

Utopia or dystopia – deterrents to ecotourism development in Fiji

Abstract

This paper draws on sustainability and ecotourism literature and aims to identify the deterrents to ecotourism development. The research opted to use Abaca Ecotourism Park, located in the Koroyanitu National Heritage Park in Western Viti Levu Fiji, as a case study. Three studies exploring management, local residents, and tourists' perspectives were undertaken to determine the factors that deter from the further development of the selected ecotourism project. Study 1 conducted an interview with the management team of the ecotourism park to gain insights into the factors that influenced the project's development. Study 2 was undertaken with the villagers who reside in the region where the ecotourism park is located. Longitudinal secondary research covering 20 years of data was used in Study 3 to identify tourists' visitation and consumption patterns. Some findings were consistent across the three studies. The results reveal a range of deterrents to the ecotourism development, including infrastructure constraints, issues related to inequality, overdependence on neighbouring countries, and political vulnerabilities. The implications for the literature and practitioners conclude the paper.

Keywords: Ecotourism, sustainability, Fiji, tourism deterrents

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INTRODUCTION

Advertised as a South Pacific hidden paradise, Fiji is an archipelago of more than 300 islands and acclaimed for its beautiful landscape, exotic flora and fauna, remote location, friendliness, and the genuine hospitality of its people. These islands are depicted as an idyllic paradise with much fantasy, myth, and romanticism associated with the host (White, 2007). Modern tourism in Fiji emerged in the 1960s, and gradually evolved into a major sector of foreign exchange earnings. Tourism has become the largest contributor to Fiji's economy and job creation, recording 894,389 visitors in 2019 with rising trends (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

Mass tourism in Fiji faces challenges reflected in an overdependence on foreign capital, leakage of tourism profits, malpractice of tourism policies, environmental degradation, and climatic contamination. Fiji has been depleting its resources to attain economic gains, leading to social and environmental issues, in addition to the country's susceptibility to climatic changes and natural disasters. These issues suggest a requirement to develop a sustainable tourism model. Ecotourism is founded on sustainability initiatives that aim to resolve issues related to conventional resort-based mass tourism and by upholding environmental conservation and sustainable development (Korth, 2016; Tyllianakis et al., 2019).

Ecotourism in Fiji is nature-based, with waterfalls, mountain peaks, nature-trekking, historical sites, and can offer accommodation in traditional housing (*bure*). Nature-based ecotourism intends to foster an appreciation for nature and local culture, conserve the physical and social environments, and work towards the improvement of the welfare of local people (Weaver and Lawton, 2007). In addition to countering the side effects of mass tourism, Harrison et al. (2003) suggests the rise of ecotourism in Fiji can be attributed to growing environmental concerns, government initiatives to assist underdeveloped rural areas, policies to prevent or reduce further rural–urban migration, and to manage economic and sociocultural

impacts. Burns (2006) later proposed adoption of the principle of *Vaka Pasifika* by prioritising rural- and community-based tourism. Although ecotourism began to evolve in the mid-1980s, with an ecotourism division established in the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation of Fiji, there were no plans or policies to promote this initiative. It was not until late 1990s, that the *Ecotourism and Village Based Tourism: A Policy and Strategy for Fiji* (Harrison, 1999) was released to formalise strategies and policies.

However, the policies and remedial measures have been described as old wine in a green bottle for tourism operators and marketers to make quick profits (Harrison et al., 2003). The ecotourism projects undertaken have encountered numerous constraints and have mostly been considered failures (Farrelly, 2011; Korth, 2016; Scheyvens, 1999). No research to date has attempted to identify what caused these failures and the potential deterrents to ecotourism project development in Fiji. The literature has identified a range of factors associated with ecotourism development including underdeveloped infrastructure, insufficient tourism facilities, conflicts between stakeholders, and poor management (Arsic et al., 2017; Asadpourian et al., 2020; Mallick et al. 2020; Preston-Whyte and Watson, 2005; Van Amerom, 2006). However, these factors tend to be case-based and geographically bounded. The deterrents identified in the literature were primarily approached from a single perspective, for instance, tourists (Mallick et al., 2020), tour guides (Peake et al., 2009), or experts (Bunruamkaew and Murayanm, 2011). For instance, A recent study approached from tourist perspective to identify factors associated with ecolodge in Fiji that influence tourist satisfaction (Mafi et al., 2020). Each ecotourism destination has its own attraction and characteristics, which are subject to different influencing forces. Researchers (e.g., Asadpourian et al., 2020; Mallick et al., 2020; Peake et al., 2009) indicated that the issues and problems associated with the sustainable development of ecotourism are dependent upon geographical locations, the stakeholders, and cultural and national backgrounds.

Whether these factors influence the tourism industry in Fiji is unknown. The current study aims to identify the deterrents to ecotourism development in Fiji. The study opts for one ecotourism project - the Koroyanitu National Heritage Park (KNHP) across six villages with a focus on Abaca National Heritage Park (ANHP) that is representative of the similar ecotourism projects in Fiji. To capture a wholistic picture of the deterrents or constraints, this research conducted three studies and approached multiple stakeholders including the management of the ecotourism park, the local residents who were directly involved with the park, and the tourists with intention to understand the differing perspectives within an ecotourism project to investigate the factors that deter ecotourism development in Fiji. The following section discusses the literature relevant to ecotourism development. The methodology will then be outlined, followed by the presentation of the results. A discussion of the research findings and implications for the literature and practitioners conclude the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecotourism

Ecotourism emerged as a sustainable alternate form of tourism as a reaction to the negative impacts of mass tourism (Cobbinah, 2015). Ecotourism has been defined from different perspectives in the literature (see Fennell, 2001). Based on a content analysis, Fennell (2001) summarised the most frequently cited variables within definitions including the occurrence of ecotourism, resource conservation, culture, local benefits, education, ethics, and sustainability. In general, ecotourism is referred to as a form of nature-based tourism which involves responsible travel to relatively underdeveloped areas to foster an appreciation of nature and local cultures, while conserving the physical and social environment, respecting the aspiration and traditions of those visited, and improving the welfare of the local people (Blamey, 1997; Cheia, 2013; Donohoe and Needham, 2006). Some ecotourism destinations have been described as a utopic paradise with nature-based activities, idyllic scenery, and

exotic nature (e.g., Burnie, 1994; Honey, 2008; Honey and Rome, 2001), although the paradise can become dystopia if poorly managed (e.g., Hoyman and McCall, 2013).

