RESEARCH ARTICLE

A matter of perspective: residents', regulars' and locals' perceptions of private tourism ecolodge concessions in the Kruger National Park, South Africa.

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Abstract:

Privatisation of public assets through public-private partnerships can be contentious, leading to considerable public opposition. In Kruger National Park (Kruger), private tourism ecolodge concessions were established to boost park revenue, offer a new tourism experience and support conservation efforts. However, the support for their establishment by the Kruger's large domestic visitor market has not been quantified. Here, we explore this group's perceptions of the ecolodge concessions, based upon the strength of their association with the park (i.e. how many years they had been visiting the park and number of visits) and their proximity to the park. The results of a survey of 314 domestic visitors suggest that respondents who live closer to the park were significantly more likely to have more experience and better knowledge of the concessions, but were also less likely to support their existence than respondents living further away. Respondents with a long and frequent association with the park had significantly less information about the concessions, but were more likely to say they would visit the concessions if offered an incentive to do so. These results have important implications for how protected area managers market the value of the ecolodge concessions in achieving park objectives.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, private concessions, place attachment, loyalty

1. Introduction:

How people think about, feel and act towards places, i.e. their sense of place, has received increasing attention in the management of natural areas, particularly where these are held in the public interest, such as national parks. Sense of place draws upon themes of cognition, identity conflict, collection action and politics (Cheng, Kruger &

Daniels, 2003), and plays a central role in adaptive co-management approaches to recreation management (Hutson & Montgomery, 2010, p.422).

However, integrating place meanings into protected area management is problematic as “meanings can lurk as invisible tripwires for managers” (Kruger, 2006, p.388). Actions by place managers inevitably create, transform and sometimes destroy place meanings and the individual and group identities of people associated with them (Cheng et al., 2003). Often these changes relate to new tourism initiatives and associated changes in use, access and activities within protected areas (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Hammit, Backlund & Bixler, 2004).

In this paper, we investigate one case of national park management-driven changes to place, and domestic tourists’ response to this change. The site, Kruger National Park, is an iconic tourism attraction of international significance (van der Merwe & Saayman, 2008). It represents a symbol of national identity for many white South Africans. Moreover, the Kruger, like other South African parks, has expanded its recreational base to new users in the post-apartheid era, and recent research shows that the previously disadvantaged black communities also have a sense of pride in the park (Strickland-Munro, Moore & Freitag-Ronaldson 2010).

Furthermore, a “commercialisation for conservation” strategy, involving public-private partnerships with service providers (e.g. food and beverage, shops, day tours, etc.) was adopted by South African National Parks (SANParks) in 2000 to provide additional revenue for national park management (Fearnhead, 2003; Varghese, 2008). The strategy’s objective is multifaceted, aiming to reduce service delivery costs, improve service levels, leverage private capital and expertise, and expand tourism products. It also aims to generate additional revenue to fund conservation efforts and enhance constituency building (SANParks, 2009).

Privatisation of public assets can be highly contentious, leading to public opposition of such decisions (Macaraig, 2011). In the context of the Kruger, the commercialisation strategy was not unilaterally accepted both internally and from external public sectors, particularly in relation to the outsourcing of shops and restaurants, as well as ecolodge concession management (Mabunda & Wilson, 2009).

It is therefore necessary to develop an understanding of domestic tourists' perceptions of these changes to assess whether this has had any effect on visitor loyalty and place attachment.

A number of studies have examined domestic users' perceptions of SANParks' commercialisation strategy more broadly (e.g. Fearnhead, 2007; Mabunda & Wilson, 2009; Varghese, 2008). However, none have focused specifically on the domestic users' perceptions of the ecolodge concessions, one of the key pillars of SANParks' "commercialisation for conservation" strategy. Furthermore, while Mabunda (2004) argued for the implementation of a tourism management framework within Kruger, his proposed principles do not appear to have been effectively implemented, and the park management objectives are still primarily driven by biodiversity conservation philosophies (SANParks, 2008). Therefore, this study focuses on the value and importance of tourist perceptions, with reference to ecolodge concessions.

We first review the literature on place attachment. Stokowski (2002) argued that little research has focused on negative sentiments about place, on the dynamic nature of sense of place, and on the socially constructed meanings of places. We therefore examine the various constructs associated with place attachment needed to understand dynamic meanings created around places (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Dredge, 2010; Williams & Stewart, 1998). These include shared, socially constructed meanings of place, belonging and resultant ingroup/outgroup conflicts, and place-protective responses. We also investigate the resultant management implications associated with safeguarding the "public interest", and visitor trust in the management agency. We focus on Experiential Use History (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000) as one aspect of the temporal process involved in attachment, and finally contrast the above with research on loyalty and novelty seeking in tourism.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Sense of place: place attachment and experience use history

Sense of place is the umbrella term used by researchers to describe the place-environment relationship. Williams and Stewart (1998) describe it as "the collection

of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values and feelings that individuals or groups associate with a particular locality” (p.19). Place attachment is a fundamental component of sense of place (Kyle & Chick, 2007), and central to the current research. However, concepts and characterisations of place attachment can be difficult to compare across different disciplinary backgrounds (c.f. Ramkissoon, Weiler & Smith, 2011).

