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Community perspectives of empowerment from trophy hunting tourism in Namibia's Bwabwata National Park

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ABSTRACT

Trophy hunting (TH) tourism plays an important and often controversial role in wildlife conservation and community livelihood in many African countries. Despite its potential social and economic benefits, TH can have a negative impact among the locals and pose critical challenges in governance. However, research on the local community perspective of TH and how it is linked to empowerment of locals and wildlife conservation in Namibia remains limited. Therefore, to address these gaps, our study explores how communities of Namibia's Bwabwata National Park perceive TH and how TH supports or hinders empowerment of local communities and their relationship with wildlife. Through semi-structured interviews with community members, this study elucidates the economic benefits and inequities, cultural impacts from lack of traditional hunting, perceived relationship to poaching, and limitations of governance and distrust among stakeholders. This research innovatively applies empowerment theory to TH tourism and thus, can strengthen and inform sound governance and sustainable practices of TH at local, national, and international levels by providing the local perspective that has largely been absent from the TH debate.

Introduction

Trophy hunting (TH) tourism has been considered essential in providing economic incentives to conserve large mammals in many African countries (Dickson et al., 2009) and to support the empowerment of local communities that experience economic challenges (Di Minin et al., 2016; Gunn, 2001; Naidoo et al., 2016). There are several terms used to describe this type of hunting such as safari hunting and conservation hunting. For the purpose of this study, TH refers to a type of sport hunting that involves paying a large fee to hunt an animal with a certain physical attribute (e.g., horn, tusk, pelt) (Batavia et al., 2018; Loveridge et al., 2006). Namibia's local governance has been recognized for its success in wildlife management and providing economic support for local communities (Angula et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2013). However, there have been numerous challenges in Namibia, thus requiring an in-depth analysis of TH as a "social phenomenon" (Koot, 2019, p. 430) to assess the impacts to local livelihoods and wildlife conservation.

TH can only be sustainable when community participation and empowerment are integrated into policy and development strategies (Di Minin et al., 2016; Lindsey et al., 2014; Nelson et al.,

2013; Yanes et al., 2019; Zolfani et al., 2015). Empowerment is recognized as a critical component to sustainable tourism (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999) and is defined as "a multidimensional, context-dependent, and dynamic process that provides humans, individually or collectively, with greater agency, freedom, and capacity to improve their quality of life as a function of engagement with the phenomenon of tourism (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017, p. 343). There is a need to study sustainable tourism through a critical lens of local empowerment (Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999) and it is imperative that local communities are engaged in TH decisions (Angula et al., 2018; Di Minin et al., 2016; Fischer et al., 2013; Lindsey et al., 2014; Nelson et al., 2013).

To critically examine the impacts of TH tourism, it is important to integrate economic, social, and environmental aspects (Stoddard et al., 2012) and how these relate to empowerment (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999). However, Muposhi et al. (2017) highlights that many TH studies focus on isolated versus integrated aspects of tourism hindering the ability to assess its sustainability. Policy changes that do not take into consideration local communities' perspectives could result in unintended and undesirable effects (Di Minin et al., 2016; Macdonald et al., 2016; Naidoo et al., 2016). Therefore, equity and power dynamics are particularly important in the context of TH (Abebe et al., 2020) as this form of tourism has been dominated by an elite global market (Gressier, 2014). There is a need for studies that provide in-depth analyses among different stakeholders for TH, in particular local communities (Mkono, 2019). Yet, while there have been studies that acknowledge empowerment for TH (e.g. McCubbin, 2020; Ullah & Kim, 2020) and empowerment through community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) (e.g. Boudreaux & Nelson, 2011; de Araujo Lima Constantino et al., 2012), there is a lack of application for empowerment theory in the context of TH.

To address this gap, our study aims to better understand the impacts of TH to the residents of Namibia's Bwabwata National Park (BNP) through application of empowerment theory to critically assess TH as a form of sustainable tourism. To meet this objective, we explore the following research questions: (1) How does the community perceive the economic, social, and environmental impacts of TH? and (2) How do these impacts relate to empowerment and sustainable tourism? We begin with background on TH in Africa and the potential for sustainable tourism followed by an introduction to empowerment theory as our theoretical lens to the BNP study site. The study's qualitative methodology provides an in-depth understanding of empowerment for BNP's local communities and we conclude with a discussion on the relationships between TH and key aspects of empowerment including economic development, traditional hunting, poaching, and governance.

African trophy hunting and sustainable tourism

Most African countries have developed both consumptive and non-consumptive forms of wildlife tourism that are responsible for a significant portion of the countries' GDP (Lindsey et al., 2007); however, the COVID-19 pandemic is having widespread impacts to the global tourism industry (Gössling et al., 2020). Sustainable tourism reflects the complex contexts from local to international scales (Bramwell et al., 2017); yet faces challenges to achieving its goals (Budeanu et al., 2016). The United Nations World Tourism Organization has defined sustainable tourism as tourism that "takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities" (UNWTO, n.d., par. 1). While sustainability is deemed essential to the tourism field, there are many challenges to achieving sustainability goals (Budeanu et al., 2016).