The benefits of ecotourism

Ecotourism was expected to enhance positive environmental, economic, and socio-cultural outcomes. Environmentally, ecotourism has been associated with nature-based tourism activities that encourage environmental education and protection. Ecotourism aims to conserve the environment and deliver financial and non-financial benefits to both tourists and local communities (Cobbinah, 2015; Page and Dowling, 2002). Weaver (1998) indicate that ecotourism could create employment and generate revenue from tourism activities. Non-financial benefits include skill development and social welfare for small, rural, and remote communities that may struggle due to insufficient government attention and assistance (Regmi and Walter, 2016; Stone and Stone, 2011). Ecotourism may enable local communities an opportunity to utilise their internal strengths and resources to become self-sufficient (Joppe, 1996). Culturally, ecotourism could help promote cultural preservation and respect (Honey, 2008).

Deterrents to ecotourism development

While the benefits of ecotourism are commonly discussed in the literature, ecotourism development has encountered various internal and external constraints. Prior research from differing perspectives has attempted to understand what factors may deter ecotourism development. From an environmental perspective, researchers (Buchsbaum, 2004; Wondirad et al., 2020) have indicated that the very presence of tourists could result in some degradation of the environment and it has become a challenging task to balance the damage caused by tourists and the ongoing preservation of the ecosystem. The tourism activities may damage environmental assets through the emission of waste and the loss of biodiversity and wild habitats (Epler Wood, 2002).

Infrastructure is also a key issue to ecotourism development and sustainability. As most ecotourism projects are located remotely from business districts and high street zones, the lack of a convenient transportation system and other tourism facilities can be a challenge for ecotourists (Arsić et al., 2017; Mallick et al., 2020). Despite the need for financial subsidies to upgrade infrastructure, excessive legal requirements and taxation have also discouraged investment (Arsić et al., 2017).

Some studies have concluded that ecotourism has been as a marketing tactic to attract environment-conscious tourists (Courvisanos and Jain, 2006; Drumm and More, 2002). Sustainability has also been hindered by the failure of effective collaboration between the governments, conservation agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and local communities, who have conflicting interests (Cobbinah et al., 2015). Research (Arsić et al., 2017; Mallick et al., 2020) has also identified that poor knowledge and communication between stakeholders, including local management, local travel agencies, caterers, and the locals is problematic. Ecotourism has also been labelled ‘ego-tourism’ (Wheeler, 1993).

Ecotourism development in Fiji

Limited research has examined the deterrents to ecotourism development in Fiji. Political instability, cultural traditions, and frequent natural disasters may play a role in the success or failure of the tourism sector. Political vulnerability had a impact on tourists’ perceptions of safety and security and may influence their decision to travel (Hall, Timothy and Duval, 2004; Sonmez, 1998). There have been four political coups within the last four decades (May and September 1987, 2000 and 2006) in Fiji. Post-Coup recovery policies attempted to rebuild the image of stability and safety to attract potential investors to the islands (Narayan, 2005). However, many ecotourism agencies reduced their budgets after the 2000 coup (Harrison and Brandt, 2003). The unequal distribution of power within institutions and

society may also have implications for ecotourism development (Gibson, 2012; Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Pratt et al., 2013).

Fiji is an ethnically divided society between *i-Taukei* (native Fijians) and Indo-Fijians with most of the ecotourism community-based projects falling under the ownership of native Fijians. In indigenous Fijian culture, chiefs and elders are respected and recognised as community leaders with the utmost authority and power and are positioned at the apex of the hierarchical society (Niukula, 1992). The unequal distribution of power within institutions and society has become a social norm based on the *vanua*ⁱ concept (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Pratt et al., 2013) that has significant implications for the management of community-owned and operated development ventures (Gibson, 2012). The *i-Taukei* village tourism stakeholders may not dissent as it may be considered forbidden (*tabu*). Korth (2016) stated that within Fiji ecotourism cannot be considered alternative sustainable tourism as it is politically motivated and ethnically inclined towards the indigenous Fijian population.

Tourism in Fiji is also highly vulnerable to natural disasters, such as cyclones and floods, which have an adverse effect on the economy and tourism. These natural disasters are unpredictable and frequent, mostly between November to April. Environmental change is arguably driving the velocity of cyclones and may increase the probability of increased landslides due to heavy rains. Furthermore, being an island there are issues relating to waste as there are no facilities in the regions where ecotourism projects are usually established. Illegal dumping exacerbates the consequences of natural disasters (*Fiji Times*, 15 September 2014). No research to date has attempted to examine the factors that may affect the ecotourism projects in Fiji. The study undertakes a case-based approach and opts for Abaca National Heritage Park to identify the deterrents. The following section provides the characteristics of the ecotourism park and the rationale for the choice of Abaca as a case study

Abaca

Abaca is located in the centre of the Koroyanitu National Heritage Park (KNHP) (See the map in Figure 1). Abaca ecotourism park, also referred to as Abaca National Heritage Park (ANHP) is located at western Viti Levu, a tropical montane forest, which traditionally had never been logged. However, due to pressures from the logging and mining sectors, local chiefs and landowners established protection of their land in 1993 as the Koroyanitu National Heritage Park. The kinship group moved the settlement several times in the past and finally settled in the valley. The KNHP is owned by 18 landowners from six local villages—Abaca, Vakabuli, Nalotawa, Yaloku, Navilawa, and Nadele/Korobebe (see Figure 1) with a representative being appointed by each village (Abaca, 1999). The KNHP project was initiated to raise awareness of land reservation and to generate income for local residents. A report was prepared for the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP) under the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP) to track changes in the Koroyanitu Conservation Area. This report focused on biodiversity, resources, and health. The Abaca ecotourism project is managed by the Abaca Ecotourism Cooperative Ltd. with a chairman, a secretary-general, and an accountant (Kaizu and Yamaguchi, 2009). There were 27 families with about 97–100 people residing in Abaca at the end of 2018ⁱⁱ, with three *matanqalis*ⁱⁱⁱ and two *yavusas*^{iv}, headed by the chief of the village.

