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Eco-tourism within communities in Zimbabwean resort areas

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Abstract

Tourism in Zimbabwe is a vibrant economic activity encompassing many different sectors involving inbound travel for recreational, leisure, education or business purposes. Although visitors inevitably gain a fulfilling experience through tourism, and the operators maximise on their equity returns, what is lacking is a guarantee to equitable access to benefits, derived from natural resources by the locals staying within the vicinity of tourist resort areas. The focus of this article is to identify ways through which Zimbabwe's communities can maximise on benefits of engaging eco-tourism and how the communities can be educated to mitigate on the negative impacts of tourism developments in their regions. Some 145 interviews were carried out in the major tourist resort areas of Zimbabwe. The article proffered a framework to support the development of a primary school curriculum, which can also be used as an education or training guideline by communities to enhance promotion of eco-tourism in regions adjacent to tourist resorts in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Eco-tourism, Management; Community benefits; Sustainability; Educational curriculum

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1. Introduction

Zimbabwe has a unique abundance of exceptional natural landscapes, fauna and flora that attract an emerging breed of domestic and international wildlife tourists who seek the experience of being able to explore an unspoilt ecosystem and its inhabitants. Protected areas such as National Parks are vital in attracting wildlife tourists but generally the impetus to manage such areas to the mutual benefit of all parties concerned has met with insurmountable challenges. Successful protected areas management requires the co-operation among government, private sector, local communities and the visitors themselves. It has been the experience of many developing countries that management plans are easier to formulate than they are to police or implement, where in Kenya, South Africa, Botswana and Namibia revenue-sharing schemes tied in with conservation by local communities neighbouring National Parks initially generated unrealistic expectations without clear revenue-sharing guidelines (Shackley, 1996). In response to conservation challenges, the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (Campfire) project was launched in Zimbabwe early 1989. The objective of this programme was to curb poaching in national parks and bolster conservation efforts as it became increasingly evident that natural resources including biodiversity ought to be preserved for posterity. Evaluations of the Campfire projects clearly show that a gap exists between policy endorsement and policy implementation. Shortcomings in the implementation process arise because of conflicts between resource management agencies, tourism developers and the affected communities.

2. Statement of the problem

World-wide trends show a movement towards adventure, historical and indigenous cultural tourism which is universally assumed to be consistent with natural, social and community values (Eadington and Smith, 1992). The term ascribed to this kind of tourism development is eco-tourism or sustainable tourism. Worldwide, indigenous ancestral territories hold the bulk of the world's remaining resources (World Wildlife Fund for Nature, 2000). Evidently, the development of tourism in Zimbabwe is based on the unspoilt environment which has strong linkages to the culture of the local people. Only when eco-tourism development takes cognizance of the local communities' culture, will it survive the negative impacts of unplanned development. Bringing tourism education to children at an early age and tourism training to the local communities should yield the answer to the sustainable development of tourism in Zimbabwe as a whole.

3. Objective of the study

The focus of this article is to identify ways through which Zimbabwe's communities can maximise on benefits of engaging eco-tourism and how the communities can be educated to mitigate on the negative impacts of tourism developments in their regions.

4. Literature review

Shackley (1996) notes that the consensus among all those involved in tourism about managing the interface between tourism and conservation is that community participation is paramount in determining the success of any tourism project. Designating a conservancy, reserve or national park may often conflict with the traditional resource practices of local communities, when local people suddenly find themselves excluded from traditional hunting territories or alienated from grazing and farming land. Measures taken by the relevant authorities should therefore take into account the provision of an alternative resource base as well as potential compensation. In many instances it is easier to find examples where tourism benefits tour operators, governments and arguably animals than it is to see schemes that involve and benefit local people. Sustainable tourism as argued by Swarbrooke (1999) respects both the visitors and the hosts together with their cultural heritage and biodiversity.

4.1. Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a newer phenomenon that can lead to sustainable tourism but is premised on the variables of conservation and education definitions. It is one of the most common forms of sustainable tourism that involves visiting natural areas in remote wilderness or rural environments. The International Ecotourism Society (1990) defines ecotourism as,

"responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people".