Place attachment itself is sometimes considered to be the supra-concept that incorporates the various dimensions of sense of place (Table 1), or alternatively represents the affective relationship between people and place in the tripartite conceptualisation of place attachment consisting of affective (place attachment), cognitive (place identity) and conative (place dependence) components (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Hammitt, Kyle and Oh (2009) provide a useful overview and definitions of most of the different concepts associated with place attachments, notably place identity, place dependence, place familiarity, place belongingness and place rootedness (Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Importantly, most studies in this area acknowledge that place attachment, and the creation of place meanings, is a dynamic process dependent on time and increasing familiarity (e.g. Kyle, Mowen & Tarrant, 2004; Raymond, Brown & Weber, 2010). Kyle and Chick (2007) describe this process of repeated place interactions and experiences as the “steady accretion of sentiment” (p.211). Smaldone, Harris and Sanyal (2008) introduce the notions of endurance, frequency and continuity to highlight the importance of time in shaping a sense of place.

The concept of Experience Use History (EUH) also has strong links with place attachment, and has been used as an independent variable to predict place attachment and bonding (Buruck, Stanis, Schneider & Heisey, 2008; Hammitt et al., 2004; 2009). EUH is a useful concept in understanding differences in perceptions of ecological impacts, setting preferences, trip behaviour and so forth. We adopted a temporal analysis of EUH in this study using Bricker and Kerstetter’s (2000, p.235) definition: the “amount and extent of participation by the individual in recreational pursuits”.

Hammitt et al. (2004) suggest that using the multi-variable construct of EUH can divide users into sub-groups that are relevant to natural resource managers. Buruck et al. (2008) explore how the different variables of EUH relate to place attachment, and operationalise EUH as an individual's number of total visits, total years of use, and frequency of use of a site. Place identity was best predicted by how long users have been associated with a place, whilst place dependence was best predicted by the distance between place and the respondent's home and frequency of place use (Buruck et al. 2008). Correspondingly, these parameters form a central component of our analysis assessing the place attachment of domestic visitors to the Kruger.

2.2. Shared Meanings:

One result of the temporal aspect of place attachment described above is the social construction of shared place meanings. Smaldone et al. (2008) conclude from both theory and empirical studies that “longer associations with a place shifts the basis of attachment from the physical to the social aspects of place” (p. 439). Indeed, through this process, places are understood across a set of people and created and reproduced through interpersonal interactions, becoming “formalised in social behaviour and persists in collective memory” (Stokowski, 2002, p.372). Such “social places” are replete with their own symbols, labels and sometimes iconic statuses, e.g. National Park, National Forest and Wilderness Areas, which all evoke socially constructed images or symbols (Stokowski, 2002, p.443).

In some instances, these socially constructed, shared meanings can lead to sense of place belongingness and membership to a place (see Table 1) and eventually to a sense of “insidedness” that may contrasted with a perception of “outsidedness” of other user groups (Halpenny, 2010; Raymond et al., 2010). Cheng et al. (2003) describe how places play a fundamental role in group identity, shaping ingroup behaviour in relation to outgroups. Furthermore, Kruger (2006) suggests that along with the creation of a shared sense of place, the ingroup can develop rituals to sustain the individual and collective identity as well as the shared vision of that place.

Bonaiutu, Carrus, Martorella and Bonnes (2002) documented how people can react to threats to socially constructed places, particularly when this involves a perceived loss of control over land. In their study, they found that the park management agency became the outgroup that was trying to take something away from the ingroup. This is reflected in Stedman, Beckley, Wallace and Ambard (2004) as well as Dredge's (2010) examination of the role of power in shaping places, and the symbols and meaning imposed upon a place by a particular group of people including natural resource managers, tourism organisations and developers.

2.3. Management Implications:

The preceding arguments expose the management implications of understanding both individual and collective senses of place, but also how changes to place evolve and are received by various groups. Therefore, interpreting changes to places is crucial to understanding user responses such that place change becomes a discursive or communicative process between users and key organisations driving the change (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010).

In public places where managers are responsible for the “public interest” any changes brought about by adaptive management approaches require analysis and feedback to assess responses to improve on these management interventions. Central to the public interest aspects of place change is trust in land managers; Devine-Wright and Howes (2010), Dredge (2010) and McKercher, Denizci-Guillet and Ng (2011) all point to the issue of trust as a moderator in how the public interpret and respond to place change.

