that include government, civil society, academic institutions, and the private sector.

The current state of Tourism in South Africa is a vital sector due to its contribution to employment creation, small business development, and national image building. The country continues to attract travelers through iconic natural attractions such as protected areas, mountain landscapes, and biodiversity-rich regions, alongside strong urban tourism offerings. These features position tourism as a strategic sector for socio-economic development (South African Tourism, 2023; UNWTO, 2022). Major cities including Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban strengthen South Africa's tourism appeal through cultural heritage, food and wine tourism, adventure activities, and creative industries. However, despite this diversity, the sector faces persistent structural challenges that limit its ability to deliver broad-based and sustainable benefits (UNWTO, 2023).

In 2024, South Africa could welcome 12 million international visitors, a value still at only 75% of the 2019 number of 16 million. However with a 25% growth rate for the period January to November 2025, the pre-pandemic level will be almost reached again in 2025 (STATSSA, 2025).

Key Challenges Facing South African Tourism

Uneven Visitor Distribution and Seasonality: One of the most significant challenges is the uneven flow of visitors, with tourism demand concentrated in a few destinations and peak seasons. This concentration results in overcrowding in popular areas while many regions remain underutilized, reducing economic opportunities and increasing environmental pressure in high-demand locations (UNWTO, 2023).

Inequality Between Large and Small Tourism Operators: A substantial gap exists between large international tourism enterprises and smaller, community-led businesses. While local operators often provide authentic and high-quality experiences, they frequently struggle with marketing, digital visibility, and operational capacity, limiting their participation in tourism value chains (OECD, 2020; South African Tourism, 2023).

Operating Environment and Changing Tourist Expectations: The tourism operating environment in South Africa is increasingly complex due to rising costs, energy and water shortages, and heightened safety and service expectations. At the same time, tourists are becoming more conscious, digitally connected, and interested in responsible travel that demonstrates positive social and environmental impacts (UNEP, 2021; UNWTO, 2022).

Opportunities to Address Tourism Challenges

Diversifying Tourism Beyond Peak Seasons: Addressing seasonality requires the development of experiences that are not dependent on peak travel periods, such as birdwatching, wildflower tourism, food festivals, and community-based cultural activities. Strategic packaging and the use of local guides can support year-round tourism demand and regional economic stability (UNWTO, 2023).

Promoting Inclusion and Benefit Sharing: Inclusive tourism can be strengthened by tracking indicators such as local ownership, year-round employment, and spending on community-based suppliers. These measures improve fairness, enhance local economic retention, and contribute to more resilient tourism businesses (OECD, 2020; Arlt, 2025).

Improving Safety Perceptions and Service Quality: Establishing transparent service standards, certification systems, and host training programs can improve traveller confidence and destination competitiveness. Transparency through audits and reporting aligns with modern tourist expectations and strengthens trust (UNWTO, 2022).

Reducing Environmental Stress: Environmental sustainability can be enhanced through simple monitoring of indicators such as water and energy consumption per guest night, waste diversion rates, and biodiversity protection measures. These metrics provide evidence of responsible practices and help balance tourism growth with environmental conservation (UNEP, 2021).

Responding to Market Shifts: Emerging tourism markets including remote work tourism, ethical volunteering, accessible tourism, culinary travel, and contemporary African cultural experiences present new growth opportunities. Targeted digital marketing and collaboration with content creators can help destinations adapt to these changing preferences (UNWTO, 2023).

Key steps for the implementation of Meaningful Tourism

Selecting Relevant KPIs: The first step involves selecting SMART Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as visitor satisfaction, off-peak travel rates, local income retention, workforce diversity, supplier localization, and environmental efficiency. Such indicators provide a transparent way of measuring progress (Arlt, 2025; UNWTO, 2022).

Using Existing Data Sources: Meaningful tourism emphasizes the preference of using existing administrative data, mobile surveys, and basic environmental checks. This approach minimizes costs, avoids complex systems, and ensures accessibility for small and medium-sized enterprises (OECD, 2020).