Conservation and development in Africa encompasses different perspectives surrounding TH. It is argued that TH can be a vehicle for conservation financing and studies have highlighted the social and economic contributions of hunting including generating income and employment,

providing game meat as food, and strengthening the capacity of communities (Lindsey et al., 2007; Mbaiwa 2015; Muposhi et al., 2016; Naidoo et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013). Additionally, TH has served as a mitigation strategy for human–wildlife conflict by helping to control wildlife populations, placing an economic value on certain species and connecting the communities to tourism benefits (Lindsey et al., 2012; Mbaiwa, 2015; Naidoo et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, there is a strong opposition to any form of TH. The impact of hunting on wildlife populations is complex and hard to quantify (Milner et al., 2007; Selier et al., 2016). Concerns have already been raised on how TH may jeopardize the genetic integrity of populations (Coltman et al., 2003; Crosmary et al., 2013) and reproductive success (Milner et al., 2007; Packer et al., 2009; Selier et al., 2016). While there are examples of effective quotas set by local communities through programs like Zimbabwe's Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) (Frost & Bond, 2008), TH approach alone was not adequate strategy to contribute to sustainable control of wildlife populations (Teichman et al., 2016). Thus, there is a need for research on the relationship between population demographics and TH tourism (Milner et al., 2007).

There is further opposition of TH based on animal rights and unethical practices (Muposhi et al., 2016). TH has been faced with controversy from the international conservation community (Macdonald et al., 2016; Batavia et al., 2018). The debate gained traction in recent years after contentious hunts in Zimbabwe and Namibia (Macdonald et al., 2016; Batavia et al., 2018). The call to ban or restrict hunting tourism cites concerns of sustainability and animal rights (Lindsey et al., 2016; Selier et al., 2014). Yet, most countries where TH occurs are limited in the financial resources they can dedicate to conservation and other forms of tourism are not a viable option (Di Minin et al., 2016; Lindsey et al., 2006; 2014; 2016; Naidoo et al., 2016).

While TH proponents tout the industry's ability to support CBNRM (Di Minin et al., 2016; Naidoo et al., 2016), equitable and sound governance plays a critical role in TH's sustainability (Di Minin et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013; Silva & Mosimane, 2015). CBNRM is a participatory form of environmental governance that is especially popular in sub-Saharan African nations; it attempts to include local people in the management of natural resources with the objectives of reducing poverty and improving conservation (Hulme & Murphree, 1999). In the 1990s, Namibia's adoption of CBNRM devolved significant local control over wildlife (Naidoo et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013). TH is most beneficial when the central government devolves rights over wildlife and where revenues accrue to local communities (Di Minin et al., 2016; Lindsey et al., 2014). Yet, living in proximity to wildlife is associated with a variety of costs (Schnegg & Kiaka, 2018) and being restricted in decisions limits community support for conservation (Leader-Williams & Hutton, 2005; Naidoo et al., 2016).

Empowerment theory

Empowerment has been studied across a variety of disciplines (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1984; Wilkinson, 1998) and is recognized as a critical component to sustainable tourism (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999). Empowerment supports the ability to influence choices for individuals and their communities and can also dismantle negative structures in a community (Strzelecka et al., 2017). There are varied relationships of power within a community (Knight & Cottrell, 2016) and Scheyvens's seminal (1999) framework serves as the foundation for studying empowerment and assessing tourism impacts to local communities through four key dimensions (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Boley & Gaither, 2016; Boley & McGehee, 2014).

Economic empowerment refers to monetary gains from tourism that are sustained over time and shared among the community as well as collective improvements in infrastructure; conversely, economic disempowerment refers to inadequate, inconsistent, and unequitable

distribution of funds from tourism, economic leakage, and loss of access to other economic activities due to tourism (Scheyvens, 1999). Many tourism initiatives do not fully meet the goals of economic empowerment and instead emphasize the inequities within a community limiting the sustainability (Boley & Gaither, 2016).

Psychological empowerment refers to enhanced self-esteem and pride in the culture and resources of the local people, enhanced status, and opportunities; in contrast, psychological disempowerment can result in negative changes in local culture and their relationship with resources as well as hardships, embarrassment, and frustration (Scheyvens, 1999). This form of empowerment is often tied to how tourism can catalyze locals' pride in their unique culture (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Boley & Gaither, 2016; Boley & McGehee, 2014). Increased self-esteem has been found to influence how local communities perceive tourism impacts (Boley et al., 2014) which may be particularly important for marginalized groups (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017).