Furthermore, Clark and Stein (2003) argue that seeing users as either landscape- or social-oriented can help public land management planners understand how best to communicate with stakeholders. The former, they argue, might be more sensitive and/or opposed to localised changes, based on their familiarity with the area, whilst socially oriented users might become more involved in changes that affect the landscape/community relationship (e.g. establishing new land-use policies or regulations, setting new nature-based tourism initiatives, purchasing large natural areas for conservation).

2.4. Tourist loyalty and place attachment

Another social construct associated with place attachment is loyalty (e.g. McKercher et al., 2011; Mechinda, Serirat & Gulid, 2009). Indeed, Niininen, Szivas and Riley (2004) describe attachment as the “close cousin” of consumer loyalty (p.439). McKercher and Denzci (2010) define loyal customers “as frequent, repeat purchasers who feel a sense of belonging to an organisation and who are reluctant to change even in the presence of similar offerings from other firms” (p. 121). Loyalty is measured in terms of attitudinal loyalty, or behavioural loyalty or a composite measure (although this has inherent difficulties associated with weightings).

Although there is some debate around the presence of loyalty in tourism, we note that as a construct, it has been associated with familiarity, involvement, satisfaction, perceived value and service quality/interaction with staff (Alexandris, Kouthouris & Meligdis, 2006; Mechinda et al., 2009). For instance, Mechinda et al. (2009) indicated that that attitudinal loyalty was mainly driven by attachment, familiarity and perceived value, whereas behavioural loyalty is driven by familiarity, as risk-averse tourists are more likely to stay with familiar destinations even if they are not entirely satisfied with it.

In their seminal paper on customer loyalty, Dick and Basu (1994) warn that familiarity may have links with inertia or spurious loyalty, where buyers simply engage in repeat purchase for convenience, lack of substitutes or lack of information on substitutes and psychological costs of discontinuation. Behavioural loyalty may therefore be confused with habitual behaviour and have no underlying loyalty basis. On the other hand, McKercher et al. (2011) argue that attitudinal loyalty, and in particular attitudinal measures that reflect expressions of trust, preference and positive word of mouth, is a much more powerful indicator of loyalty than behaviour.

Some authors have also tried to integrate the concepts of novelty seeking, a key component of tourism behaviour, with loyalty. Niinninen et al. (2004) argue that “novelty-seeking tourists may want to repeat the same type of holiday but they do not wish to return back to the same destination” (p.442), whilst warning that within the

tourism context, it is not the provision of something by the supply side that is important, but the idea of novelty seeking within an individual.

In this study, we propose that all of the concepts introduced above, i.e. place attachment, EUH, familiarity, social construction of meanings and symbols, place disruption, public interest, trust and communication, user conflict, loyalty, perceived value, service quality, habitual behaviour and novelty-seeking, all play a role in shaping the evolving process of establishing ecolodge concessions within South Africa's Kruger National Park. The context of the Kruger will be introduced next, before presenting the aims of the research, methods, findings and discussion.

3. The research context: Kruger National Park

As South Africa's flagship national park, Kruger is the country's largest (~20 000 km²) and oldest (proclaimed in 1926) national park, renowned for its unparalleled wildlife and adaptive management in Africa (du Toit et al., 2003; Venter et al., 2008) (Figure 1). It is also one of the busiest national parks, and has an iconic status as a symbol of South Africa (van der Merwe & Saayman, 2008). In a post-apartheid South Africa visitor numbers have increased dramatically, and the most recent figures for Kruger show that more than 1.4 million tourists visit the park annually, of which about 75% are domestic visitors (SANParks, 2010). At the time of the study, black guests comprise approximately 35% of domestic day and only 6.6% overnight visitors to the Kruger (Joep Stevens, General Manager Tourism Operations, SANParks, Pers Comm, October 2012).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Major social and political changes within South Africa have had significant repercussions on national park management, bringing about changes in the allocation of funds for conservation and expanding park users to new sectors of society. The decision to introduce tourism concessions, of which the ecolodges are one important aspect, in Kruger (as well as some smaller national parks) dates back to the year 2000. At that time, the South African government warned of cutbacks to park funding. The

subsequent move towards “commercialisation for conservation” is explained in a report released by SANParks at the 2003 World Parks Congress (see Fearnhead, 2003). In this report SANParks recognised the negative aspects of tourism management within South Africa’s national parks including:

- The inefficient delivery of tourism products with often mediocre service standards;
- Limited market segmentation and product differentiation;
- Prices that have not been determined by market forces.