Insert Figure 1 here

ANHP was chosen for this study due to its central location in one of the biggest ecotourism parks with similar characteristics as others in Fiji. This park has abundant resources for ecotourists and a large ecotourism centre, and has become an ecotourism hub with abundant natural resources in the western Viti Levu region including, waterfalls, the highest mountain peak, nature-trekking tracks, historical sites, and accommodation in traditional houses (*bure*).

Like other ecotourism parks in Fiji, the attraction of ANHP is its natural beauty, the calm and spectacular views, and the friendly local residents, referred to as indigenous Fijians or iTaukei who differ from Indo-Fijians. The cliffs around Abaca pose as an impressive backdrop against the Koroyanitu mountain range (Abaca, 1999). Abaca has been conserving and planting forest plants and trees, which have several benefits as medicines (many indigenous plants are grown there that provide medical remedies in KNHP), and are used in food, cooking oils, fragrances, and costume ornaments. The villagers are aware of their usage, seasonality, and growing place (Abaca, 1999). The natural resources of Abaca have added to the growing trend of a 'greener orientation' (Harrison et al. 2003). The 'vegetation observed around Abaca by this consultancy team is a mosaic of forest stands, scrublands, abandoned garden areas, grasslands, gardens and plantations' (Ward et al., 1999). Abaca provides opportunities for tourists to rejuvenate and appreciate village-based community culture within a natural environment. Activities include horseback riding, cooking, planting, village stays, working with villagers, and dancing, as well as ecotourism activities such as adventure and trekking (Abaca, 1999).

Abaca is also close to Nadi International Airport and Lautoka Wharf making it attractive to international tourists. Despite these advantages, the ecotourism business has been sluggish, and the tourism resources are underused. The development of the ecotourism project in this area has faced many challenges and constraints. This study aims to identify the causes that have hindered the development of Abaca ecotourism park with the intention to develop appropriate strategies for growing and sustaining the project.

Research was undertaken in an 18-month period (from 2017 to 2019) and based on fieldwork at the Abaca ecotourism project in Lautoka. Three studies were undertaken to identify the factors that affect ecotourism development. Study 1 conducted in-depth interviews with the management team, followed by a survey of local residents in Study 2. Concurrently, secondary data research was undertaken in Study 3 to examine tourist trends and consumption

patterns by analysing sales associated with Abaca ecotourism from 1999, when the first invoice was issued, to 2018 when the current research was completed, including entry ticket income. The research team sought assistance from the indigenous communities who run the ecotourism park. They **were supportive and provided access to research participants**. The research team ensured that the study was undertaken in a culturally appropriate manner by following their protocols, for example, participating in the sevusevu - the ceremonial presentation of Kava to the chief of the village.

STUDY 1: THE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

METHODS

Sample

To identify the obstacles and challenges at the project, interviews were arranged with staff, including the project manager, the secretary, the accountant, the head villager, and six others who had been running or were directly involved with the project since its inception in 1993. The selected interviewees had similarities and variances in terms of their level of involvement, commitment, responsibilities, and interests in the ecotourism project. The sample size was determined to be adequate based on the research aim and replication logic (Dworkin, 2012; Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling was applied to access prospective respondents as some were not at the site during the study. This method has merits to access populations that are hard to reach and expands sample size, manifested by participants' referrals, which generates more respondents with similar backgrounds (Heckathorn, 2011). Cases were selected until theoretical saturation was achieved, and further responses became redundant (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Data collection procedure and data analysis

The management team of Abaca ecotourism park were approached, and four visits were made to the park. The research team was culturally aware of protocols during the research, and

participated in the ceremony of sevusevu during the first visit. *Talaona*^v(Vaioleti, 2006), is an unstructured interview method that suits the Fijian/Pacific research community and was utilised in this study. Each interview took approximately twenty to thirty minutes at a location preferred by the interviewee. The interviews were conducted in English. The interview questions were centred on asking the participants the major constraints and deterrents of the ecotourism park. A few topics based on the extant literature were raised by the interviewers including infrastructure, education, environmental issues, politics, funding, and marketing.

Interview responses were audio-recorded. Some topics that were voluntarily raised by the interviewees but deemed to be irrelevant to the research objectives were noted for discussion with the interviewees' permission. The recorded responses were transcribed verbatim, which allowed unbiased automated extraction of seed concepts and themes to generate an objective and higher-level view of the dataset. NVIVO was employed for data analysis. This software is able to analyse large amounts of qualitative data with a specialist automated content analysis application (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). Thematic analysis was performed to identify the patterns or themes within the data, which was then merged into similar categories.

RESULTS

Several themes emerged from this study. These themes reveal internal and external deterrents to the ecotourism project development at Abaca, ranging from infrastructure constraints, inequality issues, insufficient funding, and urban migration. These factors are somewhat related. The issue with infrastructure relates to the location of the ecotourism project and the leakage of funding that was allocated for the upgrade of the tourism facilities. The shortage of funding was a result of unequal allocation of tourism revenues and gender inequality. These shortfalls led to residents' urban migration. Discussion of these findings is as follows.

Infrastructure constraints

The interview reveals a series of infrastructure problems including a broken bridge, gravel roads, a lack of signboards, no electricity, and a lack of sewage and drinking facilities. One of the managers stated: “most of the tourist turn back from midway due to the broken bridge that connect the ecotourism park with the Lautoka town”. Connectivity is impeded with the only form of access being by four-wheel drive vehicles. During the cyclone season, the river has a strong current, that is difficult to cross. One secretary highlighted “women in this village have to pay a large amount of money for commuting to the town, as a village has lost its own vehicle due to maintenance problem that was donated by foreign aid”.

There are also no waste facilities with interviewees raising the issue of increased litter by ecotourists and local communities, despite the sign “*Please take all rubbish back to Lautoka with you when you leave*”. This resulted in the degradation of soil and increased pollution, which endangers habitats and the ecosystem.

Inequality

The interviews revealed dissent and division among the local stakeholders in terms of the distribution of income and the contribution of villagers towards the park. A sense of resentment was detected regarding the uneven distribution of revenue. The secretary stated that she did not receive a regular salary and indicated the practice of nepotism and a lack of transparency in the distribution of income. Unequal cash distribution created ill feelings within the community. The plan for the distribution of income at the beginning of the ecotourism project stated that almost one-third of the ecotourism profit would be distributed to each family. In addition, villagers earn extra money by selling commercial crops in the town of Lautoka.

