

Exploring challenges to the sustainability of tourism in the Kafue river catchment: A qualitative study of stakeholder perspectives and mitigation strategies

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ABSTRACT

This research looks at the main obstacles impeding the advancement of sustainable tourism from growing in Zambia's Kafue River Basin. The study, informed by Sustainable Development Theory and Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Theory, underscores the equilibrium among economic advancement, environmental conservation, and social equity, while accentuating the significance of host community involvement in tourism planning and benefit distribution. A qualitative case study research design was utilised, incorporating in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, with data subjected to thematic qualitative analysis. The target population consisted of around 200 homes, five traditional chiefs, and 12 tourism-related enterprises in the Lower Kafue River Basin. Consequently, a purposive criterion sampling methodology was employed, resulting in a sample size of 21 participants (18 community members and 3 policy makers). The findings indicate that inadequate policy articulation and enforcement, substandard infrastructure, the marginalisation of local communities, cultural and environmental issues, and disjointed stakeholder coordination are the primary obstacles impeding sustainable tourist development. Zambia's tourist policies have improved, but they are still not being put into action well because of problems with governance and infrastructure. The study finds that sustainable tourism in the Kafue River Basin is not possible without full community involvement, strong enforcement measures, improvements to infrastructure, and cooperation amongst all parties involved. It suggests forming partnerships, making sure that policies are followed more strictly, giving local people more influence through capacity-building, and keeping cultural authenticity in order to create a tourism industry that balances social justice, economic growth, and environmental protection.

Keywords: Community Participation, Environmental Sustainability, Kafue River Basin, Policy Enforcement, Stakeholder Collaboration, Sustainable Tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world currently. Tourism contributes to approximately 10 per cent of the world's Gross Domestic Product [GDP] (Kaale et al., 2026). In developing countries, particularly in Africa, it promotes economic growth and poverty reduction, and rivals traditional economic sectors, such as manufacturing and agriculture (Seraj et al., 2025). As a low-skilled, labour-intensive economic sector, tourism is a potential tool to uplift rural communities' living standards in developing countries (Snyman, 2012). More broadly, tourism can help the economies of destination countries to flourish and to achieve this, many countries are manoeuvring to outdo each other in maximising tourist arrivals through infrastructure development and other means (Shahzad et al., 2017).

Some scholars have described overtourism as a continuation of long-standing patterns in tourism development, where growth often prioritizes capital accumulation and can exacerbate income inequalities within destination countries and communities. (Milano et al., 2019). This suggests tourism based solely on maximising the number of tourist arrivals and exploitation of natural resources may not be sustainable (Sharpley, 2000). Today, thanks to the economic cooperation of many African governments, Africa, behind only the Asia-Pacific, boasts the second-largest tourism industry in the world (Zhou, 2022). Particularly, Southern Africa is endowed with savannas, marshes, and river systems that have developed into formidable tourist destinations, offering tourists wildlife safaris, cultural appreciation, and river ecosystems (Nyambe et al., 2023). Yet, the region is more amenable to mass tourism, which has been blamed for exacerbating deforestation, overfishing, water pollution, climate change, and other ecological and health issues in most destinations within the region (Rogerson & Visser, 2020).

This paper explores the main challenges hindering the development of sustainable tourism in Zambia's Kafue River Basin. The area has pursued mass tourism, which the government, through the line ministry, seeks to change and transform into sustainable tourism. The transformation process began in 2015, when the new Tourism and Hospitality Act No. 13 of 2015 was enacted, and restructured in 2020, when Statutory Instrument No. 121 of 2020 operationalised the Act.

The expectation in the country, particularly among the key stakeholders in the tourism industry, was that with the necessary legal framework in place, the country, and in particular the Kafue Basin, would rapidly flourish with sustainable tourism projects. This has not happened yet, at least not to the expected scale. The questions then are: What are the main challenges hindering the development of sustainable tourism in the Kafue River Basin, and by extension, the country as a whole? How can these problems be mitigated? This paper attempts to address these questions by drawing on the insights and perspectives of the industry's key stakeholders – the government, business owners, and local communities within the Kafue River Basin.

1.1 Research Objectives

To explore current challenges affecting the sustainability of the tourism sector and their respective mitigation measures in Zambia's Kafue River Catchment

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Sustainable Development Theory and Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Theory

This paper is based on two theories: Sustainable Development Theory and Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Theory. Sustainable Development Theory stresses the need for a balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and social fairness. This theory can be used to judge whether tourism projects in the Kafue River Catchment will last over time. CBT Theory also emphasises the importance of host communities being involved in planning tourism and sharing the benefits, which makes sure that managing natural resources is both fair and participative (Hall & Richards, 2000). These ideas work together to give a complete picture of the problems that are holding back sustainable tourism growth in Zambia's Kafue River Catchment and suggest ways to fix them.

Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing parts of the economy around the world. In 2000, there were 687 million foreign visitors; by 2018, that number had grown to nearly 1.4 billion; and by 2030, it is expected to reach 1.8 billion (United Nations World Tourism Organisation. [UNWTO], 2019). Still, sustainability remains a failing area. The Brundtland Report of 1987, page. 16 says that sustainable development is meeting the requirements of the present without hurting the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable tourism aims to harmonise economic and social advantages with environmental conservation (Shahzad et al., 2017).

The Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) support this direction by pushing for sustainable tourism instead of mass tourism (Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016). SDG 8 (economic growth), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), and SDG 14 (life below water) are all intimately related to the rise of sustainable tourism (Saarinen, 2020). The idea is to help developing countries like Zambia use tourism to boost the economy and protect the Kafue River Basin, while making sure that everyone in the community can participate and is treated fairly. This is in addition to protecting the environment.

2.2 Empirical Review

Despite the theoretical emphasis on sustainability, many developing countries face challenges in institutionalising sustainable tourism to suit local conditions. At global level, in the study of Brida et al. (2014) looked at how tourism affects the economies of many countries. They showed how behaviours that are not sustainable, including relying too much on international visitors and not having strong environmental protections, hurt long-term advantages. Their results stress the need of policies that work together to protect the environment while also promoting economic growth.

Dangi and Jamal (2016) looked at sustainable tourism frameworks around the world and said that although sustainability is broadly supported, it is still not being put into practice in a consistent way. The study asserts that collaboration among stakeholders and adaptive governance are essential for addressing concerns like resource depletion and the commodification of culture. At regional level, Mutanga (2015) looked into the sustainability of tourism in Southern Africa and found that biodiversity is at risk because of environmental damage and bad waste management. The study suggests that these problems can be solved by getting stakeholders more involved and increasing their skills.

Studies from Zambia by Kaale et al. (2026) reveal that development of tourism in the Kafue basin has been patchy, slow, and poorly linked to principles of sustainability. Further, the study stated that there is poor empirical appreciation of how varying governance arrangements, community participation and benefits sharing mechanisms combine to influence local-level outcomes for tourism in riverine catchment.

And Nchito and Sichimwa (2024) examined the execution of tourist policy in Zambia revealing that institutional deficiencies, insufficient enforcement, and inadequate financial backing result in discrepancies between policy objectives and actual implementation. This shows how hard it is to turn well-written policies into real sustainability results in the Kafue River Catchment. This paper addresses these gaps in the context of the Kafue River Basin in Zambia, contributing to debates on the growth and challenges of sustainable tourism in developing countries.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design. According to Lim (2025), qualitative research provides a distinctive lens for examining and interpreting the complexities of social phenomena, offering insights that go beyond numerical data. It is in this context that the study utilises qualitative methodology to explore the subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings that key stakeholders attribute to sustainable tourism in Zambia's Kafue River Basin. To be specific, the study employed a qualitative case study research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to embrace openness and a variety of relevant methods for a thorough exploration of the challenges hindering the advancement of sustainable tourism in the Kafue River Basin.

Understanding these perspectives is essential for crafting adaptive, inclusive, and ecologically sound tourism policies in Zambia and other tourist destinations with similar characteristics. This paper gains an in-depth understanding of these challenges (Palinkas et al., 2015) by riding on the perspectives and experiences of the key stakeholders in the tourism industry (Teherani et al., 2015).

3.2 Study Area

The study focused on the Kafue River Basin. This includes all areas within the Basin that are central to tourism in Zambia. The study specifically explored key tourism hotspots within the Basin, including Kafue National Park, as well as other locations characterised by significant tourism activity along the river corridor, extending downstream to the confluence of the Kafue River with the Zambezi River. These areas were purposefully selected based on their economic, social and ecological significance (or potential thereof) to sustainable tourism in the area.

3.3 Target Population

Approximately 200 households in the sampled area, distributed along the selected communities, five traditional chiefs, and 12 established companies, such as hotels and lodges, in the Lower Kafue River Basin, which is the area this study is focused on. This group of people was the focus of this study, and the sample adhered to Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation. The main idea was to make sure that a representative sample was taken. Based on their unique positions and experiences, the key informants provided detailed and useful information about Zambia's sustainable tourism policies and the challenges those policies faced in the Kafue Basin.