The Society emphasises that ecotourism is about 'uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. Accordingly, those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles:

- minimise impact on the environment;
- build environmental and cultural awareness and respect;
- provide constructive quality experiences for both visitors and hosts;
- trigger the provision of financial resources for conservation;
- make available economic benefits and empowerment for local people; and
- raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental and social climate.

Honey (2008) expands on the TIES definition by describing more characteristics of ecotourism, which include:

- involving travel to natural destinations;
- respecting local culture; and
- supporting human rights and democratic movements in terms of travel.

Indeed this presupposes that taking a game drive through Hwange National Park is not necessarily ecotourism unless that particular drive somehow benefits the Park and the locals living in the park's vicinity.

Ceballos - Lascuran (1983) focuses on the importance of natural areas and unbundled ecotourism as travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas. He reiterates that, ecotourism also seeks to reduce the visitors' impact on the area visited and contributes to the conservation of natural areas and development of adjacent communities and nearby populations. Benefits to the local communities include economic developments which create employment and opportunities for entrepreneurship for locals, environmental benefits providing improved social infrastructure for residents, and socio-cultural benefits which enhance better cultural understanding and improved social infrastructure for residents.

The most popular ecotourism destinations are spread out in Central and South America, Canada, USA, Australia, Kenya and South Africa. A study of Amboseli National Park in Kenya determined that a lion there was worth US\$27 000 and elephant herd US\$610 000 in tourist revenue per year (Hasler, 1996). Concurring with Hasler, Swarbrooke (1999), Page (2002), citing the case of The Galapagos Islands and Thailand respectively, argue however that ecotourism based activities often lead to a deterioration in environmental quality as today's ecotourism can easily become tomorrow's mass market tourism product. Wood and House (1991) outline broad categories of tourism impacts ranging from inappropriate development, loss of habitat and effects on wildlife, pollution, extinction of species and loss of spirit. Butler (1980) identifies the evolution of resorts or destinations through his tourist area life cycle where resorts experience various stages of evolution from exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline and rejuvenation. This model provides a useful insight into understanding how destinations evolve and have to cater for different categories of tourists at each stage of the life cycle and that tourism will impact negatively on the destination if proper management decisions are not met. Evidently a community-based approach to ecotourism ought to recognise and promote both the quality of life of locals and the conservation of resources, through compensating people for the loss of access to resources they suffer when wildlife parks are created and when animals invade their fields. Woodwood (1997) however comments that there was little commitment to supporting the rights of indigenous peoples to benefit from their traditional lands and wildlife in South African ecotourism ventures. Education in the field of tourism at schools and community level will boost the locals' appreciation of developments in ecotourism.

4.2. Local manpower development

Currently training within the tourism and hospitality industry inside the communities is skills based. Education makes a valuable contribution to the development of independent learning skills nationwide and the ability to apply knowledge. It also helps to create interest in the curriculum and ensures high levels of quality and operational standards that prepare students for their future careers.

Learners who are taught tourism at the primary school age are more likely to become critical perpetuators of the status quo and turn out to be effective and thinking would-be managers ready to change things for the better. Furthermore they are likely to exhibit improved communication and presentation skills in their encounter with the tourism and hospitality industry. Given the complexity, sensitivity and diversity of players involved with the tourist experience, the economic, environmental, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic

values of the destinations need to be carefully monitored, and an optimum balance created between economic growth, sustainable development, environmental conservation and protection (Krippendorff, 1987).

5. Research methodology

This study was carried out with the intention of crafting a primary school curriculum on tourism and hospitality management. Such a curriculum would buttress the development and practise of ecotourism that ensures that benefits flow to local communities. In a bid to collect useful data for the study the researcher drew up a population for the study comprising 300 education officials, tourism stakeholders, local communities, captains of industry and workers employed in resort areas. However, after repeated efforts, the researcher managed to interview 145 officials from the targeted population with 44 responses coming out of Harare, 33 from Eastern Highlands, 30 form Bulawayo and 38 from Victoria Falls resort area. To complement the in-depth face-to-face interviews that were used the researcher also observed and recorded tourism developments in the resorts.

5.1. Ways of maximising socio-economic and socio-cultural benefits out of tourism

Figure 5.1 below summaries the respondents' attitudes towards local communities' possibilities for exploiting their natural resources without caused significant damage to the environment. Their emphasis was on education and awareness of the local communities as well as use of renewable energies.