Although agriculture is the primary source of income for the villagers, the revenue generated from the ecotourism activities is not insignificant. The income was planned to

upgrade infrastructure and to remunerate staff and villagers. A portion of the profits earned from ecotourism was deposited for the purpose of benefiting the entire village, including children's school expenses, church expenditure, and maintenance of infrastructure. The balance was distributed to individuals such as guides and those who provide meals and accommodation. This income formed a supplementary income for their families. All accounts were maintained by the general secretary (accountant). The study suggested that the success of KNHP depends on the cooperation and commitment of the entire village community (cultural base) and *mataqali* (the land and resource owners).

Another theme identified was gender disparity. Women in Abaca help sell agricultural products produced in the village at the Lautoka Market. Many local tourism operators were interested in selling ecotourism products. Women engaged in craft-making and producing goods that can be sold to visitors, integrating traditional craftwork with tourism. Tour guiding was identified as a vital income source for villagers. This position was primarily taken by male villagers. Women tend not to become tour guides due to a lack of training and opportunities to become certified guides.

Funding shortages

Interviewees highlighted that with the lapse of foreign funding (NZODA, SPBCP, SPREP and JANCPECC), management of the ecotourism venture was left in the hands of the residents. This led to numerous problems such as lack of funds for maintenance, no donated goods, shortages in skills, a lack of training for young tour guides, and limited monitoring within the park. Insufficient and ineffective marketing was another issue associated with a lack of funding.

The project managers and secretaries agreed that marketing and promotion were inadequate. Word of mouth seemed to be a primary marketing tool, with a few blogs on travel

websites. A few KNHP ecotour operators initiated modest marketing activities. These tour agents charge exorbitantly and paid nominal commissions to villagers. Some frequent visitors would make private arrangements with local villagers and pay them directly to save on overpriced tours charged by the agents. Adjacent resorts established partnerships with Abaca ecotours for promotions, but there was a lack of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for the sustainable development of the park. The interviews suggest that it is imperative to adopt wide-ranging marketing strategies by local, regional, and national stakeholders in order to achieve sustainable income and business growth.

Urban migration

The park was managed by the local residents. However, the issues affecting the park have resulted in the migration of some residents from the rural village to urban areas, seeking better livelihoods and job opportunities. The study also revealed that loss of cultural heritage and the process of acculturation may cause a shortage of labour for ecotourism development due to urban migration. The interviewees highlighted the difficulty of preserving the *Vanua* communal heritage. Ecotourism itself has threatened communal heritage as tourists failed to follow traditional cultural protocols, including dress codes and behaviours. The residents have progressively acculturated with the rituals and manners of international tourists. As a result, the preservation of a cultural reservation, a principle of ecotourism, is threatened.

STUDY 2: THE VILLAGER PERSPECTIVE

METHODS

Sampling and data collection

A survey of villagers was conducted to confirm the challenges faced by the KNHP and emerged in Study 1. There were 27 households at the time of our research, with about 90 to 100 residents including children living in the Abaca village. One individual from each

household, who represented the family and had knowledge of the ecotourism project, was invited to participate in the survey in order to ascertain the major challenges faced by the park. The prospective participants were approached directly with the help of the project managers and secretaries. The research team explained the study aims and objectives to the prospective participants before handing them a paper-pencil-based questionnaire. These villagers demonstrated a willingness and enthusiasm to participate in this research. Some volunteered to pass the survey on to their villager peers. The research team assisted each participant to interpret the survey questions or to assist where villagers struggled with reading or writing competencies. As a result, 20 usable responses were generated.

Instrument

The questionnaire was based on the findings from Study 1. However, some identified issues were deemed to be irrelevant to the villagers. To determine the relevance and importance of issues, a pilot study was conducted with a few residents who understood the park and the ecotourism project well. Inputs from these residents were sought to improve the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire. As a result, questions were refined, and items were added to reflect the view of the villagers. Questions used a 5-point Likert scale to measure the degree of agreement with each statement. Open-ended questions were also included to generate greater insights from the participants.

RESULTS

The results from this study revealed one major deterrent to the eco-park development from the villagers' perspective: inadequate infrastructure. This issue manifested in inadequate educational facilities (lack of school), lack of technical skills (no technical skills), insufficient electricity, no signs for roads, bridges, no public toilets, unplanned sewage, no public transport, and a lack of health care services. The environmental vulnerability (e.g., soil erosion and

logging) was also identified. The findings summarised in Figure 2 are consistent with those identified in Study 1, albeit with more insightful comments and nuanced information.

Insert Figure 2 here

Eighty percent of respondents highlighted power as an issue. Only two houses in this village had generators.^{vi} A shortage of gas cylinders for cooking was also mentioned. The roads and bridges need maintenance. Most roads are covered with gravel which can be a challenge during the monsoon season. Bridges have been flooded, disrupting the transportation system in Abaca. When there was flooding, no public transports were available, no proper sewage system, and no fresh drinking water.

The lack of infrastructure facilities also influences the environment. Historically, the village has changed its location due to environmental hazards (Abaca, 1999). The findings from this study indicate that the key issue is related to soil degradation and erosion due to heavy rain, logging, and forest fires. Pollution in the soil, water, and air has also increased due to unregulated dumping of waste from the ecotourism project. The litter left by ecotourists and local communities has become a major issue.

Education is another issue that deters the ecotourism development. The results show that the village lacked primary and secondary schools, which means the village children travel long distances for a basic education. The local kindergarten had teachers with no training or fixed salaries.^{vii} It was highlighted by 25 percent of the respondents that there was shortage of skills-training programmes for villagers. Most lacked the training for professional hospitality, and some didn't have a primary education. Those who provided services were not trained professionally. Without proper training, managing a tourism destination can be a challenge.

STUDY 3: THE TOURIST PERSPECTIVE

METHODS

Sampling and data collection procedures

Study 3 aimed to identify the deterrents to the ecotourism development by analysing tourists' visitation trends and consumption patterns. This approach is more objective, compared to the survey responses, which were reflective of the respondents' perceptions and attitudes and may be biased. The visitation trends reveal information that cannot be gained from the surveys. The consumption patterns may be indicative of the attractiveness of tourism offerings.