3.4 Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

Data were collected from twenty-one (21) participants, comprising eighteen (18) community members (16 households, 2 customary chiefs, and 3 businesses) involved in tourism-related activities, and three (3) key policymakers representing the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), the Hotel and Catering Association of Zambia (HCAZ), and the ZIPAR, or Zambia Institute for Policy Analysis and Research. Palinkas et al. (2015) substantiate the inclusion of participants due to their distinctive lived experiences. The small number of participants drawn from each community was complemented by focus group discussions that involved larger groups (12 participants each). Two focus group discussions were held in each community. In fact, like key informants, only members with unique experiences and positions in their communities relevant to the study were selected for in-depth interviews through the criterion sampling technique, which is a form of purposive sampling, to choose a group of people who had the right experiences for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the fieldwork for this study spanned from September to November 2025.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect their insights, experiences and perspectives on policy adequacy for sustainable tourism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). People with different job positions were involved to enable the study to capture and improve group dynamics and sharing in the talks (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus group discussions explored the challenges hindering sustainable tourism in the Kafue Basin. Furthermore, policy and other regulatory documents were reviewed to understand existing frameworks and practices in the basin.

3.6 Data Analysis

The Thematic Qualitative Data Analysis technique was employed to analyse the data. Thus, categories and concepts emerged from the data that linked concepts to substantive formal theories (Bernard, 2000, 443). In qualitative

research, credibility is obtainable from participants whose experience of the phenomenon studied forms a basis for validating results. Member checking was used to validate, verify or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results (Birt et. al., 2016). Therefore, participants verified the results to confirm the true reflection of their experience about the Challenges Affecting Sustainable Tourism Development in the Kafue River Basin.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were taken into account by getting permission from the Directorate of Research at the University of Zambia. Participants were informed about the nature of the research and that their involvement was voluntary. Thus, all participants provided their prior written consent as a way of authorising their participation in this study. To ensure confidentiality, all the interviews were anonymised, and the collected information has been used for academic purposes only.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Being a face-to-face kind of fieldwork study, its response rate was 100%. Data were obtained from a total of twenty-one (21) participants, including eighteen (18) community members engaged in tourism-related activities and three (3) key policymakers representing the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), the Hotel and Catering Association of Zambia (HCAZ), and the Zambia Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (ZIPAR). The interviews conducted provided the required data and reached data saturation. Data saturation is attained when the ability to obtain additional new information has been exhausted (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This is exactly what the final set of interviews yielded when the participants began to report repetitive viewpoints and insights on the main issues we were investigating.

4.1.1 Challenges Affecting Sustainable Tourism Development

The study identified multiple structural and operational constraints impeding the realisation of sustainable tourism in the Kafue River Basin. These challenges emerged from both individual interviews and focus group discussions. The participants in both highlighted issues that the researcher, through analysis, organised around five major themes presented below.

Theme 1: Limited Policy Awareness and Weak Enforcement

Across most communities, participants expressed low awareness of tourism-related policies and perceived weak enforcement of existing regulations. While Zambia's National Tourism Policy of 2015 outlines clear sustainability principles, implementation at the local level remains inconsistent.

"The law says you shouldn't build too close to the water, but structures are built into the river, and nothing is done." (Community Member J, Housekeeper, 2 November 2025).

The lack of policy awareness was common among community members and business owners in the Kafue Basin. In the interviews and focus group discussions, participants rarely cited relevant pieces of legislation to support their claims or narratives, indicating their lack of knowledge of the legal framework. The main issues that emerged here include ignorance of tourism laws, weak monitoring and enforcement, perceived impunity among investors and poor dissemination of policy guidelines.

Theme 2: Poor Infrastructure and Accessibility

Participants in focus groups emphasised road inaccessibility, unreliable transport, and inadequate utilities as major obstacles to tourism development. Poor infrastructure not only constrains tourists' access but also inflates operational costs and limits local businesses.

"Tourists can't reach our village easily; even taxis fear using these roads." (Community 4, Participant F, 26 October 2025)

"We have nice sites, but no good roads or bridges to reach them." (Community 5, Participant G, 22 October 2025).

Much as the tourism policy emphasises infrastructure development as a benchmark for sustainable tourism, very little infrastructure development is underway in the Kafue River Basin to facilitate it. Participants reported, and the researchers confirmed, dilapidated roads, and a lack of basic supporting infrastructure around potential tourist centres. Much of the tourism activities occurred in pockets along the basin around isolated major private investments such as hotels and lodges. This affected the nature and quality of tourism in the area.

Theme 3: Exclusion of Local Communities

Participants from local communities bemoaned their exclusion from major tourism projects in the area. In the interviews and discussions, they frequently cited exclusion in employment, procurement, and decision-making, with external actors dominating lucrative positions and supply chains.