In addition, the report highlighted that SANParks does not have the skills, attitudes and incentives that drive successful business, nor the necessary capital for tourism ventures (Fearnhead, 2003). Combined with other inefficient policies and procedures, there was significant opportunity costs to biodiversity conservation (Child, 2002, cited in Child et al., 2004, p. 137). Allowing tourism concessions into South African national parks would enable the park agency to focus on its core tasks of biodiversity conservation, provide additional sources of revenue, diversify the product base, and expand the tourism market (Fearnhead, 2003). Therefore SANParks embarked on a path of commercialisation, outsourcing several of its hitherto core functions within its tourism and hospitality division (e.g. restaurants, shops, guided wildlife viewing tours etc.).

Establishing ecolodge concessions within national parks was seen as part of the commercialisation solution to internal funding and tourism and hospitality expertise constraints. A typical ecolodge concession contract allows a private operator to construct and operate an ecotourism lodge within a national park on a 20 year “build, operate, transfer” contract. The contract gives exclusive rights of occupation and commercial use of the land while adhering to a set of financial, environmental, social and empowerment obligations (Fearnhead, 2003; 2007; Varghese, 2008). As there is no change in ownership and conservation land use of the concession area itself, the ecolodge concessionaire can market themselves using the parks’ existing destination images.

Eleven ecolodge concessions were awarded following the implementation of the commercialisation strategy, seven of which were in Kruger. The ecolodges with their

exclusive wildlife viewing traversing rights are generally perceived as established for, and marketed solely to, wealthy international visitors (Varghese, 2008). Given the national significance of the Kruger within the hearts and minds of South Africans, and the importance of the domestic market in providing financial and political support to this national park, this paper focuses on domestic tourists' perceptions of ecolodge concessions within the Kruger.

This approach is adopted for four reasons. First, the ecolodge concessions' contract with SANParks stipulates that they must further the goals of the protected area in a manner compatible with existing circumstances, including the historical recreational characteristics of the protected area. Second, domestic visitors form the core of the tourism market in many protected areas and are an important sector to target when implementing changes to the recreational management and visitor experiences within the park. Thirdly, the historical status, size and visitation of the Kruger, compared to Table Mountain NP proclaimed only in 1998 but with higher tourist numbers, provides access to a domestic visitor pool to assess long-term loyalty.

Finally, the relationship between domestic park users and ecolodge concessions is a dynamic and complex issue. Whilst the ecolodge concessions were undoubtedly initially designed to attract international visitors, the domestic market has been identified as an untapped market for the ecolodge concessions both by SANParks (e.g. SANParks, 2010) and by the concessionaires themselves (Lukimbi manager, pers. comm., November, 2010). However, the initial market segmentation strategy noted by Varghese (2008), and the dynamics of protected area decision making and public interest noted by Bonaiutu et al. (2002), Stedman et al. (2004) and Dredge (2010) may have left many domestic park users' feeling like the outgroup in the relationship between park managers, ecolodge concessions and wealthy international tourists. This will be in part examined in this study.

4. Research Aims:

Based on previously reported findings above, we expect to find differences in domestic visitors' perceptions of the ecolodge concessions based upon their Experience Use History variables, that is, their length of association with the park,

their frequency of visits, as well as their proximity to the park. In particular, we might expect differences in (i) knowledge of the management, purpose and services offered by the ecolodge concessions, (ii) attitudes towards the establishment of the concessions, (iii) support for and interest in visiting the concessions and finally, (iv) their attitudinal and behavioural loyalty and trust towards SANParks' tourism provisions and management of the park. We explore each of these issues in the results and subsequent discussion.

5. Methods:

The data are derived from a two-page survey of domestic visitors to the Kruger National Park. First, we sought to identify the respondents' Experience Use History based upon their age, first year of visit to the park and frequency of visits to the park. Next we asked respondents about their perceptions of the concessions; we included one question on prior use and/or barriers to use, four questions on the respondents' awareness and knowledge of the ecolodge concessions, two questions concerning levels of support for the ecolodge concessions and interest in visiting the concessions. Finally, we also included one open-ended question for further comments about both SANParks and the concessions more broadly. We used responses from this question to assess loyalty and trust towards SANParks. Finally, we noted the respondents' home town as a measure of park proximity.

The draft questionnaire was reviewed by SANParks staff and pilot tested with eight domestic tourists to check the coherence and relevance of the questions. Subsequent minor changes to the survey were resubmitted to SANParks for approval, then distributed in Kruger by the first author in October and November 2010. Respondents were sought by approaching all tourists present in various picnic sites and rest camps in the southern section of the park - the region with the highest level of domestic tourist visitation and overlap with the concession area locations (Figure 1). Potential respondents were first asked a screening question to confirm their nationality. Only one respondent per travel party was surveyed to reduce potential within-group bias. A total of 314 surveys were completed and the response rate was 95%. Of the five percent that declined to complete the survey, the majority (n=11) were black South African respondents. As a result,

the sample was primarily composed of white South Africans, who currently represent the largest user group within the Kruger.