Twenty years of invoices (from 1999-2018) from the ecotourism project, including entry tickets, parking fees, lodgement fees, visitor numbers, food charges, meals, and the purchase of handicraft products and souvenirs. The fee information is shown in Table 1. The entry tickets reveal the number of domestic and international tourists given that they were charged at different prices and by the visiting pattern (e.g., seasonal). Other invoices were used to examine if there were correlations between the number of visitors and revenue generated from other sources (e.g., accommodation, parking fees). The invoice records were arranged in chronological order, from Day 1 in 1999 to the last day of 2018. Some invoices from 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2015 were missing. This was compensated for by multiplying the average spend in the preceding year by the number of visitors.

Insert Table 1 here

RESULTS

Overall, the results from analysis of visitor revenue reveals two major patterns: an overdependence on neighbouring countries and political influence. The former is reflected in the dependence on international tourists from Australia and New Zealand based on the invoices. Political influence was manifested in the correlation between the number of

international visitors and the imposed sanctions on Fiji. Visitation was also affected by other factors such as the shortened direct flights from Australia and New Zealand to the Nadi International Airport in Fiji, the closest airport to Abaca. The visiting pattern and higher revenue collection is affected by climatic factors (higher tourist in non-cyclone season), security reasons (sharp decline in visitors immediately after 2000 and 2006 Coups).

Overdependence on neighbouring countries

Based on registered entries and invoices, the highest number of international visitors each year came from neighbouring nations, namely, Australia and New Zealand. This result is consistent with the list provided by the project manager describing the main international travellers. The results also show that the peak season for the ecotourism park was from June to August, then in December when the maximum tourist revenue was generated. This pattern coincides with school holidays in Australia and New Zealand. Interestingly, despite being cyclone season in December, more tourists visit the park.

Political influence

The results reveal that the visitation and consumption patterns were related to the political factors. Sanctions were imposed on Fiji from neighbouring countries such as Australia and New Zealand from 2006 to 2013. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, the number of visitors and tourism revenue were higher before 2006 and after 2014. Prior to the sanctions, the ecotourism project was subsidised by the New Zealand Official Development Assistance (NZODA), the Japan National Committee of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (JANCOPECC) and the SPREP. The funding was used to develop the project and train local people. There were more visitors to the park, albeit less spending tourists before the sanction. After the sanctions were lifted in 2014, there was a significant rise in revenue, even with less visitors. The increased spending resulted from extended stays in the area. The average spend per tourist was

42.55 FJD after 2014, with the exception of 2016 when Fiji was hit by category five cyclone (see Table 2).

Insert Figures 3, 4, and Table 2 here

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

This research conducted three studies to identify the deterrents to the development of an ecotourism project in Fiji, focusing on Abaca ecotourism park. Study 1 interviewed the management team at the ecotourism park. This study revealed themes that were reflective of internal and external forces impacting on the development of the ecotourism project. These included infrastructure constraints, inequality issues around income distribution and unequal job divisions, funding shortages from external resources, urban migration, and acculturation influenced by international tourists. Study 2 conducted a survey with the villagers of Abaca who were involved with the ecotourism project. The findings centred around the inadequacy of infrastructure including a lack of tourism facilities and education resources. Study 3 analysed tourists' visitation and consumption patterns over 20 years of data to detect possible deterrents to ecotourism development. An overdependence on neighbouring countries and political instability were the major factors influencing the ecotourism destination. The deterrents from the three studies are summarised as follows:

- Infrastructural constraints,
- Micro-politics,
- Insufficient marketing,
- Skills shortages,
- Environmental vulnerability/hazards,
- Loss of *vanua* communal heritage,
- Inadequate funding,
- Overdependence on neighbouring countries, and
- Political influence.

The findings echo concerns raised in Harrison et al., (2003) that ecotourism projects are no quick fix for existing issues in Fiji. Among all the factors identified from three studies, political influence appeared to be the common deterrent. This has been noted by Harrison and Pratt (2010), King and Berno (2006), and Prasad and Narayan (2008) in relation to Fiji and other destinations such as Nepal (Neupane et al., 2021). Other constraints have also been reported in previous studies. Although the overarching issues of infrastructure and environmental hazards are similar to these studies, the specific constraints tend to be case specific and influenced by the geographical and environmental factors. For instance, Mallick et al. (2020) reported that in Rameswaram, India, infrastructure constraints such as a shortage of drinking water facilities and unplanned drainage systems hindered ecotourism development. Skill shortages were also revealed in Swangiang and Kompiphat's (2021) study on ecotourism in Klong Kone, Thailand. Environmental hazards such as droughts in Iran were also identified in Jamali et al., (2021). Funding shortages were also a common issue identified for countries like Georgia (Khoshtaria and Chachava, 2017).

Despite these similarities, this study reveals new insights into deterrents to ecotourism development in Fiji. These manifest in indigenous culture, micro-politics, and the dependence on neighbour countries, which plays a significant role in ecotourism business and sustainability. These findings indicate that it is imperative to adopt a case-based approach to identify appropriate solutions and remedies for growing and sustaining ecotourism.

Theoretical implications

This paper makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, the research contributes to the tourism literature by identifying factors that influence tourism development from different perspectives. Prior research has primarily approached these issues from a single sample cohort to examine their views, perceptions, and attitudes. The current research embraced both qualitative (interview) and quantitative data. Second, the research contributes

to the ecotourism literature by revealing the deterrents for island destinations that are marketed as idyllic paradises. Such deterrents may turn the utopia of ecotourism into dystopia. Finally, this research contributes to the sustainability research by challenging research that promotes ecotourism as a sustainable approach to tourism. The paper cautions tourism research not to make unsubstantiated claims about ecotourism without analysing the constraints and deterrents.

Practical implications

As this research is case based with a focus on one ecotourism project in Fiji, the findings offer a range of practical implications for the relevant authorities and practitioners (e.g., tour operators, guides, agents) directly and indirectly involved with Abaca ecotourism park. The findings may also be applicable to other ecotourism destinations with similar characteristics and attributes. Based on the identified deterrents, the following suggestions are provided for future improvement and are summarised in Figure 5.