Social empowerment refers to a community's social capital and cohesion that has been improved from tourism; meanwhile, social disempowerment includes inequities, social conflict, loss of traditional culture, distrust, and resentment towards those that benefit more from tourism (Boley & Gaither, 2016; Scheyvens, 1999). Tourism can be studied for how it serves to mobilize resources and increase capacity of the local community or causes division (Boley & McGehee, 2014). For example, increased social cohesion through tourism projects and events was found to influence community support for tourism (Boley et al., 2014). However, social disempowerment has occurred especially when there is differing perspectives on who is an insider versus an outsider and when the bulk of pressure to maintain tourism falls on a select subgroup (Boley & Gaither, 2016).

Lastly, political empowerment refers to inclusivity and representation for diverse voices and perspectives and a decision-making process that supports active engagement and is deemed transparent and fair; in contrast, political disempowerment can result from passive or exclusive engagement (Boley & Gaither, 2016; Scheyvens, 1999). This form of empowerment is intertwined with the ability to control decisions, the opportunity for diverse voices throughout stages of decision-making and planning (Boley et al., 2014; Boley & McGehee, 2014), and where "members of a community are active agents of change" (Cole, 2006, p. 631).

While Scheyvens (1999) framework includes key components of empowerment, subsequent studies have highlighted additional dimensions for consideration. For example, Ramos and Prideaux (2014) emphasized the environmental dimension that includes eco-friendly tourism activities, habitat restoration, control over environmental protection, sustainable use of resources, and knowledge and ability to mitigate negative environmental impacts. Additionally, Emery and Flora's (2006) community capitals framework includes seven dimensions, encompassing aspects of social (i.e. community relationships, sense of belonging), political (i.e. access to different levels of power), financial (i.e. funding sources and flows), cultural (i.e. traditions, values) capital that overlap with Scheyvens (1999); however, the framework also includes natural (i.e. communities engagement with natural resources to support livelihoods), built (i.e. infrastructure), and human (i.e. leadership, information, skills) capital that offer distinct components. These forms of capital have been applied to recent studies by Stone and Nyaupane (2017, 2018) and are closely related to empowerment.

It is important to note the interconnectivity of the empowerment and capital dimensions outlined in the previous frameworks that all influence the sustainability of tourism (Stone & Nyaupane, 2017, 2018). For the purpose of this study focused on trophy hunting tourism, an adapted empowerment framework includes Scheyvens' (1999) economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment dimensions in addition to Ramos and Prideaux's (2014) environmental dimension while also acknowledging the varying forms of capital.
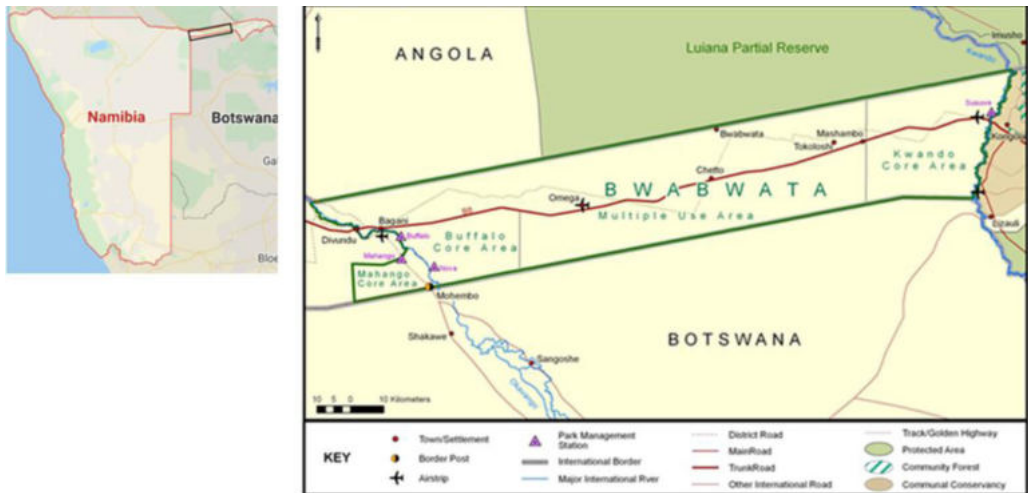
Figure 1. Map of BNP and the villages. (Source: Adapted from Boden, 2014).

Study site

BNP is located in the northeastern part of Namibia and comprises the previous Caprivi Game Park, Mahango Game Reserve, and several villages (Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), 2013). The park covers 6274 km² (see Figure 1), and the Trans-Kalahari Highway transects the park, linking Namibia to countries such as Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. BNP serves as a transboundary corridor for migratory wildlife as it lies within the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area. BNP hosts an impressive diversity of wildlife species, including rare species of high conservation and hunting value such as black and white rhino, roan, sable and tsessebe (Johnson et al., 2010; Martin, 2003) and the largest elephant concentration in Namibia (MET, n.d.). These ecological assets have earned BNP its status as a high conservation area and potential biodiversity hotspot (Humphrey, 2018).