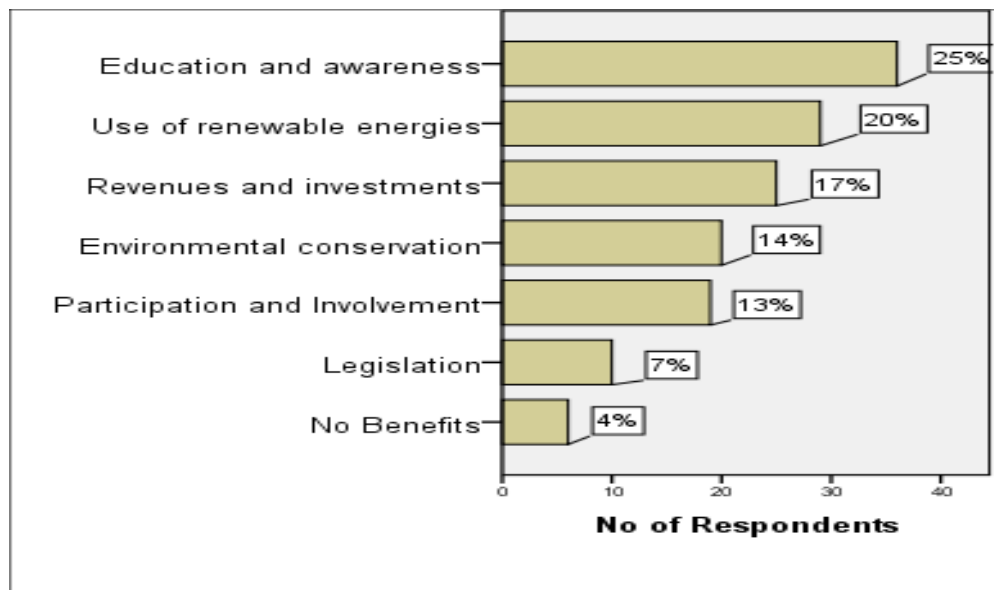


Figure 5.1. Possible community benefits to be reaped out using the tourism natural resources

Respondents also supported the need to earn revenues through tourism operations 17% as well as through legislation on indigenization. It is quite surprising that some 4% of the respondents believe that there are no benefits that can be reaped out of tourism towards local communities arguing that local communities never reach levels where they can be meaningfully involve with tourism developments. They are forever sleeping partners only.

5.2. Traditional ways of protection, management and preservation of biodiversity

Asked to cite any traditional forms of wildlife management and biodiversity protection that can be incorporated into a primary school curriculum to enhance the development of eco-tourism, 35 of the respondents chose the use of totems as an effective tool for wildlife protection and preservation as shown in figure 5-2. Some 24 respondents cited the traditionally recommended ways of protecting wildlife areas and preservation of virgin land as an effective tool. The idea of forbidding the hunting of calving animals was cited by 20 of the respondents. Methods of collecting wild fruit were another tool used to protect plant life as highlighted by 13 of the respondents. Some 12 members of the respondents argued in favour of respecting and preserving wetlands which are traditionally considered to be sacred. Eleven respondents quoted traditional permaculture and conservation farming while eight respondents stated non-destructive fishing methods traditionally practiced by communities. Seven respondents appraised traditional honey collection methods at the same time as five who recommended revisiting religious beliefs mentioning in particular, that snakes suffered human attacks or being killed as a result of the biblical ruling that Adam was advised to crush the snake’s head at every encounter as punishment for coning Eve into devouring the forbidden fruit.