Insert Figure 5 here

Upgrading infrastructure Ecotourism needs to be enhanced through infrastructural development such as the construction of a tar sealed roads and maintenance of infrastructure, for example, bridges. Basic facilities need to be developed to provide electricity, water management, public transport, hygienic public toilets, the installation of signboards and tracks for ecotourism destinations, constant water supply, improved health and the education of villagers, adequate accommodation, and the supply of recreational activities. Emergency medical services, patrol guard stations, and transport infrastructure would also provide quality services and products for locals and tourists alike. A solid waste and water management system are required with the support of the Fijian government.

Environment conservation Damage from Fiji's cyclones may be reduced by controlling environmental hazards. The degradation of soil and pollution caused by waste

dumping are exacerbated by heavy rain, logging, and forest fires. Monitoring of these actions is crucial for the success of this ecotourism project. Ecotourism corridors for sustainable development should be built along with the appointment of an environmental coordinator. Efforts should be made to protect the forest and prohibit any form of logging.

Conservation of the natural ecosystem could be enhanced through monitoring and the control of littering, dumping, logging, and water management. Visitors need to be reminded of basic ecotourism guidelines to avoid littering, disturbing the wildlife, and avoid plant removal to reduce negative human impacts. These guidelines should be communicated clearly to the visitors through multiple means (e.g., signs, websites) by different stakeholders (e.g., tourism operators, tour guides, the management). Environmentally sensitive activities should be observed.

Culture conversation *Vanua* culture in Fiji is an attraction for tourists. This cultural concept must be respected as a tradition of the residents. This culture involving interrelated social, ecological, and spiritual elements, needs to be appropriately promoted. The cultural sensitivity of the host must be conserved. Ethnic standards need to be displayed by offering traditional cuisine and indigenous hospitality. Historical destinations and traditional culture should be reflected through *i-Taukei*'s traditional kava ceremony (*sevusevu*), *meke* shows (traditional dance), and *lovo* dinners (food cooked in an underground oven). Village tours along with the sharing the culture and history will help to maintain cultural capital. The commodification of arts and craft needs to be merged with cultural heritage display.

Conserving and planting forest plants and trees is required as it generates local ecotourism products such as medicines, food, cooking oils, fragrances, and costume ornaments. An equilibrium between economic initiatives and development of ecotourism park is needed. Environmentally friendly practices such as agricultural tourism (farm tours, bee cultivation

tours, and night wild pig hunting tours) and organic farming may add value. The large-scale sale of ecotourism products will also be beneficial to the park. The major threats to KNHP, as highlighted by the South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Programme (SPBCP), are ‘commercial logging interests, fires, mining interests, over-grazing, and small scale cropping’ (Baines et al., 2002) that should be contained and controlled.

Local participation Local people should be involved in decision-making and planning. Indigenous *i-Taukei* villagers need to be consulted for policy making and their active participation in the creation, marketing, and selling of ecotourism products is pivotal. The selling of handicraft items and eco-friendly products will create employment opportunities and raise the income of locals. Fiji must be marketed as a safe tourist destination in terms of politics and health. At present, the ecotourism project is managed independently without international or national financial aid (Project Manager). This is evident with the closing of many ecotourism project activities; for example, bee-rearing, making ecotourism products, the sale of a published information booklet, and the sale of traditional products, such as *sulu* and shirts. Local residents’ participation is essential to sustain this project.

Training Skills training, education, and research should be provided to the villagers for the conservation and promotion of ecotourism. Empowering local tours and appointing village ecotourism guides are essential for employment. This will also reduce gender disparity in respect to ecotour guides and will improve service quality. Local ecotourism operators need to be set up to provide better ecotour deals to attract both international and national ecotourists and reduce the leakage of funds. Ecotourism can create more jobs and income for locals as well as profits for national Eco tour agencies.

Self-funding Fiji’s coup culture creates a substantial threat to the sustainable growth of ecotourism. Tourist arrivals, employment, earnings and investment, and overseas funding

sources are all impacted by political instability. Dependence on foreign sponsors needs to be reduced. Finance should be sought from local and national governments. Donor-driven ecotourism policies (New Zealand's development assistance; Japanese's economic cooperation aid program; South Pacific regional environmental aid) needs to be minimised. The feasibility of spending large amounts by local stakeholders seems difficult and requires government support without relying on unsustainable charity, aid or a gift. Locals should be prioritised in terms of being involved in the development project. Increasing transparency in the expenditure of the village is mandatory and may create greater enthusiasm to contribute, more job opportunities, protect cultural heritage, and may help to resolve infrastructure and environmental problems.

Marketing Remodelling marketing and promotional activities to highlight the cultural and natural heritage of Fiji is also advisable. Aggressive marketing of ecotourism is necessary at the local, national, and international level to attract ecotourists. The advertisement for green tourism with conventional tourism seems sustainable in Fiji's ecotourism context. Capitalization of the ecotourism park should be avoided. Ecotourism projects should not be privatised (controlled by nearby private resorts), as this may lead to a preference for economic goals over sustainable ecotourism principles. Ecotourism principles should be readily available with online access and published information material. Ecotours need to be promoted through travel agents, government policies, and private tourism stakeholders.

The study suggests that local tourism operators should reduce the exorbitant charges imposed on ecotours hired by international visitors. They need to establish an understanding with the local village ecotourism stakeholders in relation to profit sharing and mutual cooperation. One possible strategy for the local tourism operators might be to concentrate on the volume of visitors by charging fees with reasonable profit margins. This will create more job opportunities and local development through increased visitation to Abaca through tourism

operators. These suggestions may help the Abaca ecotourism park generate more revenue by increasing the number of visitors, leading to increased revenue, and create more local job opportunities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A few limitations of the research must be acknowledged. First, the research only focused on one ecotourism park. The findings may not be applicable to other ecotourism projects in Fiji, or those in other geographical regions. However, the results from this research can be a reference for other ecotourism projects with similar characteristics, as well as making contributions to sustainability research and practice. Second, some interview questions were politically or financially sensitive and responses may be biased. Third, poorly recorded invoicing meant data was incomplete and needed to be extrapolated from previous figures, which may affect the outcomes of Study 3. Interpretation of these findings must be cautioned. A remedy for this limitation can only resort to the support of the ecotourism stakeholders to provide accurate data. Finally, political and cultural censorship also imposed constraints on this research. Future research should endeavour to address these limitations and provide a more holistic perspective of ecotourism development research.