After agreeing to participate, the specific purpose of the study was explained to respondents. At this time, respondents were not provided with any information about the ecolodge concessions. This enabled the researchers to identify how much prior knowledge the respondents had about the ecolodge concessions (first section of the questionnaire). On completion of the first section of the survey, a standard explanation emphasising the key points of the concessions (areas within the Park that offer exclusive access to overnight guests, and provide additional revenue for SANParks) was given to respondents who requested further information. The diversity of responses to the final two questions (To what extent do you support the strategy of having the ecolodge concessions? Do you have any additional comments?), offers reassurance that the standardised information did not “prime” the responses to subsequent questions.

Data were entered into SPSS 17.0 and analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-squared tests and content analysis. For the latter, the first author inductively decided on content categories and both researchers coded the responses independently. This intuitive coding process was selected over other software based systems (e.g. NVivo) to capture the subtle differences in visitor responses, avoid deterministic and rigid coding processes, focus on depth, meaning and linkages between various content categories. Where there was low agreement in the number of responses with matching codes (i.e. 50-70% agreement), both authors discussed the comment to reach agreement.

6. Results:

6.1. Experience Use History:

For 97% of respondents this was not their first visit to the park. Based upon on their frequency and length of association with the park, four categories of respondents were identified. First, 32.0% of respondents had visited the park once a year or more, since

childhood (under 18 years of age). These respondents had long and frequent association with the park. Next, 31.3% of the respondents had been visiting the park at least once a year since they were adults (over 18 years of age). This group represented respondents with a short and frequent association with the park. A total of 18.3% of respondents had visited the park less than once a year since childhood, and therefore had a long and infrequent association with the park. Finally, 18.4% of respondents had visited the park less than once a year since they were adults, indicating a short and infrequent association with the park.

Regarding proximity to the park, a third of the respondents lived in Gauteng (including the major urban areas of Johannesburg and Pretoria), whilst another 13% were from Nelspruit, the capital city of Mpumalanga, where the southern region of the Kruger is located. Over one-quarter (26%) of the respondents lived within 100km of the park boundary. An interactive effect between the visitation variables and proximity to park variables was detected using a chi-squared analysis; respondents who lived closer to the park were significantly more likely to visit the park more frequently than more distant respondents ($\chi^2 = 22.82, p < 0.05, \text{d.f.} = 3$).

6.2. Knowledge of the concessions, their management, purposes and services:

Knowledge of the concessions was generally low and only 7.6% had previously visited an ecolodge concession. Proximity to the park appears to have a greater influence on experience with, and knowledge of, the ecolodge concessions. Respondents who had previously visited the ecolodge concessions were significantly more likely to live within 100km of the park ($\chi^2 = 9.54, p < 0.05, \text{d.f.}=1$). Conversely, those living further than 100km from the park were significantly more likely to say that they had no knowledge of the concessions ($\chi^2 = 5.00, p < 0.05, \text{d.f.}=1$).

Additionally, respondents who lived within 100km of the park were more likely to say that they had some knowledge of the concessions' products and services ($\chi^2 = 13.18, p < 0.05, \text{d.f.}=1$), whilst respondents who lived more than 100km away from the park were significantly more likely to say that they had no knowledge of ecolodge concession environmental management practices ($\chi^2 = 9.31, p < 0.05, \text{d.f.}=1$). The

respondents' EUH with the park had no effect on either result, although respondents who had a longer and more frequent association with the park were significantly more likely to say that they knew someone who had visited the concessions ($\chi^2 = 17.20, p < 0.05, d.f.=1$).

When asked about the information sources that they used to gather information about the concessions, just under half (45%) of all respondents said that they were unaware of any available information regarding the concessions. This result was significantly higher for respondents with a long and frequent association with the park ($\chi^2 = 9.280, p < 0.05, d.f.=1$). It is also interesting to note that respondents with a long and frequent association with the park were significantly more likely to say that they found information about the concessions on the SANParks' website and public forum ($\chi^2 = 8.153, p < 0.05, d.f.=1$).

Based upon coding of open-ended questions, EUH and park proximity appear to influence respondents' attitudes towards the establishment of the ecolodge concessions. Table 2 highlights these differences in key areas of concern across the different groups of respondents and examples of responses are provided below. Only three of these areas of concern were significantly different across groups of respondents; concerns with open vehicles were reported significantly more frequently by respondents with a long and frequent association with the park ($\chi^2 = 8.509, p < 0.05, d.f.=3$) as well as respondents who lived closer to the park ($\chi^2 = 4.248, p < 0.05, d.f.=1$), whilst respondents with a long and infrequent association with the park were significantly more concerned regarding the revenue generated by the concessions ($\chi^2 = 18.044, p < 0.05, d.f.=3$).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Examples of comments provided in this open-ended question include:

- *“Conservation costs a lot of money, if we had to pay for it through entrance fees the park would be inaccessible to us. This is a good compromise but it would be nice if they were affordable to us”* - respondent with a long and frequent association with the park.