However, BNP is different from other state-owned protected areas in Namibia because communities live within the park (Jones & Dieckmann, 2014; MET 2013). In 2012, the park's residential population was approximately 6000–6500 (Boden, 2014). A large proportion of the communities living within the park are of San descent, part of Namibia's marginalized community. The Khwe-San people represent 80% of the population, while 16% are the Hambukushu, and 4% consist of people from the! Xun San and other mixed cultural groups (MET, n.d.; Humphrey, 2018). In total, there are 17 villages in BNP, of which six are larger and densely populated, while the remaining are smaller, newer settlements that are distant from the main road (Boden, 2014). All villages are headed by traditional leaders known as headmen/women; however, the MET remains to have the jurisdiction over the land and control over the resources in the park.

BNP has two land use options: core wildlife (35% of land) and multiple use areas (MUAs) (65% of land). The core wildlife areas, the Kwando (1345 km²), Buffalo (629 km²), and Mahango (245 km²), are strictly used for controlled tourism and hunting with the special protection of wildlife. Any form of human settlement has been prohibited within these areas. The MUA has been considered vital to the livelihoods and survival of communities living within the park as it is the area designated for human settlement, harvesting of natural resources, tourism, and farming (Humphrey, 2018).

Communities in BNP operate under a community-based approach, which allows them to participate in the management of natural resources and receive benefits that can sustain and diversify their livelihoods (Naidoo et al., 2016). In 2006, the MET officially recognized a community-led

resource management institution, the Kyaramacan Association (KA), as the legal natural resource and tourism development body of BNP residents (Jones & Dieckmann, 2014). The KA formally represents all the people living in the park (the Khwe, the Hambukushu, and other minority groups), but the Khwe's interests form the majority (Koot, 2013; Koot et al., 2016). Members of the KA management committee are selected by the communities; subsequently, the committee cooperates with the MET in managing the resources while simultaneously granting communities opportunities to benefit (Koot et al., 2016).

Hunting in Namibia is regulated by the government and all communities are granted rights to derive benefits from hunting through concessions. The KA leadership and members have a platform to carryout activities in the park in partnership with government. The KA, however, have limited options to negotiate for agricultural and traditional hunting within the park, as wildlife populations inside the parks are strictly regulated.

Hunting operations often involve complex relationships and tensions in terms of global and local context (e.g., Gressier, 2014). There are two hunting operators contracted by the KA: one operates within the MUA/Kwando core area and one that operates in the Buffalo/Mahango core areas (NACSO, 2019). These hunting operators solicit clients, sell TH opportunities to both local and international hunters, and then facilitate the hunts within the concession areas. In 2011, a hunting concession was able to generate N\$1.9 million (\$125,000 USD) that was paid directly to the KA, this money was used to cover the operations of the Association, like salaries staff such as community game guards and community resource monitors and overall operations of the KA. Hunting permits are operated by the government and hunter make payments directly to the government. Additionally, 32,000 kilograms (kg) of elephant meat and 7,000 kg of other game meat from trophy hunts were donated to communities. Dividends to community members makes up a small proportion. For instance, in 2012, the KA distributed a total of N\$425,000 (\$28,000 USD) among its community members as a cash benefit (Jones & Dieckmann, 2014). The hunting concessions have remained operational with its permit renewable every five years.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were performed as a qualitative research method to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of local communities on TH in BNP. In general, qualitative methods are used to allow researchers to obtain insights from actual experiences, perceptions, and local knowledge of the respondents (Creswell, 2014).

Sizes of the BNP villages differ considerably and are spread out across the MUA and the selection of the villages was stratified based the village size and distance from the center of the community – where KA offices are located. The predetermined sample size was at least 50% of the BNP villages (i.e. 8–9 villages), to be covered during this study. Therefore, at total of 11 out of the 17 BNP villages were consulted during the interviews as households in some villages were empty and were replaced with neighboring village. Among the larger settlements and central villages were the Omega I, Chetto, and Omega III; the villages at the west end of the park along the Bangani areas included the Mutcʾiku, Mushangara, and Mashashane villages. Smaller newly founded settlements such as the Mushasho, Mashambo, Katcendje, Poca, and Tʾon-xei also formed part of the sample.

Traditional leaders or heads of villages served as key informants to guide the selection of households and study participants, although the village leaders also participated in the study. Local field assistants were recruited and trained to assist researchers with interview translations. Topics of the interviews included the community's perspective of TH and the linkages to social, economic, and environmental aspects, responses to a hypothetical TH ban (although no ban was being considered at the time of the study), and the linkages of TH tourism to rural livelihood development and wildlife conservation. In total, 24 interviews were conducted across the 11

villages. To ensure broader representation of villages (65% of villages represented), the study was limited to two to three households per village. Limitations included the non-availability of some sampled households due to high mobility and inaccessibility of some villages.