Co-Governance and Public Reporting: The final step involves establishing multi-stakeholder governance structures, conducting regular reviews, and publishing annual impact reports. Public reporting enhances legitimacy, encourages compliance, and supports honest destination storytelling, particularly among younger stakeholders (UNWTO, 2023).

Aligning Meaningful Tourism with Policy and Development Goals

Meaningful tourism complements existing government strategies by translating policy goals into measurable actions related to capacity building, product innovation, market diversification, regional development, inclusion, and environmental protection.

Transparency strengthens investment confidence and policy coherence.

3.4 Meaningful Tourism and Sustainable Development in Tanzania and Zanzibar

Tourism is one of the most important economic pillars in both Tanzania and Zanzibar, contributing significantly to national income, employment, and foreign exchange earnings. The country's major attractions include world-class national parks such as the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater, the rich cultural heritage of local communities, and the island destination of Zanzibar. In Tanzania, tourism accounts for a substantial share of GDP, while in Zanzibar it contributes nearly one-fifth of the regional economy and supports large numbers of women and youth in tourism-related jobs. As global tourism trends shift away from mass tourism toward sustainability and meaningful experiences, Tanzania and Zanzibar are increasingly positioned to benefit from tourism models that prioritize quality, inclusion, and long-term value creation (UNWTO, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Tanzania's tourism sector recorded a nine per cent increase in tourist arrivals in the first eleven months of 2025 compared to the same period in 2024. In that year, more than 5 million tourists visited the country (DailyNews, 2025a).

Zanzibar alone is expecting to reach one million arrivals for the first time in 2025. However, the Executive Secretary of the Zanzibar Commission of Tourism, Mr. Arif Abbas Manji, was quoted as saying that "Our goal is not just to attract more visitors, it is to ensure each arrival contributes to a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive tourism economy one that benefits Zanzibaris for generations." (DailyNews, 2025b)

Globally, tourism is transitioning from high-volume mass tourism toward sustainability and, more recently, toward Meaningful Tourism. Meaningful Tourism emphasizes purpose-driven travel that creates positive value for multiple stakeholder groups rather than focusing solely on visitor numbers. Based on the Meaningful Tourism framework, tourism should benefit tourists, host communities, employees, businesses, government, and both natural and cultural environments. This approach aligns tourism development with responsibility, respect, and shared value creation (Arlt, 2025; UNWTO, 2022).

Importance of Local Operators in Tanzania and Zanzibar

Local tour operators play a central role in shaping visitor experiences in Tanzania and Zanzibar. As destination ambassadors, they design authentic nature- and culture-based experiences, preserve heritage, support local employment, and distribute tourism benefits within local economies. Products such as community tourism, eco-tourism, and halal tourism demonstrate how local operators contribute to inclusive growth while protecting cultural and environmental assets (OECD, 2020; UNWTO, 2023).

Challenges Facing Local Tourism Operators

Despite their importance, local operators face significant challenges, including strong competition from foreign-owned companies and proxy operators. Limited digital visibility, reliance on global online travel agencies (OTAs), pricing pressure, revenue leakage, and restricted access to international markets weaken local competitiveness. Additional challenges include skills gaps in digital marketing and sustainability, limited community integration, and environmental pressures on marine and coastal ecosystems (UNEP, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Although tourism growth in Tanzania and Zanzibar has been strong, many communities do not fully benefit from this expansion. Overdependence on a few source markets, weak coastal zoning, limited community involvement, and ecological stress highlight that growth alone is insufficient. Traditional sustainability approaches such as symbolic environmental actions or certification are valuable but often fail to deliver measurable, long-term benefits

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across all stakeholder groups (UNDP, 2022; UNWTO, 2022).