- *“They (the concessions) are only for the very rich, Kruger should be open to all”* - respondent with a shorter but frequent association with the park.
- *“If they (the concessions) are contributing financially to the park that is fantastic, but we don't know enough about them to say if we support them”* - respondent with a longer and infrequent association with the park.

Finally, proximity to the park and EUH had differing relationships to support for, and interest in, the ecolodge concessions. On the one hand, a chi-squared comparison of frequencies revealed that respondents with a longer association (both frequent and infrequent) with the park were significantly more likely to say they would visit the concessions if offered an incentive ($\chi^2 = 17.85, p < 0.05, \text{d.f.}=3$). On the other hand, respondents living within a 100km radius of the park were more likely than other respondents to say that they did not support the concessions, although this difference was not significant (Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

6.3. Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty and trust towards SANParks' tourism provisions and management of the park

Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards SANParks' tourism provisions and management of the park were mentioned 65 times in the open-ended question. Of these comments, 22 reflected a sense of loyalty, either behavioural or attitudinal, towards SANParks tourism provision and the remaining 43 indicated either a dissatisfaction with SANParks or alternatively, demonstrated novelty-seeking behaviour towards the ecolodge concessions, that is, an active interest in finding out more about the ecolodge concessions. These responses also varied depending on the nature of the respondents' park association (Table 3), or their proximity to the park (Table 4).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Of the 231 valid responses to the final open-ended question, 149 addressed SANParks' relationship with the concessions. These responses either indicated that there was (i) a lack of understanding of the relationship; (ii) a conditional acceptance ("if" or "should" statements); (iii) concerns regarding SANParks' management approach and finally (iv) a trusting acceptance of the ecolodge concessions for the good of the park. An obvious difference is noted between respondents with a long and frequent park association, who are less likely to provide uncertain responses and more likely to be concerned about the ecolodge concessions than respondents with a short and infrequent park association (Figure 3). When respondents who live close to the park are compared with respondents living further from the park (Figure 4), it is the former who show a greater level of uncertainty towards the park management and tourism provision.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Discussion:

At the outset of this paper we identified a number of aims to assess how domestic visitors, with different visitation patterns to a national park, perceived changes brought about by the park management agency and demonstrated an acceptance and/or tolerance towards changes to their social places. The majority (82%) of domestic visitors have a long or frequent association with the Kruger, based on EUH, suggesting that they are likely to have a strong sense of place attachment (Hammit et al., 2004; Buruck et al., 2008). Indeed, sentiments expressed during the surveys suggest that this long association has established the Kruger as a "social place" within the minds of domestic visitors (Smaldone et al., 2008). As one respondent

commented “*Kruger has lost the feeling it once had, the staff don’t make you feel part of it anymore*”. This comment also highlights the concern that some respondents had about the changes to their sense of place brought about by management changes, particularly the commercialisation process.

Importantly, the ecolodge concessions are but one component of a larger commercialisation strategy undertaken by SANParks where the outsourcing of other tourism services has also generated negative sentiments (e.g. service quality in restaurants, pricing in shops, number and behaviour of open game drive vehicles etc.) (Mabunda & Wilson, 2009). How domestic visitors perceive the ecolodge concessions also needs to consider these other drivers that affect their holistic sense of place. This reiterates the sentiments of those authors highlighting that place attachment is a dynamic process (Kyle et al., 2004a; Raymond et al., 2010), but emphasises that this dynamic is influenced by both positive and negative associations with a place.

Despite their strong sense of place and attachment to the park, respondents showed low awareness of tourism related changes within the park, particularly where visitors have had no firsthand experience of such changes, or these changes have not impacted upon their overall experience. The respondents surveyed here have little knowledge of the commercial ecolodge concessions, despite these being operational for over ten years in the Kruger. Therefore, the majority (92%) would appear not to have had any interaction or experience with these new places although their presence may alter the sense of place within the Kruger more broadly. These aspects are explored further below.

Many respondents were unaware of information available on these concessions, particularly amongst those with a long and frequent association with the park. The knowledge, or lack thereof, surrounding concessions may have contributed to the visitors expressing sentiments of concern when considering the relationship between the park management agency and the ecolodge concession operators. While trust is an important factor in the relationship between land managers and users (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Dredge, 2010; McKercher et al. 2011), the lack of trust may not translate into opposition of the change, or indeed loyalty to the Kruger itself.

Nonetheless, the levels of concern noted in this study should act as a red flag for SANParks to facilitate wider communication and engagement with the domestic visitors to the KNP. Mabunda (2004) highlighted that the tourism and recreational values within the Kruger are not adequately recognised by park management and called for the development of a tourism management framework to be integrated within the overall park management plan. Given that tourism research and knowledge management were seen as pivotal to improving the integration of tourism values within park management practices (Mabunda, 2004), the apparent lack of these strategies within the currently approved management plan for the Kruger (SANParks, 2008) are of concern.