The research targeted heads of households and in cases where household heads were not present, their spouses or other adult household member were interviewed. The interviews were dominated by adult male respondents as most women refused to participate. As a result, only one headwoman of a village participated in the interview. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the respondents and transcribed verbatim, and the researchers were also recording responses on notepads.

A qualitative data analysis program (NVivo) was used to rigorously and systematically code the interview data. We used a deductive approach for initial codes based on the broad dimensions of empowerment to align with the study's conceptual framework. Additional codes were included if the data did not align with one of the broad categories. We then used axial coding to categorize themes from the interviews into further sub-codes (Allen, 2017). NVivo software assisted in the identification of frequency of codes; however, due to its small sample size, we did not think it was appropriate to assign numerical values to codes. When codes had a large amount of references, an additional round of coding was performed to determine its sub-codes. To support intercoder reliability and reduce bias from a single researcher, multiple authors reviewed transcripts to establish codes for analysis and discuss differences that emerged in the coding process (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Results

Economic empowerment

TH supported economic empowerment to the communities through monetary gains that provided improved infrastructure and job opportunities. Many interviewees mentioned how TH helped to "send their kids to school" and buy school uniforms, in addition to "providing foreign currency for the community in order for them to support their families." TH also supported employment in the communities as some of the villagers are hired as game guards, trackers, and staff at lodges, which in turn can provide additional training for them to "learn new skills." For example, "they [locals] are getting skills and … are earning as well and also [with] the trophy hunters recently there is a training … on how to protect wildlife, wildlife crime and by doing that the person is earning or gaining personal skills."

Despite the funding and employment benefits, interviewees have emphasized insufficiency and inequity as a form of economic disempowerment. Interviewees reported that there are "not really equal benefits," "only some people get the money," and that "this can cause conflict within the community." There were also several references to the inconsistency of money over the years from TH. For example, they "receive cash benefits only some years, not all years," and "the money is not enough to help with our needs." In terms of employment, interviewees noted that there are not enough job opportunities. One interviewee shared, "I want to work, but they don't want to recruit me" and that "people were given training, but only on tracking, not jobs from TH. [There has been] no improvement of livelihood."

Psychological empowerment

Many individuals expressed pride in local wildlife as a form of psychological empowerment. For example, "We have lived with the animals for a long time, and conserved them, and that is how it will stay … Our parents told us that God has created us with these animals, you cannot just kill these animals only to eat, and their future must be ensured." Further, communities referred to themselves as "the protectors of the wild animals because older people have [had] a history

to live with the animals" and that the "elders taught us that all these animals are ours. When elephants come to destroy our field, it is the same as our own cattle destroying our field. We feel that they are ours, so [there is] no negative view on the animals even before or after TH."

Psychological empowerment of locals was evident through enhanced status and opportunities. Yet, interviewees reflected that an overdependence on trophy hunting could increase their vulnerability if hunting stopped reflecting a form of psychological disempowerment. One individual shared "People will feel bad. Our animals are our natural resources and at least we are receiving some income to keep us happy." Another individual spoke of their dependence on TH for income and meat: "There is no way that the community will get anything to eat or anything to help themselves … If that TH stops then automatically [our] misfortune will be increased." Additionally, another participant said that "there are no other places where people get money, it will be very difficult."

Lastly, TH has brought about changes to local culture and traditional hunting practices that resulted in psychological disempowerment through feelings of hardship. One interviewee shared, "We were prohibited from hunting and gathering, so we were struggling how we can get ways so we can stay in the park and survive in [the] park and think how we can benefit. It was so difficult from the beginning for people to understand … " This same interviewee continued emphasizing that while community members experienced this disempowerment, they did adapt: " … at least TH made people see that this is the only way, and people have adopted the philosophy that TH has improved our lives."

Social empowerment

Social disempowerment was emphasized by interviewees through loss of traditional culture as a reflection on not being allowed to hunt bushmeat. One community member described the change as "the bush was our market … but after TH, everything stopped. Now we cannot find where to get food." Several individuals also described how TH prevented them from harvesting: "We were stopped to do any activity in the bush; even the fruits are rotten because we cannot collect it anymore. People cannot support themselves anymore." As a result, "people are eating different types of food," and "when they get money, they buy different food so it change[s] the livelihood of the community."

Additionally, there were several instances where respondents reference social disempowerment through resentment towards others who benefit from tourism, the unequal distribution of cash benefits, and nepotism in employment opportunities. For example, an interviewee emphasized favoritism in the KA employment: "the KA is for us, but really to see and compare with other villages, you see that in other villages, the association has employed many [more] people." Similarly, community members shared there is limited meat for distribution: "by the time the buffalo is killed and the meat reaches the community, the meat is not enough for the community or they don't bring it all. It's not even a whole animal."