“They only give us jobs when there’s construction, but later bring workers from Lusaka.” (Community Member H, 30 October 2025).

“We can supply food or crafts, but they don’t involve us in planning.” (Community 2, Participant D, 18 October 2025).

The major issues that participants raised here related to local exclusion from employment, weak community voice in governance, and limited access to procurement and contracts. This exclusionary dynamic contradicts the participatory intent of Zambia’s Tourism and Hospitality Policy.

Theme 4: Cultural and Environmental Conflicts

Tensions between tourism operations and traditional livelihoods emerged as a recurring concern in most individual interviews and group discussions. Communities reported restricted access to traditional fishing areas, noise pollution, and loss of sacred spaces due to tourism expansion.

“We can’t fish where we used to; investors have fenced the riverbanks.” (Community 1, Participant E, 22 October 2025).

“The music from the lodges disturbs our peace and scares away fish.” (Community 3, Participant F, 26 October 2025).

Participants reported that tourism was damaging their communities and livelihoods. This was a clear statement that the Kafue River Basin was practicing traditional tourism; it had not yet transitioned to sustainable tourism. Yet, the government representatives insisted during the interviews that the transition had already occurred, indicating a clear disconnection between reality and policy intent.

Theme 5: Weak Coordination Among Stakeholders

Policymakers and institutional actors involved in this study acknowledged that poor coordination and role duplication among the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Zambia Tourism Agency (ZTA), Hotel and Catering Association of Zambia (HCAZ), and local councils had made it difficult to operate in the Kafue Basin.

“Each department works on its own; we need a single platform for coordination.” (Policy Maker, MoT Official, 5 November 2025).

In fact, locals denied any involvement or consultations from the government or business owners. What was witnessed in the area was a clear case of inter-agency fragmentation, role duplication and competition, and absence of joint planning mechanisms. As such, different stakeholders were pulling in opposite directions, making it extremely difficult for them to find a common ground on any part of the policy.

4.1.2 Emerging Coping and Mitigation Strategies

As stated in the introduction, this study also aimed to analyse the possible mitigation measures for the identified challenges. These measures came as proposals from the stakeholders. Like the challenges discussed above, several proposals were submitted by the participants. But these proposals were synthesised and grouped under the key themes as presented below.

Theme 1: Capacity-building and local empowerment

All participants agreed that community sensitisation and capacity building can help bring local communities on board, and this in turn could smooth the implementation of the policy. Participants emphasised the need for continuous awareness campaigns on tourism policies, rights, and benefits.

“Employ us and train us; that is the best way to empower the community.” (Community 2, Participant F, 26 October 2025).

“We need to be educated about tourism laws and how we can benefit from them.” (Community 6, Participant H, 30 October 2025).

Except for those government representatives, all participant, including business owners, indicated their willingness to undergo intensive capacity-building and sensitisation on sustainable tourism issues and policy. This came from the realisation that this could equip them to participate in the industry. Participants claimed the local exclusion from employment and business contracts was due to their lack of necessary skills and education, which this training could help address.

Theme 2: Infrastructure Upgrades

Across the board, participants agree that infrastructure development is the starting point for sustainable tourism. Therefore, they all called for accelerated government efforts in road rehabilitation, bridge construction, and improved water transport.

“If the roads improve, more tourists will come, and we will sell more products.” (Community 4, Participant D, 18 October 2025).

The participants requested that the government and its cooperating partners construct new and rehabilitate existing roads, bridges, and water transport and power infrastructure to facilitate sustainable tourism in the area.

Theme 3: Strengthened Stakeholder Collaboration

Both community members and policymakers demanded structured coordination platforms where the Ministry of Tourism, Zambia Tourism Agency, local councils, investors, and civil society could meet and interact.

“If government, investors, and us locals can meet regularly, tourism will grow faster.” (Community 7, Participant C, 30 September 2025).

Participants demanded regular stakeholder forums, joint planning and monitoring committees, and multi-level governance coordination. To them, this strategy reflected inclusive, trust-based partnerships as the foundation for sustainable tourism, which they said was essential to the development and growth of sustainable tourism in the area.

Theme 5: Cultural Preservation and Authenticity

Participants, particularly community leaders, expressed a desire for tourism that allows them to maintain cultural authenticity in tourism while resisting excessive commercialisation.

“Let us show our culture in our own way, not through company uniforms.” (Community 5, Participant A, 25 September 2025).