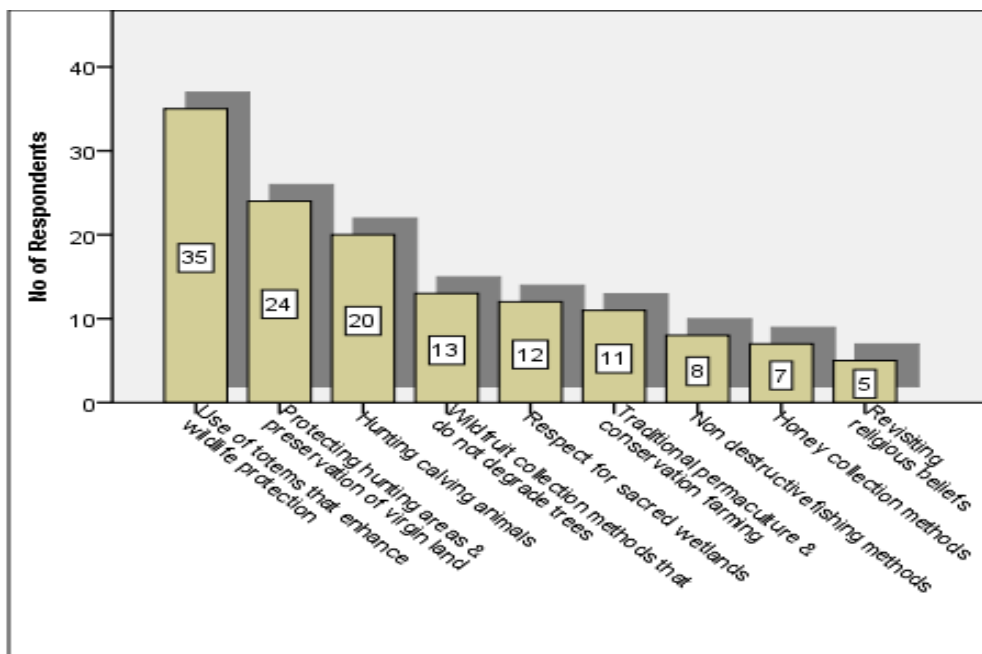


Figure 5.2. Traditional norms that enhance protection and preservation of Fauna and Flora

5.3. Eco- and cultural tourism's impacts on schools and local communities

Ecotourism was described in the literature as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (Ceballos-Lascuran, 1983; TIES, 1990; Honey, 2008). Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should endeavour to minimise the impact of tourism on the environment by building environmental and cultural awareness and respect.

Respondents cited the use of totems as an effective traditional tool for wildlife protection and preservation. Traditionally communities do not hunt animals belonging to their totems instead, they protect and preserve them. This safeguards the thriving of a variety of animal species that might otherwise be endangered. Such a traditional practice also augments the provision of constructive quality experiences for both visitors and hosts in respect of non-consumptive tourism or photographic safaris. What's more, such provisions when carried out through public private partnerships would stimulate and trigger the setting up of financial resources for conservation at the same time availing economic benefits and avenues of empowerment for local people. Likewise, the profile of conservation issues would be raised across the board and sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental and social climate would be heightened.

Respondents were not against hunting. Instead they cited specific traditionally recommended ways of protecting wildlife areas and preservation of virgin land with hunting amongst them as an effective tool. The traditional idea of forbidding the hunting and killing of calving animals was given special attention. Environmentally friendly methods of collecting wild fruits were another specified tool used to protect plant life. Some respondents argued in favour of respecting and preserving wetlands which are traditionally considered to be sacred. In terms of land uses, respondents quoted traditional permaculture and conservation farming alongside controlled mining, responsible tourism and traditional fishing as means of sustainable development. Respondents stated non-destructive fishing methods traditionally practised by communities as particularly important and effective. They emphasised that fish breeding through artificial means ought to be part of the curriculum. Communities should constantly replenish water reservoirs through fish hatcheries which are facilities that release juvenile fish into the wild for recreational fishing or to supplement numbers of existing species. Fish breeding techniques could form part of the curriculum in schools.

Respondents applauded traditional honey collection methods while others endorsed revisiting religious beliefs pointing out in particular, that snakes suffered stigmatisation notwithstanding human attacks or being killed as a result of the biblical ruling that Adam was advised to kill the snake as punishment for coning Eve into consuming the forbidden fruit. Snake and reptile lovers could then enjoy tours into the wildlife under the direction of professional tour guides who are well versed with the local habitat.

There were arguments raised by respondents to the effect that environmental sustainability must not be restricted to tourism developments in isolation, but must be extended to include other majors sectors of the economy like agriculture, manufacturing and mining ventures. It is imperative for communities to asses Zimbabwe's mineral wealth before embarking on mining and restrict it to ventures that which meet the basic necessities of the country and preserve the rest of the reserves for future generations. This inadvertently

gives the environment room to regenerate and be consequently available for a mix of other land uses like agriculture and mining.