Key Focus Areas of Meaningful Tourism

Local Content and Economic Retention: Meaningful tourism emphasizes the use of local guides, drivers, suppliers, hotels, and craft producers. By strengthening compliance with local content regulations and promoting fair business relationships, a larger share of tourism revenue remains within the local economy, supporting livelihoods and reducing economic leakage (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

Community-Based Benefits: Community-based tourism initiatives such as village tours, homestays, cultural experiences, and revenue-sharing mechanisms help uplift host communities. Support for education, health initiatives, youth training, and local entrepreneurship strengthens community ownership of tourism and encourages long-term stewardship of cultural and natural resources (UNDP, 2022; UNWTO, 2023).

Environmental Stewardship: Environmental responsibility is a core pillar of meaningful tourism. Practices such as waste reduction, marine and wildlife conservation partnerships, cleaner transport options, and visitor education ensure that beaches, forests, marine ecosystems, and wildlife remain healthy for future generations (UNEP, 2021).

Cultural Preservation: Meaningful tourism supports the protection and promotion of authentic cultural expressions, including Swahili traditions, heritage sites, and religious values such as halal tourism. Clear guidelines for heritage interpretation help prevent cultural exploitation and ensure that tourism strengthens rather than dilutes local identity (UNESCO, 2021).

Workforce Skills and Capacity Building: A skilled workforce is essential for high-quality tourism delivery. Training in hospitality, safety, environmental management, digital skills, and service design improves professionalism, enhances visitor satisfaction, and strengthens the reputation of Tanzania and Zanzibar as quality destinations (ILO, 2021; UNWTO, 2022).

Digital Transformation: Digital tools enable local operators to reach global markets without excessive reliance on large OTAs. Social media storytelling, local booking platforms, online training, and digital performance tracking improve competitiveness, transparency, and sustainability within the tourism sector (World Bank, 2022; UNWTO, 2023).

Practical Tools for Implementing Meaningful Tourism

Meaningful tourism promotes simple, practical tools that businesses can apply regularly. These include rapid self-assessment tools that score activities based on community benefits, environmental impact, visitor experience, employee well-being, and economic fairness. Additionally, key performance indicators (KPIs) such as local employment rates, spending on local suppliers, visitor learning outcomes, waste reduction, and community partnerships help businesses measure and communicate their real value contribution (Arlt, 2025). Tanzania and Zanzibar already demonstrate meaningful tourism practices through marine zoning initiatives, women's cooperatives, seaweed farming, spice farm tours, cultural heritage experiences, youth empowerment programs, and improved domestic connectivity. Growth opportunities exist in eco- and regenerative tourism, halal tourism, domestic tourism, diaspora engagement, and regional collaboration, positioning the destinations for future resilience (UNDP, 2022; UNWTO, 2023).

Policy Directions and the Path Forward

To scale Meaningful Tourism, policy support is essential. Priorities include strengthening

local content regulations, supporting community enterprises, improving access to finance for sustainable and digital upgrades, and enhancing collaboration between government, private sector, and communities. Keeping local operators at the centre of tourism development will ensure inclusive growth, environmental protection, and cultural integrity (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

3.5 Meaningful Tourism Reimagining Great Zimbabwe as a Living Engine of Inclusive Growth

In 2018, more than 2.5 million international visitors were registered arriving in Zimbabwe. After the pandemic, this figure moved back to 1.6 million in 2024, while reaching almost 1.4 million in the first three quarters of 2025 alone (TradingEconomics, 2025; SputnikNews, 2025). Tourism is a key element of Zimbabwe's economy, contributing at least 5 billion USD, approximately 12%, to the country's GDP.

In September 2025, the Tourism and Hospitality Industry Minister, Barbara Rwodzi, announced that a new target was set to grow the country's tourism sector to 10 billion USD by 2030, reaching the goal by upgrading and building airports, promoting MICE tourism, boosting eco-tourism and cultural travel and encouraging investment in hospitality infrastructure (HeraldOnline, 2025).

Going beyond such purely financial goals, the Meaningful Tourism paradigm offers Zimbabwe a transformative pathway to sustainable destination development, one where tourism delivers measurable benefits to communities, conservation, visitors, and the national economy. Rooted in collaboration and accountability, this paradigm positions attractions like the Great Zimbabwe site not merely as a heritage site but as a dynamic, integrated destination where culture, community, and conservation work together.