Environmental empowerment

There were several indications of environmental empowerment. For some community members, benefits from hunting have become essential to ensure their support for wildlife conservation suggesting a strong link between economic empowerment and environmental empowerment. When locals perceived benefits from TH, they "feel that since we were protecting this wildlife and since that process results in us getting an income, we must still protect wildlife even more as the local community." Interviewees further stated that benefits from TH discourage their potential engagement in illegal wildlife activities. Individuals advocated for hunting "because TH prevents poaching and also we benefit from it." While, it is unclear how or if hunting tourism

actually impacts poaching, one villager noted that the villagers are "very much scared [of the poachers] because we don't know how they behave; they might even kill the people there in the village." Some individuals said declining wildlife populations due to poaching impacted TH policies: "I think these poachers, they have killed a lot of elephants. The government sees that the elephants are finishing [declining] so better to ban the TH. The government might get angry and ban the TH." Although TH results in the killing of wildlife, a community member attributed the bulk of the decline in wildlife numbers to poaching: "the number of animals are decreasing … what makes me feel pain in my heart is not only the TH, but the poachers are also involved. Poachers are the ones causing the decrease."

Without receiving economic benefits from TH, there is evidence of environmental disempowerment as some locals felt "that we are not going to protect them [wildlife] because we are not getting something from them [wildlife], while they [wildlife] are coming to destroy our fields." When communities are economically disempowered, there could be increased poaching. One community member shared that "if local community members no longer have work with TH, there is fear that those that have experience with animals, if they are fired from their association, those guys will start poaching."

Political empowerment

Hunting operators and the KA

Lack of trust in hunting operators and the KA emerged as a key issue and form of political disempowerment. Locals shared that most TH operators and hunters "don't keep promises" and "trophy hunters are not working together with the community." Interviewees have emphasized the need to "bring cooperation with the community … we will not trust them [TH operators] because there is no teamwork and they must respect our traditional authority … and we can work much easier with them."

Political disempowerment due to the lack of transparency and fairness has resulted in frustration among communities as they describe the "corruption." Stronger cooperation between the traditional leaders, the KA, and the hunting operators could change the perception that "trophy hunters do not acknowledge the important role of the community" and that "trophy hunters don't make any relationships with locals." According to one member of the KA, it is critical for hunters and associated operators to meet with their local leaders: "Since these people [hunters and operators] are not setting up meetings with traditional authority or leaders, they don't have that vision. They really don't acknowledge the importance [of communication]." Another local leader described the situation: "We the headman, we know the importance of our knowledge, but the trophy hunter doesn't. That's why we tried to talk to him … he never turns up … the regional council called him and he said he is busy hunting and does not have the time. So, this person who is hunting, is he even on our side?"

Local leaders and community members

The headmen, or traditional authorities, serve as advocates of village interests and a form of political empowerment, as they "are aware of the local communities' knowledge about the forest and the wildlife" and can "appoint local community members to go work with them [the trophy hunters] and assist them." Community members echoed this sentiment, maintaining that "headmen here have been elected because they take care of their villages. If someone comes, they will meet that person and talk to that person and sort out the problems in the villages, and that is why they are elected." Most community members see the headmen as "skilled in leadership" and "take care of the community and solve problems experienced." Although the headmen are perceived as leaders of the villages, the KA takes on the bulk of the governing responsibilities.

The traditional authorities' perception of exclusion in hunting operation decisions could have contributed to the community members' overall dissatisfaction with the governance style of the KA indicating political disempowerment. One individual shared that "staff from Kyaramacan [KA] are earning direct income from trophy hunters [operators] because the fee that is paid by the operator came to the association [KA]. Then, the association [KA] is using that money to pay the salaries all that of the association and also giving benefits to the members." One headman suggested the need for regular communication with the hunting operators: "I would prefer if they communicate with me, maybe by sending someone from the community to go to and communicate with him or to tell him that the headman or the community needed him to come and have a meeting with him."

State government and community members

Most participants have trust for the management of hunting quotas: "TH does not decrease animals because they are using the quota permit from the MET. Poachers are decreasing animals." Further, these quotas target "bulls or older animals [rather] than killing younger animals so it [is] not completely finishing the animals." However, the communities also shared feelings of distrust and political disempowerment regarding their relationship with the MET. Although MET mainly works with the KA, which is composed of community members, one individual shared a desire for increased engagement: "With MET, there is no trust. There is no community member employed by the Ministry, so there is no trust." Community members also reflected their sense of ownership over wildlife and the need to be more involved in decision-making. For example, a respondent indicated that "MET is the one making decisions … Someone else cannot decide about someone else's animals. It's better to sit together and discuss with the owner before deciding." It has been perceived that "the government decides what to hunt, where to hunt and when to hunt and after hunting, the government decides where the money goes. The community has no right to discuss TH."