While the Kruger Management Plan looks towards well established models (e.g. LAC, VIM, VERP, TOMM) to deliver sustainable tourism products there is little mention of the need to engage with the visitors themselves, particularly the large domestic visitor market. Active engagement would provide visitors with information about the ecolodge concessions, and also to allow them an opportunity to experience these areas to create meanings associated with these places over time (Kyle et al., 2004a). Establishing more transparent information sharing about the ecolodge concessions will also likely facilitate their acceptance by domestic visitors as this will address many of their perceived issues surrounding the concessions themselves.

Many of the respondents with a long and frequent association with the Kruger expressed concern about access restrictions, the total number of visitors to the park (i.e. overcrowding), the number of open vehicles, and affordability of tourism services. Similar relationships between how visitors identify with places and their perceptions have been reported by Kyle et al., (2004b). And in fact, many concerns raised by domestic visitors to the Kruger are not solely restricted to ecolodge concessions, highlighting a degree of miscommunication between SANParks and these visitors.

A closer inspection of these issues, e.g. road closures, overcrowding, open-vehicles and affordability, reveals some interesting dynamics that can shape the sense of place for visitors to the park. For example, the establishment of the concessions in

previously inaccessible areas has seen the creation of about 43 km of restricted access roads, or 1% of the roads in the park visible to general tourists, compared to 1400 km of restricted access SANParks' management roads, or 35% of roads visible to general tourists. Furthermore, visitors to ecolodge concessions are less likely to contribute to overcrowding issues as the bulk of their time will be spent in the exclusive use areas set aside for each concessionaire.

In addition, while open vehicles are commonly used by the ecolodge concessions there are 47 commercial tour operators who visit the park daily in 187 open vehicles in the generally accessible tourist areas (SANParks, 2008). Finally, accommodation at the ecolodges is targeted towards the high-end tourist market, but dissatisfaction about affordability also potentially pertains to the products in outsourced shops, restaurants and picnic sites. Domestic visitors' perceptions surrounding the ecolodge concessions are therefore influenced by broader issues, and whilst domestic visitors may once have felt part of the Kruger, the increase in commercial tour operators and knowledge of inaccessible areas (i.e. ecolodge concessions) may increase the feeling of "outsidedness" amongst these visitors.

Consideration of the multidimensional nature of human emotions, and how this influences place attachment is therefore argued (Manzo, 2003). How a person's negative perceptions of a place affect their previously positive attachment to a place is poorly addressed in the literature. We demonstrate here that while domestic visitors to national parks can have a primarily positive attachment to these places their negative perceptions brought about by changes to the place itself could change these views. How this further impacts on visitor loyalty remains to be determined.

Despite domestic visitors to the Kruger demonstrating considerable, perhaps spurious, loyalty to SANParks in terms of the affordability and overall experience (Tables 3 and 4), they also voiced concerns over the establishment of the ecolodge concessions and the commercialisation process more broadly. Importantly, it was the park visitors with long and frequent associations with the park who were more likely to be uncertain and concerned with park management changes in regards to the provision of ecolodge concessions within the park. Furthermore, these sentiments also tended

to be held by those visitors living in close proximity to the park as opposed to those further away.

We noted throughout the results that apparent behavioural loyalty was consistently exhibited by respondents, whilst attitudinal loyalty was less evident. Respondents also voiced mixed opinions; some declared themselves satisfied with SANParks' tourism provision, whilst also expressing an interest in experiencing "something different" within the Kruger (i.e. novelty-seeking behaviour), others felt constrained to SANParks' tourism provision by a lack of resources to enable them to visit the ecolodge concessions. Many exhibited both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty to SANParks, whilst some voiced a deep concern and/or mistrust regarding SANParks' strategy of "commercialisation for conservation".

In conclusion, adopting a sense of place approach to investigate domestic visitor perceptions of one aspect of SANParks "commercialisation for conservation" strategy has highlighted the complex and dynamic relationship between EUH, place attachment, loyalty and trust between the parks' management agency and arguably its biggest user group. We suggest that these results may provide an impetus for thinking about relationship marketing between SANParks and their largest user group; Venter et al. (2008) remind us that improving "assertiveness in marketing values, especially those conducive to achieving Park objectives by embedding them within a wider set of societal values" is one of SANParks' strategies for addressing emerging management issues. Finally, the lessons learned regarding sense of place, ecolodge concessions and the importance of relationship management with major stakeholder groups can be transferred to national parks in other countries that are considering adopting this commercialisation strategy.

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Table 1. The various dimensions associated with place attachment, taken from Hammitt et al. (2009).