Participants’ demands included cultural preservation, community-led heritage protection and regulation of corporate branding at cultural events. To them, this could help to preserve their identity as a people and enhances the sustainability of cultural tourism. Along these lines, one participant emphasised that cultural integrity is vital for both community cohesion and destination distinctiveness.

4.2 Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section clearly demonstrate that the major challenges hindering the development and growth of sustainable tourism in the Kafue River Basin and the country as a whole include weak policy articulation and enforcement, poor infrastructure, non-involvement of local communities, and fragmented sector coordination. Different stakeholders are pulling in opposite directions, a consistent problem in many African countries, where the gap between policy and reality is often wide (Okoye et al., 2025). In such countries, it is difficult to instigate any meaningful industry-wide change through policy or any other regulatory framework. This clearly is what is

happening in the Kafue River Basin, where the Tourism and Hospitality Act 2015, which is praised for being the most progressive and comprehensive tourism policy in the history of Zambia (Kaale et al., 2026), has failed to stimulate any meaningful sustainable tourism activities.

Consistent with Hall (2011b), the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms has made it difficult to transform sustainability aspirations from a regulatory ideal into practical developments that can benefit the ordinary people on the ground. Part of the problem is the lack of critical infrastructure on the ground to support policy implementation and wider sectoral changes. Telfer and Sharpley (2016) have rightly asserted that infrastructure is fundamental to the competitiveness of any economic sector, including tourism. Thus, without adequate critical infrastructure, any economic sector is destined to fail, regardless of the legal framework backing it. This means, then, that until critical infrastructure is developed, such as roads, power, water and sanitation, Zambia may be flogging a dead horse in the Kafue Basin as far as sustainable tourism development is concerned.

The findings in the previous section also linked the failure of sustainable tourism in the Kafue River Basin to the fragmented governance system therein and the country. The finding validates Bramwell and Lane's (2011) theory of *Collaborative Governance*, emphasising the need for inclusive platforms that unite public, private, and community actors toward shared sustainability goals. This runs counter to the tenets of both the Sustainable Development Theory and Community-Based Tourism theory, which demand the inclusion of local communities in development projects, including tourism. The key explanation is that sustainable tourism cannot be achieved without the involvement of all key stakeholders, including local or destination communities. The willingness demonstrated by the communities around to participate in tourism projects, however, shows the potential of and the opportunity for the region to embrace sustainable tourism.

What is obtaining in the Kafue River Basin, and of course, in Zambia as a country, may relate to the wider developments in the tourism sector globally. Duedahl (2020) has described institutional inertia as a global impediment to sustainability transitions in various economic endeavours, which may include tourism. Novelli (2015) has also shown that inadequate infrastructure and coordination hinder green- or sustainable tourism competitiveness in sub-Saharan Africa. Other more recent studies (Yangailo, 2025) have demonstrated that countries across Eastern and Southern Africa share common challenges to tourism growth, including weak infrastructure, limited government support, and security concerns, all of which hinder progress toward sustainable tourism development. This suggests Zambia is not alone in this race and that it has many examples to learn from. The most important thing is to initiate stakeholder engagement within and outside the Kafue River Basin on the development of sustainable tourism.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The findings revealed systemic and cross-cutting challenges constraining sustainable tourism development in the Kafue River Basin and the country. These challenges include ineffective policy implementation process, lack of key infrastructure, insignificant community participation, and weak institutional coordination, among others. Environmental degradation, driven by the current unsustainable tourism activities, threatens the ecological integrity of the Kafue River Basin, further precluding the possibility of entrenching sustainable development there. This clearly shows that having a good policy is one thing; having it implemented successfully to induce positive and meaningful change in the industry is quite another. Zambia is grappling with the latter in the Kafue River Basin. The problem may not only be with implementation but also with the process that culminated in the same policies. In future, the involvement of all key stakeholders must not be limited to the implementation of policies, but must be involved through the entire process of sustainable tourism development. This will not only instill confidence but will also ensure full participation and interaction of all stakeholders in the industry. In sum, riding on both Sustainable Development and Community-Based Tourism Theories, this paper concludes that these challenges stem from governance inefficiencies and a top-down approach to tourism planning. Sustainable tourism requires both structural reforms and behavioural change.

5.2 Recommendations

Therefore, the study recommends: Strengthening enforcement of environmental regulations through community-based monitoring systems that empower local residents as custodians of natural resources. Implementing financing models such as community conservation funds, micro-grants, and revolving credit schemes should be introduced to enhance local participation. Infrastructure development which should be guided by integrated land-use planning, ensuring that roads, waste management systems, and accommodation facilities align with sustainability principles. The government should also foster partnerships with academia to generate research-based solutions for climate resilience and sustainable resource management.

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