Tourism guidelines like the '*low volume high value*' tourism policy were recommended by respondents as a means of conserving the environment. This strategy aims at attracting low numbers of high spending visitors who basically travel individually or in small groups of up to ten persons each. This suggests that in order to viably steer the '*Look East Policy*' adopted by Zimbabwe in 2003, only the up-market high ends of the Chinese, Japanese, Singaporean and South Korean markets would need to be targeted. Such a policy however needs to be buttressed by a sound flourishing domestic tourism development through making it policy among other measures that companies contribute payments towards a given number of days making up part of employees time off and that schools encourage that school fees include at least two days of holidaying for learners at places of interest in Zimbabwe.

Tourism developments are largely dependent on information and computer technologies. Respondents pointed out that today's learners use computers as play tools. By introducing e-learning in schools, a horde of other opportunities would be opened up for primary school learners and communities. Investments into computer hardware would be enhanced and computer literate service providers would offer visitors more varied and improved services.

United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development shows usage of energy in Zimbabwe as largely reliant on non-renewable wood fuel, liquid fuel and electricity. The situation is exacerbated by the sale of wood carvings to tourists which encourages the cutting down of trees, a practice which demands the immediate implementation of tree planting programmes to guarantee regeneration of the resource. Coupled with that is the sale of stone sculptures which are dependent on stone extractions again a non-renewable resource. When people consume more energy resources that provide tourism attractions and habitat to tourism wildlife, bio-diversity is removed. As more bio-diversity is removed tourism becomes untenable leading to unsustainable development.

Respondents recognised that in order to avert a catastrophic degradation of the environment and sustain the use of wood fuels there is need for more support for the Schools and Colleges Tree Growing and Tree Care Programmes as part of the National Tree Planting Programme. Further aspects advanced to bolster this programme were increasing production of tree seedlings at community based nurseries in line with the strategies to decentralize this activity and to involve communities in reforestation. Schools and communities also need to collaborate expansively with the non-governmental organisations-based working groups on woodlands who meet periodically to discuss woodland management issues in Zimbabwe. To effectively deal with problems related to the use of wood fuels consultations to formulate a woodland management policy for the country, need to involve schools and communities at all levels.

In order for the country to enjoy a viable tourism development and enable communities to fully exploit economic benefits derived from tourism, there is need to promote the tourism products locally and internationally, but promotion is a capital intensive venture. A sound tourism base can however be heightened through established local markets braced by communities or government geared on domestic tourism growths. Established local markets make it possible for communities to easily promote tourism and

hospitality products and be motivated to invest more through the local available materials. Respondents advocated for the creation of community groups that can exhibit their products at district, provincial or national level, aided by government and corporate sponsorship. They recommended that computers be availed to pupils/learners at an early age. They said that learners would develop an appetite for information technologies and discover information in most of the areas on their own and possibly improve their own performance. The challenge is that of low or no connectivity in remote areas of the country when it comes to the use of the internet.

Information technologies can however be efficiently used to support effective education in computers, music, dance, home economics, sport, arts and culture. Respondents said that information technologies could be used to back up tourism e-learning and other subjects thereby enhancing development of ideas especially through social networks. Benefits include the use of emails, enhancement of performance, back-up of popular play tools for learners and promotion of music and drama, thereby helping in preserving cultures.

Besides the use of computers to reinforce the marketing and promotion of tourism products, respondents came up with the use of electronic and print media as possible vehicles for marketing their tourism artefacts and wares. Promotion through the electronic and print media being costly, respondents recommended that schools and communities work together with partners or engage some forms of linkages arising out of franchising and contracting services to boost product marketing and promotion locally and abroad.

5.4. Challenges facing schools and rural communities in tourism development

Reviewed literature showed that since local communities play a distinctive role in the maintenance of the tourism product itself, the need to educate the communities on environmental conservation is paramount. Given the complexity, sensitivity and diversity of players involved in the tourist experience, there are challenges related to local community involvement in tourism developments as highlighted by the respondents, which revolve around effects on culture, shortages of capital and human resources and lack of interest among the rural members.

