

The impacts of the pandemic on tourism in protected and recreational areas

Dr Anna Spenceley, Chair, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) Tourism and Protected Areas Specialist Group; Director, Global Sustainable Tourism Council

What impacts has COVID-19 pandemic had on nature-based tourism in Africa?

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, over a third of all direct tourism contributions to gross domestic product (GDP) in Africa, and 8.8 million jobs were attributed to wildlife tourism globally in 2018 (1). The UN World Tourism Organisation estimates that entrance, gate and park fees from all types of protected areas in 14 sub-Saharan African countries were estimated US\$ 142 million per year (2).

However, COVID-19 has caused a systemic shock to the tourism sector. A survey by the Kenyan government estimated a loss of US\$ 750 million in tourism revenues and a reduction of almost 1.3 million jobs due to the pandemic. More than 81% of tourism companies have reduced staff and 85% have made pay cuts (3). The nature-based tourism sector has been hit hard by travel restrictions, with severe seismic repercussions for conservation and local livelihoods (see Figure 1).

Innovation - what's being done to help with the recovery?

As the coronavirus pandemic progressed, its transmission became better understood, and many

countries introduced safety precautions to reduce the disease risk for visitors and hosts. New tools include the WTTC's SafeTravels standards and the Adventure Travel Trade Association's COVID-19 health and safety guidelines (5). Several countries and protected area authorities have produced information specifically for their visitors (for example, in Rwanda, South Africa) (6). A collation of this guidance developed under an EU project provides information for protected areas on operating tourism amid COVID-19 (7).

Tourism companies have needed to innovate rapidly to survive. Enterprises have diversified the types of visitor they cater to, their products and services, and their source markets to adjust to changing demand (8). Those that already had diverse products and services to offer have been more resilient as they have alternative income sources. Where tourism operations have farms or gardens on their properties, innovations have included expanding or diversifying production, and using produce to feed staff and their families. Also, virtual tours set up by protected areas and nature-based operators have received considerable traction and interest globally (9). While some of these are free for

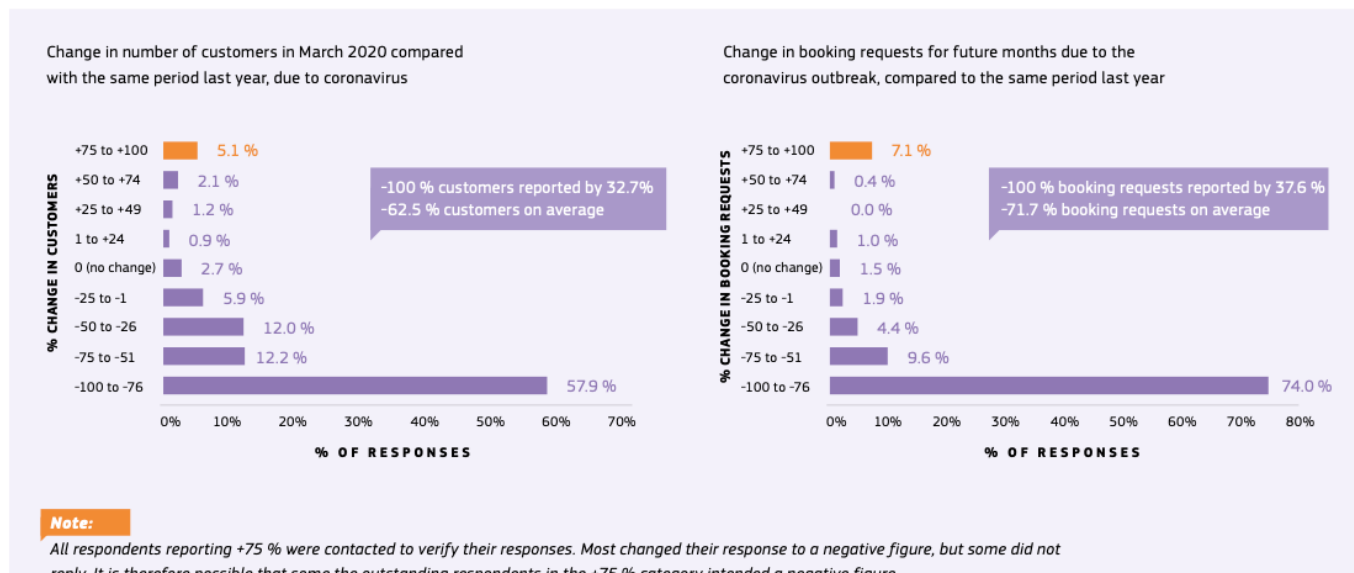


Figure 1: Changes in percentage of customers and bookings due to COVID-19 among tourism operators in African protected areas (4).

users, others are fee-based and can help offset losses in visitor revenue. Such virtual tours provide a way for people to experience natural attractions from their homes while inspiring future travel plans once restrictions are lifted.

A sustainable future

The pause in tourism has given many tourism and conservation professionals an opportunity to reflect on whether they want to go back to the way things were (10), or alternatively to 'build back better' and greener and recover in a more responsible, sustainable and regenerative way (11). The United Nations and international development agencies have been increasingly vocal in their support for sustainable recovery. In August 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres released a policy brief on COVID-19 and transforming tourism, stating that the tourism sector should be rebuilt in a way that is "safe, equitable and climate friendly [and as a] provider of decent jobs, stable incomes and the

protection of our cultural and natural heritage." For travel and tourism to be truly sustainable, broad standards and protocols are needed to address climate change, conservation and social justice. It is also important to conserve nature in protected areas to avoid future zoonoses (12).

This is the time for the tourism sector to seize the moment and enact meaningful changes that will transform the world and make a lasting difference for future generations (13). COVID-19 has accelerated the sustainability agenda, and amid the pause, companies are concentrating efforts on their commercial survival. Many tourism operators see becoming sustainable as too hard to do, but in reality it is not so difficult. Resources like the new "Handbook for Sustainable Tourism Practitioners: The essential toolkit" (14) can help the sector to build back in a regenerative way, with communities at the centre.

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