<i>Place identity</i>	Those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideals, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals and behavioural tendencies and skills relevant to this environment.
<i>Place dependence</i>	An individual's perceived strength of association between him or herself and a special place...a two component process by which occupants assess the quality of the current place and the relative quality of comparable places.
<i>Place familiarity</i>	Pleasant memories, attribute and cognitive meanings and environmental images that result from acquaintances and remembrances associated with recreation places.
<i>Place belongingness</i>	A feeling of affiliation with place, a social bond where people feel as though they are connected and hold membership with an environment.
<i>Place rootedness</i>	A strong and focused bond that "in its essence means being completely at home – that is unreflectively secure and comfortable in a particular location".

Table 2. The proportion of responses received by domestic visitors in relation to their identification of issues associated with the establishment of ecolodge concessions within the Kruger National Park. Note: Not all columns add up to 100% as respondents identified multiple issues.

Areas of concern	Park association				Park proximity	
	long & frequent (n= 81)	short & frequent (n= 74)	long & infrequent (n=46)	short & infrequent (n=35)	Close	Distant
park accessibility	23.5%	28.5%	15.0%	8.5%	26.0%	20.5%
open vehicles	20.0%	7.0%	6.5%	8.5%	4.5%	14.0%
affordability	18.5%	8.0%	19.5%	5.5%	15.0%	13.0%
revenue generation	11.0%	11.0%	32.5%	3.0%	9.0%	16.5%
concession expansion	6.0%	5.5%	4.5%	8.5%	1.5%	8.0%
tourism carrying capacity	7.5%	2.5%	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%	3.5%
conservation outcomes	5.0%	4.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.0%	2.0%
unconcerned	3.5%	2.5%	8.5%	0.0%	3.0%	4.0%
opposed	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%	3.0%	1.5%	0.5%

Table 3. Domestic visitor comments reflecting their apparent loyalty to SANParks as a function of their association with the Kruger National Park.

Park Assoc.	Type of Comment	# comments	Example of comments
Long & Frequent	Attitudinal loyalty to SANParks	n = 5	<i>“SANParks is always the best”</i>
	Novelty-seeking	n = 17	<i>“They (the concessions) should be priced in such a way that the local population can support them, I would like to treat my wife to a stay in one, but they are just too expensive for us”</i>
Short & Frequent	Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty to SANParks	n = 10	<i>“I helped fund the building of the Mopani Rest Camp, so I get 40 free nights each year there, I love it there and would not go anywhere else”</i>
	Novelty-seeking	n = 15	<i>“I researched them (the concessions) after the local radio recommended them, and it sounds great, I would definitely pay for better comfort”</i>
Long & Infrequent	Behavioural loyalty to SANParks	n = 3	<i>“I can’t imagine how they (the concessions) can offer value for money. I am happy with what SANParks offers, it’s the same game, the same roads”</i>
	Lack of apparent loyalty to SANParks	n = 7	<i>“Service is lacking SANParks rest camps, staff are very unhelpful so it’s good that alternatives are available”</i>
Short & Infrequent	Attitudinal loyalty to SANParks	n = 4	<i>“I have the same experience in the rest camps...this appeals more to my values, why pay for 2 nights in an expensive lodge when I can create the same extravagance myself in the rest camps”</i>
	Novelty-seeking	n = 4	<i>“every so often it would be nice to have the Kruger Experience but get spoilt at the same time”</i>

Table 4. Domestic visitor comments reflecting their apparent loyalty to SANParks as a function of their residential proximity to the Kruger National Park.

Park Prox.	Type of Comment	# comments	Example of comments
Close	Attitudinal loyalty to SANParks	n = 6	<i>“We prefer to camp, so they (the concessions) are not relevant to us, but we are not opposed to them”</i>
	Novelty-seeking	n = 14	<i>“They (the concessions) all seem very nice, and very expensive, they are not affordable for us, but I would like to try them some day”</i>
Distant	Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty to SANParks	n = 26	<i>“I prefer a quieter bush experience so they (the concessions) are not for me”</i>
	Novelty-seeking	n = 15	<i>“It would be nice to stay in them (the concessions), we have already been to the park so many times, it would be nice to try something new”.</i>

Figure 1: The location of the Kruger National Park along the borders of South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The ecolodge concession areas within the park are depicted in relation to the primary park management zones.

Figure 2: The proportion of domestic visitors who either do not support, show some support, or support the establishment of the ecolodge concessions within the Kruger National Park in relation to their residential proximity to the park.

Figure 3: Domestic visitor reflections on their understanding of the relationship between the ecolodge concessions and the Kruger National Park based on their association with the park.

Figure 4: Domestic visitor reflections on their understanding of the relationship between the ecolodge concessions and the Kruger National Park based on their residential proximity to the park.