Discussion

Dependency and vulnerability

Economic gains that support local livelihoods and conservation is a major proponent of TH (Lindsey et al., 2007; Mbaiwa 2015; Naidoo et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013); yet, our study's findings demonstrate how TH can support economic empowerment while also disempowering communities. Monetary gains, employment, and infrastructure improvements that are associated with economic empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999) were commonly cited in our study. Regardless of the comparatively high revenue levels from TH (Koot et al., 2016), communities were largely critical of the inconsistent and unequitable distribution of benefits which is linked with economic disempowerment (Scheyvens, 1999).

Despite these critiques, interviewees reported that a hunting ban could be detrimental due to lack of other economic livelihood alternatives. Thus, economic empowerment from TH can also result in psychological disempowerment through dependency as communities face hardships with a lack of opportunities especially for marginalized groups (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2017; Scheyvens, 1999). While the overall support for TH aligns with a previous study by Angula et al. (2018), which found the majority of conservancies in support of TH, our study emphasizes the complexity and nuances at the local scale.

Dependency on TH can increase the vulnerability of communities if the market changes, if a ban is implemented, or given recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Lendelvo et al., 2020). Paksi and Pyhälä (2018) found that state-sponsored restrictions on the use of natural resources and an overreliance on TH made local livelihoods vulnerable, especially if policies were

to change at the national and international level (Paksi & Pyhälä, 2018). For example, Botswana's TH ban brought detrimental impacts such as reduced household incomes where hunting was a large part of their economic livelihood (Blackie, 2019). When disruptive changes occur, economic diversification has been critical in supporting community resilience (Berkes & Ross, 2013). This diversification can support psychological empowerment through enhanced opportunities (Scheyvens, 1999) and increase the overall capacity of the community through social empowerment (Boley & McGehee, 2014). However, there needs to be investment in local capacity to support a transition to economic alternatives (Berkes & Ross, 2013) and building community capacity is often difficult for rural or impoverished communities due to limited resources (Aref, 2011).

Importance of traditional hunting

Integrating practices that support connections between local communities' livelihoods and the natural landscape is important for sustainability (Sunderlin et al., 2005) and maintaining traditional culture (i.e. social empowerment) is critical to sustainable tourism (Scheyvens, 1999). Our findings illuminate local communities' deep-rooted history with hunting and how restrictions have resulted in hardships and frustration (i.e. psychological disempowerment) and loss of traditional culture (i.e. social disempowerment). There are many barriers for indigenous communities to continue hunting practices (LaRocco, 2020; Mead et al., 2010; Skinner et al., 2013), and this has been the case for nearly all African countries (Hitchcock, 2001). TH has been linked to disempowerment of communities as remnants from colonialism (Brandt, 2016). Hence, allowing TH while restricting local hunting reflects the neo-colonialist history of natural resource management and trivializes the importance of local connections to the environment (Mkono, 2019) and is reflected in psychological disempowerment.

A recent article by Lubilo and Hebinck (2019) underscores the importance of local hunting "for food … as a birthright, and … as an integral part of people's cultural repertoire" (Lubilo & Hebinck, 2019, p. 68). Local hunting restrictions have contributed to changes in the relationship between local livelihoods and wildlife and a greater dependence on governments and non-government organizations (Heim & Pyhälä, 2020; Hitchcock, 2001). Additionally, as indigenous communities become more disconnected from their traditional knowledge and access to food, they are more vulnerable to health problems (Kuhnlein et al., 2006). The involuntary shift in hunting and diet that forced communities to rely on other meat sources reflects social disempowerment through the cultural changes. Yet, when policies abruptly change as was the case with Botswana's TH ban, communities that were dependent on meat from TH were deprived of this food source (LaRocco, 2020). For TH to support empowerment, the cultural importance of local hunting needs to be recognized along with the short and long-term impacts of hunting policies on local communities.

Distrust, lack of transparency, and a multi-scalar debate

Fair and participatory-based governance is integral to tourism (Marshall et al., 2007; Silva & Mosimane, 2015; Silva & Motzer, 2015; Sullivan, 2002) and political empowerment (Boley et al., 2014; Boley & McGehee, 2014; Scheyvens, 1999). In some cases, CBNRM programs have managed to strengthen local resource management (Hulme & Murphree, 1999) and bolster local skills at negotiating rights over resources (Frost & Bond, 2008; Mbaiwa, 2015). Despite Namibia's adoption of CBNRM since the 1990s, community members expressed political disempowerment due to a lack of transparency in decision-making and overall distrust towards the KA and the state government.