ⁱ Fijian cultural concept of *vanua* as a way of life, involving interrelated social, ecological, and spiritual elements. Vanua is translated as “a people, their chief, their defined territory, their waterways or fishing grounds, their environment, their spirituality, their history, their epistemology, and culture” (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

ⁱⁱ Project Secretary, personal communication, 4 July 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Mataqali* is the secondary subdivision of the *vanua*, that is, a sub-clan or land-owning group. The members of the *mataqali* come under the authority of a *turagi ni mataqali*; the use of *mataqali* land is either decided by consensus within the *mataqali* or by the *turagi ni mataqali*. *Mataqali* are known as landowning kindship groups.

^{iv} *Yavusa* is the primary subdivision of the *vanua*, a clan or sub-tribe.

^v According to Vaioleti (2006), Talanoa can be referred to as a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal. It is almost always carried out face to-face. Tala means to inform, tell, relate and command, as well as to ask or apply. Noa means of any kind, ordinary, nothing in particular, purely imaginary or void.’

^{vi} Ibid., 2018.

^{vii} Ibid.

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Figure 1: Six Villages of KNHP and the Demographic Position (Source: Abaca 1999)

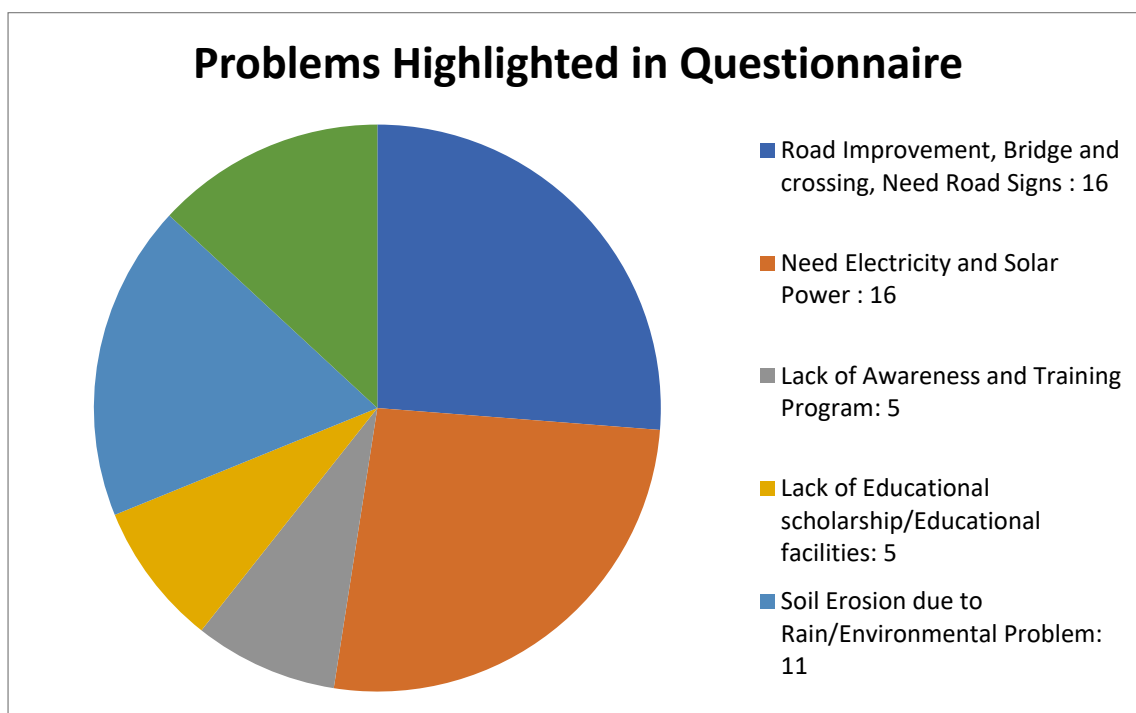


Figure 2: KNHP's Problems Based on Questionnaire

Table 1: Invoice Details

Details provided in the Invoices. Rates applied in 2017 in FJD		
	International Charge	Local Charge
Park Entry Fees	20	10
Lodgement	50-100	50
Guide Fees	50	25
Meal	10 per meal	
Souvenir/Miscellaneous	Booklet: 10; <i>Meke</i> (traditional Dance): 100, Sulu: 10	

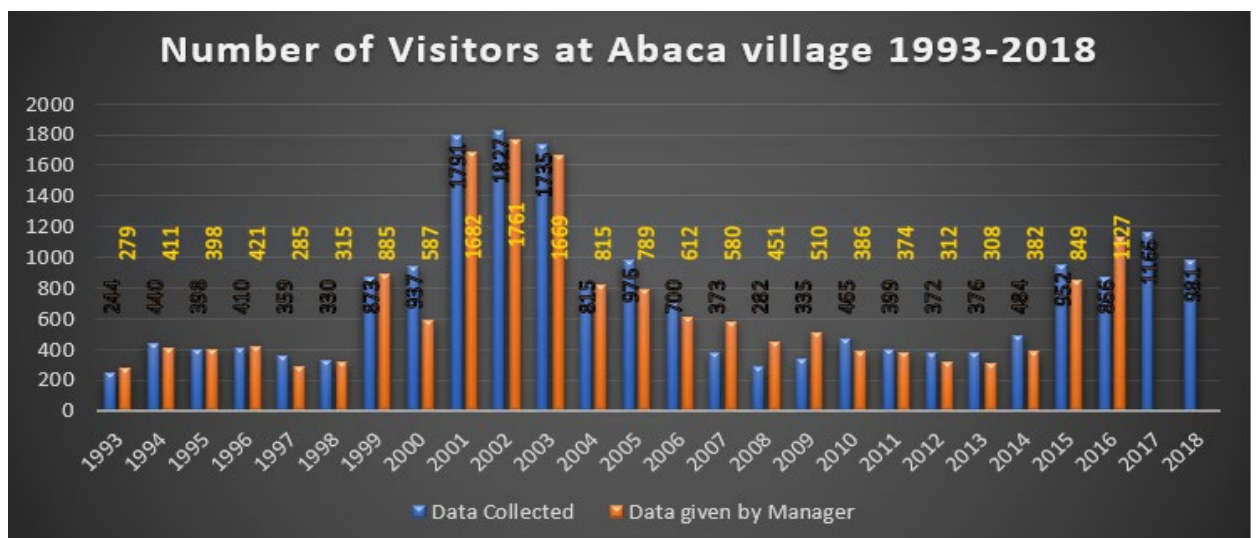


Figure 3: Number of Visitors at Abaca Village 1993-2018. [Data Collected shown in blue colour is based on research and red colour depicts data provided by Project Manager.