The Meaningful Tourism paradigm starts from the insight that sustainable tourism development can only be achieved when tourism provides both measurable, objective benefits and subjective satisfaction. Meaningful tourism empowers for example game animals to drive sustainable growth, unite stakeholders, unlock economic potential for Great Zimbabwe, the mechanical province, and beyond.

Game animals are the heartbeat of destination success, coordinating strategic planning, marketing, product development, stakeholder engagement, visitor services, and sustainability. (Dube, T. 2023). At Great Zimbabwe, game animals are established with UNESCO support. They bridge public-private partnerships to enhance conservation, boost visitor experiences, and foster community empowerment.

Meaningful Tourism Matters for Zimbabwe because it needs an approach that benefits all six stakeholders: visitors, communities, employees, companies, government, and the environment. It transforms fragmented efforts into unified, impactful action. Positions Zimbabwe as a regional leader in transformative, responsible tourism. Meaningful Tourism strengthens competitiveness, climate resilience, and community inclusion. Strategic planning and marketing.

For game animals, meaningful tourism means sharper tools for planning and promotion. They develop cohesive branding like our unified visual identity, dedicated websites with virtual tools, and engaging content on history and culture speaking with one voice aligned to Zimbabwe's national tourism master plan. (Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry, 2019). This attracts more visitors, extends fees, and increases revenues through targeted digital campaigns and media strategies.

Their demo now tracks SMART KPIs, key performance indicators for visitor satisfaction and economic impact, positioning Great Zimbabwe as a premier global destination rather than a site-only stop. For product development and visitor services, Meaningful Tourism revolutionises product development at the DMMR level. They shift from basic site visits to

immersive community-led experiences, cultural tours, craft markets, storytelling sessions, and women's programmes that leverage local knowledge.

Improved infrastructure, like upgraded interpretation systems and facilities, elevates visitor service, ensuring authentic, high-quality journeys. This diversification boosts repeat visits and positive reviews, directly bringing our destination's competitiveness and revenue streams: stakeholder engagement and community benefits. DMMR's drive for collaboration and meaningful tourism provides the framework. (Great Zimbabwe Destination Management and Marketing Region, 2023).

Through their steering committees, stakeholder workshops, and engagement plans, they unite by in for constituencies, business plans, and operations. Communities gain income, skills, and pride via the campfire. They promote low-impact operations, conservation alignment, and climate resilience, protecting their ancient ruins and ecosystems for generations. Economically, this attracts investment, stimulates local spending, and contributes to national goals like the 10 billion US dollar tourism economy.

For their DMMRs, it means sustainable funding, stronger governance, and long-term viability through public-private synergies. Composite building and challenges, they tackle DMMR pain points head-on, skip gaps in digital marketing, and service excellence via targeted workshops with role-playing. Fragmented efforts become aligned actions. Failing infrastructure voids and enhancing visibility. As chairman, they've seen their board and working groups deliver measurable wins from legal entity formation to media campaigns that spotlight Great Zimbabwe worldwide.

Meaningful Tourism allows to position the Great Zimbabwe DMMR and DMMRs globally as regional leaders, driving heritage preservation, economic vitality, and community striving. The vision is to elevate Great Zimbabwe from a single-sided, fully integrated, responsible destination that sets the standards for African heritage tourism.

While they measure their earnings as KPIs, this fosters social cohesion, reduces poverty, and creates jobs, making Great Zimbabwe a model of inclusive growth. Sustainability is core to DMMRs, and Meaningful Tourism is deeply embedded in the process of invest, engage and create. To realise this 10 billion tourism economic potential and ensure genuine sustainability impact, this issues a clear call to action to all six vital stakeholders.

To their partners in government and investments, the invitation is to invest directly in the validated infrastructure plans and the DMMR's legal entity, ensuring long-term governance and financial viability of the destination (Zimbabwe national tourism master plan (2019–2030)). To help them to fill this critical infrastructure void and align national policies with local needs, the community leaders and employees are asking for an active engagement in the community tourism steering committee and guard and interpret forum.