Our findings indicate that despite the KA being a community-led resource management institution for BNP residents (Jones & Dieckmann, 2014), there was just as much distrust towards the KA as the state-level MET. Some of the distrust towards the state government may be attributed to exclusive negotiations for concessions without adequate involvement of locals (Koot, 2019; Taylor, 2012) and a history of government-sponsored initiatives that do not adequately address human–wildlife conflicts (Schnegg & Kiaka, 2018; Silva & Mosimane, 2015). Yet, there is also a need to reconcile the lack of transparency in the decision-making process and a need for traditional leaders to play a more active role at the local level.

Despite CBNRM's potential, TH may pose unique challenges that further political disempowerment for marginalized groups (Koot, 2013). The moral and ethical arguments against TH (Macdonald et al., 2016; Batvia et al., 2018) have largely driven the international debate (Mkono, 2019) and power dynamics have been influenced by an elite global market (Gressier, 2014). Yet, the arguments for local communities' rights in regard to utilizing wildlife and natural resources also need be acknowledged (Lubilo & Hebinck, 2019). Indirectly, these external influences can impact international and national policies (Dickman et al., 2018) and impact local political empowerment hindering the potential for CBNRM (Mkono, 2018).

Poaching further complicates the TH debate and our findings suggest that local perceptions differ from the international dialogue, reflecting aspects of environmental empowerment and disempowerment. Although poaching remains a critical threat to wildlife in many African countries, respondents emphasized the strong connection and pride to wildlife (i.e. psychological empowerment) and how TH has mitigated poaching (i.e. environmental empowerment). Yet, without benefits from TH, there could be a disincentive for locals to protect wildlife as human-wildlife conflicts increase (i.e. environmental disempowerment). These sentiments align with the arguments that TH can prevent poaching due to local communities' rights over wildlife (Birch, 2017; Panday, 2019); yet are in stark contrast to the greater debate on the role of TH in declining wildlife populations (Creel et al., 2016) and claims that legalizing TH contributes to increased poaching (Schlossberg et al., 2019).

The local interpretations of poaching versus hunting have largely been defined in a postcolonial manner by western foreigners (Mkono, 2019). Our study, along with others (e.g. Von Essen et al., 2014), highlights the need to better understand the perceived relationship between poaching and TH and how these perceptions may vary from the local to international scales. Further, there is limited understanding in how international and national TH policies impact environmental empowerment (i.e. sustainable use of resources and wildlife) and political empowerment (i.e. voice in decisions) at the local scale.

Conclusion

The limited inclusion of local community perspectives in the TH debate has been emphasized (Macdonald et al., 2016; Mkono, 2019). This paper uniquely highlights the voices of a community whose traditional livelihoods have been confined within the boundaries of a National Park and been transformed through the associated changes in access and control over the natural resources combined with the emergence of TH. Additionally, the study innovatively applies empowerment theory to the TH context and illuminates the pluralism in regards to how TH empowers or disempowers local communities. Our study found diverse perspectives on empowerment related to economic (i.e., employment and revenue; inequity of funding), psychological (i.e., local ownership of wildlife; hardships and frustration), social (i.e., changes in culture), environmental (i.e. relationship with poaching), and political (i.e., distrust and lack of transparency across scales) aspects of TH. The interactions between these forms of empowerment and disempowerment provide nuance to the theory and call for further investigation into how these forms of empowerment change over time and are influenced by national and international factors.

Controversial forms of tourism like TH encompass unique challenges to sustainability as it integrates emotional and moral aspects as well as interconnected social, economic, and environmental aspects. Further, TH governance and policy varies greatly by country (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013), which often results in diverse positive and negative impacts. The complexity of TH is intensified by pluralism at the international scale within scholarly debates (e.g., Bauer et al., 2019; Dickman et al., 2019) and public and media outlets (e.g., Mkono, 2019; Nuwer, 2017). Our findings highlight the complexity of the topic and the need for further investigation as to the sustainability of TH tourism across different nations.

As with any research, there are limitations. First, semi-structured interviews allowed for a more in-depth understanding on the topic, but limited the study's sample size. Second, a subset of villages was sampled for the study and may not be representative of the broader communities in Namibia. Third, the findings may have limited generalizability to other countries where TH occurs because of the diversity in governance and policy. Future research can include a more diverse representation of TH stakeholders and comparative case studies in other parts of Namibia or other countries.

In the context of CBNRM and TH systems, communities are often conceptualized as homogenous social structures that have shared cultural norms (Agarwal & Gibson, 1999). Our research provides a more in-depth understanding of the local pluralism associated with TH and the role of diverse forms of empowerment. The findings from this study can inform strategies to strengthen governance and support tenets of sustainable tourism and empowerment for TH. While it is important to assess sustainable tourism through local perspectives, it is critical to study TH in the context of multi-scale interactions. The TH debate continues to evolve and coincides with the evolving paradigms of conservation and societal values. While TH is often not framed through a tourism lens, sustainable tourism tenets and empowerment theory can further our understanding of the sustainability of TH and the impacts to local communities.

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