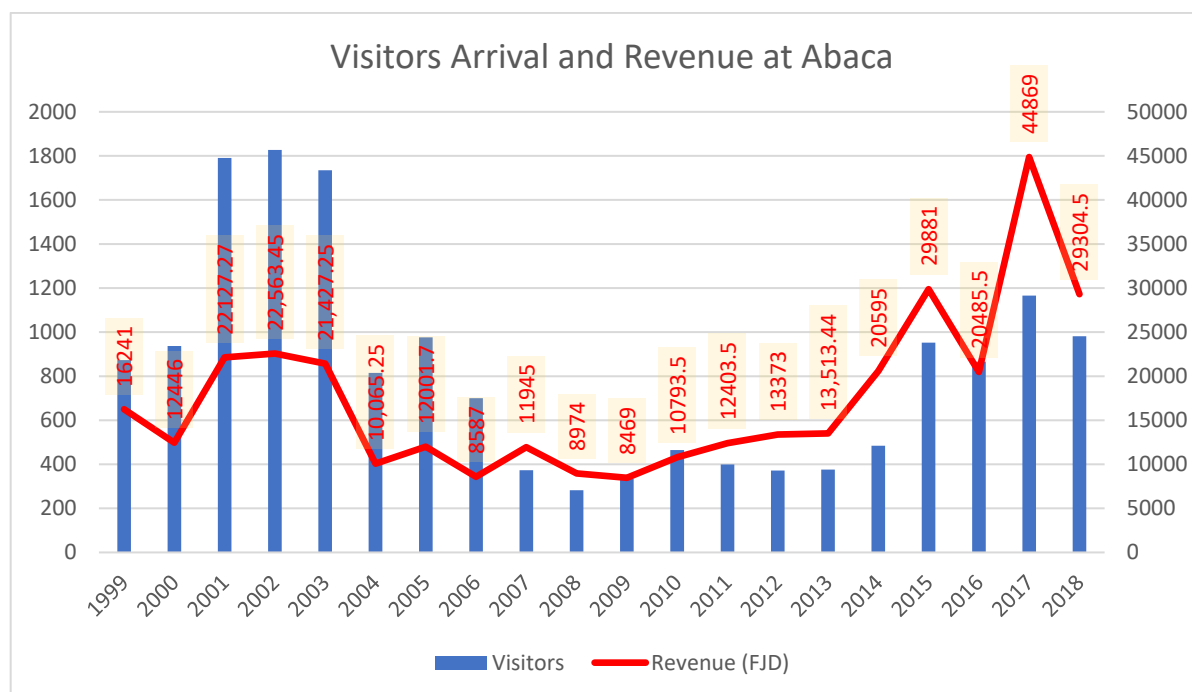


Figure 4: Trend of Revenue and Visitors at Abaca 1999-2018.

Table 2: Number of Visitors, Revenue and Average spending

Year	Visitors	Revenue (FJD)	Average Spending
1999	873	16241	18.6
2000	937	12446	13.28
2001	1791	22127.27	12.35
2002	1827	22,563.45	12.35*
2003	1735	21,427.25	12.35*
2004	815	10,065.25	12.35*
2005	976	12001.7	12.29
2006	700	8587	12.26
2007	373	11945	32
2008	282	8974	32.99
2009	335	8469	25.28
2010	465	10793.5	23.21
2011	399	12403.5	31.08
2012	372	13373	35.94
2013	376	13,513.44	35.94*
2014	484	20595	42.55
2015	952	29881	31.38
2016	866	20485.5	23.65
2017	1166	44869	45.73
2018	981	29304.5	29.87

**All monthly revenue invoices of some years were not available, so it is calculated on the average spending of last year multiplied by the number of visitors)*

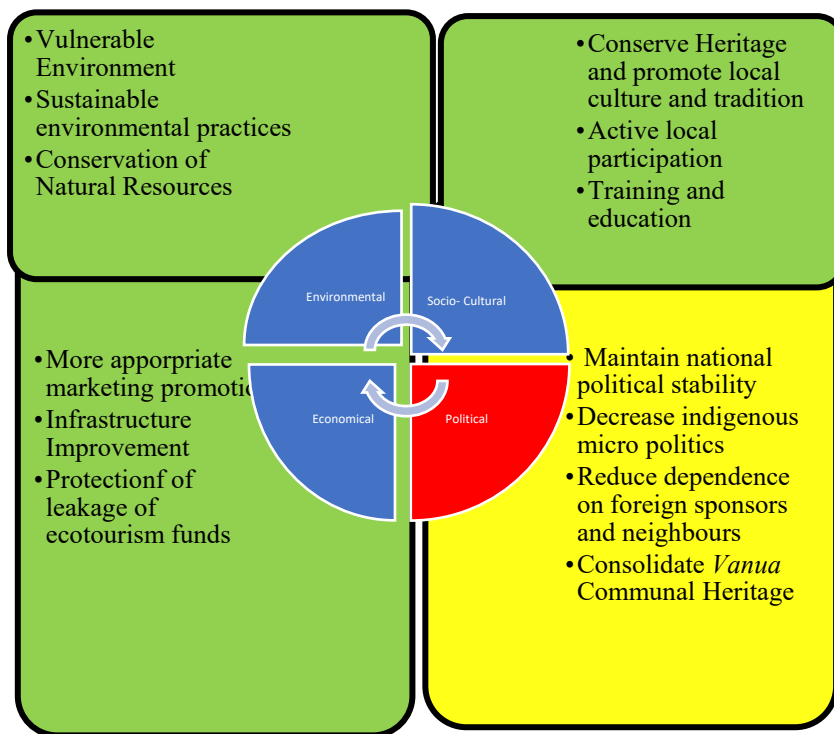


Figure 5: Suggestions for improvement