Zimbabwe's Sustainable Tourism Landscape

1. Strong heritage assets: Great Zimbabwe, Matobo, Khami, Victoria Falls.
2. Growing community-based tourism and conservation models (e.g., CAMPFIRE).
3. Key gaps: fragmented DMMOs, limited community benefits, skill shortages, and weak digital visibility.
4. Opportunity: Use Meaningful Tourism to create aligned, measurable improvements in sustainability and competitiveness.

Case Study: Great Zimbabwe. The Ancient City

Zimbabwe has made significant progress toward the development of sustainable tourism by including community benefit, environmental preservation, and economic resilience into the industry. Sustainable tourism development is a work in progress, marked by strategic

policy integration, international partnerships, climate-friendly practices, heritage-linked projects, and community empowerment.

Great Zimbabwe is a potent representation of African civilization, inventiveness, and cultural continuity. It is the greatest stone-built historical monument in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ancient City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986, is a reflection of centuries of indigenous knowledge systems-based governmental power, trade, and spiritual life. However, Great Zimbabwe has not completely converted its heritage value into widespread local economic advantages, despite its worldwide significance and significant cultural ownership by neighbouring populations. In order to guarantee that heritage conservation, visitor satisfaction, and inclusive development all progress simultaneously, the Meaningful Tourism paradigm can reposition Great Zimbabwe as a living destination, one that incorporates community-led experiences, enhanced interpretation, and quantifiable outcomes.

Steps to be taken:

1. Improve the limited community income despite strong cultural ownership and knowledge.
2. Improve interpretation, tour packaging, and community integration.
3. Encourage through Meaningful Tourism community-led experiences, craft markets, cultural tours, and youth and women's participation.
4. Track using SMART KPIs visitor satisfaction, community earnings, conservation quality, and experience diversification

Capacity Building and Stakeholder Alignment

Zimbabwe's tourism needs modern skills: digital marketing, climate literacy, storytelling, and service excellence. Meaningful Tourism Transformative Training Workshops enable aligned solutions and measurable KPIs through role-play and stakeholder engagement to fulfil the vision of Zimbabwe as a Meaningful Tourism destination, becoming a regional model for meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable tourism. Putting traditional knowledge and skills, and frontline experiences at the heart of an authentic visitor journey, drawing providers and businesses together, joining tourism product working groups to create high-quality, immensely packages that extend visitors' stays and increase local expenditure.

There is a need for partnership to enforce the new responsible tourism code of conduct. The commitment is simple: Through Meaningful Tourism, it will be ensured that every dollar spent at Great Zimbabwe translates into measurable benefits for the environment, for the travellers, and most importantly for the communities who are the true custodians of this incredible heritage.

4. Conclusion

This multi-case analysis demonstrates that the Meaningful Tourism paradigm offers a vital and actionable framework for transforming Africa's rapidly growing tourism sector. By shifting the focus from mere visitor numbers to creating measurable value for all six stakeholder groups: visitors, host communities, employees, businesses, government, and the environment; it addresses the continent's core challenges of economic leakage, community exclusion, and environmental pressure. The case studies from Cameroon to Zimbabwe reveal that success hinges on aligning policies with on-the-ground community empowerment, digital innovation, and robust local governance. Ultimately, Meaningful Tourism provides the strategic toolkit necessary to ensure Africa's tourism boom fosters not only economic recovery but also sustainable, inclusive, and resilient development for future generations.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is its reliance on qualitative, participatory observations, which, while rich in contextual insight, limit generalizable quantitative findings. The depth of analysis also varied across the six national case studies.

Future Research Recommendations

Future research should prioritize longitudinal, quantitative studies to measure the long-term socio-economic and environmental impact of Meaningful Tourism interventions. Comparative studies across different African sub-regions would help identify scalable models and context-specific adaptations. Finally, dedicated research into the role of digital technology and AI in enhancing stakeholder connectivity and monitoring SMART KPIs within this paradigm is critically needed.

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