The influence of tourism can lead locals to lose respect for their own culture as they interact with foreigners and assimilate foreign practices. Engaging in tourism can also lead to the dire need to earn money, an exercise which subsequently brings about the commoditisation of culture, thus stimulating the loss of real cultural values. While some respondents expressed the view that there was no relationship between tourism and religion, others felt that religion had a strong impact on tourism developments poignant of negative attitudes on cultural issues. Communities are however dogged by the apparent lack of knowledge on how to preserve and protect their cultural environment. There was widespread agreement that if tourism would be practised by indigenous business people there would be less value on the protection and preservation of societal and cultural norms and values. This impression presupposes changing the mind-set of local business persons in their view of and participation in domestic tourism.

A decrease in environmental quality and land degradation was also a major apprehension for the respondents. Respondents alluded to problems emanating from climate change and natural disasters citing them as critical, but identifying poverty as the biggest challenge. There is need for favouring land uses that

sustain communities in competition with fauna and flora. The problems related to cutting down of trees for heating, cooking and sculpturing, can be alleviated through educating communities on tree planting and preservation of woodlands and forests.

Murphree (1991), Petersen (1991) and McIvor (1994) among others focused primarily on CAMPFIRE projects and their contribution to sustainable development in Zimbabwe. They did not adequately deal with the challenges facing communities with respect to project management which is not done by the communities but is taken care of by central or local government authorities in conjunction with non-governmental organisations. Respondents advocated for educating the communities to equip them with project planning skills and elevate them to a position of proactive participation in the community development projects. This situation presupposes equipping communities with project management skills and entrepreneurial skills. As far as drought is concerned, educating communities in permaculture and conservation farming coupled with rain water harvesting techniques would guarantee good harvests and ultimately help curb the menace of poaching.

A serious challenge facing schools and local communities is lack of financial and capital resources for education and ownership of resources. Without a school curriculum that ensures effective education in the practical tourism and hospitality arena, learners and communities will suffer from lack of skills, a situation which ultimately degenerates into unbalanced and exploitative relationships developing between operators and communities. The relationship between hosts and tourists is also adversely affected. Failure to acquire capital resources and finance is a manifestation of lack of education. Communities need to be empowered through education to enable them to become entrepreneurs and participate implicitly in tourism and hospitality developments in their localities. Respondents believe that the challenge of poorly defined titles to ownership of land and other resources of fauna and flora can be tackled equally through education empowerment. Communities need to be able to understand legal issues related to land tenure, share ownership of resources, the question of consumptive tourism and environmental assessment and auditing of which education is the answer.

There is a need to set up breeding conservatories for wild animals that are consumed by human beings at rural primary schools and community animal sanctuaries for education purposes. A given percentage of those animals would then be released into the wildlife once established to be able to survive on their own.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The research indicated that the Zimbabwe school curriculum laid far too much emphasis on academic education. Tourism and hospitality content is more practically oriented. A school curriculum with more emphasis on manual and practical subjects which have a greater bearing on eco- and cultural tourism developments is therefore strongly recommended. Practical subjects such as music, dance, drama, physical education, computers, home economics, art and crafts need to be drafted into the primary school curriculum and examined at Grade 7 level together with English, Mathematics another language and General Paper or Content. This incorporation of academic and practical subjects can be buttressed by an active interface

between industry, schools and communities through organized, sponsored and regular pupil, learner or student excursions to major tourist resort areas.

The article recommends that in order to protect and preserve culture, there is a need to resuscitate the writing and publishing of indigenous languages and literature. This can be achieved as suggested by some respondents through the reopening of the Zimbabwe Literature Bureau together with the grooming of budding artists in other areas to promote local languages. A special emphasis on tourism teaching and use of tourism and hospitality learning materials can be employed to support the introduction and teaching of practical subjects in schools and communities. There is a need to come up with a code of conduct to be channeled through the curriculum that takes cognizance of traditional conservation methods:

- community education on tree planting ventures to enable regeneration of forests and vegetation;
- forbidding the hunting and killing of young or calving animals;
- techniques on responsible honey and food extraction;
- lessons on cultivation of medicinal herbs;
- encouraging non-destructive methods of collecting wild fruit;
- raising awareness towards respecting and preserving wetlands traditionally considered to be sacred; and
- practicing contour ploughing, permaculture and conservation farming throughout communal lands and in schools.

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