



Exploring Community-Based Wildlife Tourism from an Environmental Justice Perspective: A Case Study of the Wild Olive Tree Camp in South Africa

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Abstract

Within the legacy of environmental injustices in South Africa, this study explores the role of community-based wildlife tourism (CBWT) in promoting equitable land management. We discuss whether community-based initiatives, specifically related to tourism, can provide lasting structural benefits to local communities. Utilizing the environmental justice (EJ) framework, we conducted a qualitative case study involving semi-structured interviews with 23 participants involving the Wild Olive Tree Camp, a CBWT enterprise in the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region in South Africa. By analyzing the neoliberal approach to environmental resources for tourism, we demonstrate that while CBWT might benefit local communities in the short term, it risks perpetuating neocolonial structures and dependencies in the long term. This study underscores the need to acknowledge historical trauma stemming from segregation and apartheid and advocates for the restructuring of power imbalances in tourism management while promoting equitable access to knowledge and land rights. This study contributes to the EJ scholarship by contextualizing these issues within the historical reality of the region.

Keywords Community-based wildlife tourism · Distributive environmental justice · Neoliberal conservation · Wildlife economy · Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region · Manyeleti Game Reserve · South Africa

Introduction

The imperative to assess the role of community-based wildlife tourism (CBWT) in the equal distribution of environmental resources and land ownership using the environmental justice (EJ) framework drives the focus of this article. Previous studies addressed community involvement in conservation efforts, emphasizing the importance of including local agency in community-based initiatives (Gaodirelwe et al., 2020; Mahony & Van Zyl, 2001; Masina et al., 2021; Measham & Lumbasi, 2013; Zips & Zips-Mairitsch, 2019). Other research has defined structural challenges in community-based initiatives, where communities remain dependent on neoliberal mechanisms embedded in these efforts and have critically explored the neoliberal approach

to both conservation and community-based initiatives (Bunn et al., 2023; Büscher et al., 2014; Nel, 2021; Ramutsindela & Shabangu, 2013; Sterkl, 2019). Additionally, scholars have studied both the colonial and neocolonial implications of conservation and tourism (Bunn et al., 2023; Koot et al., 2024; Thomsen et al., 2022; Woods, 2019). However, the knowledge regarding the specific role of CBWT in advancing EJ remains underdeveloped.

Despite the growing body of interdisciplinary literature on socio-ecological systems related to community empowerment and environmental protection through tourism, limited attention has been given to the EJ framework in such place-based research. The second generation of EJ studies highlights the importance of considering historical events and structural dependencies within the specific context of case studies (Menton et al., 2020), particularly in areas where the legacies of colonialism persist. In regions where tourism is a significant source of income and environmental resources are commodified under the political guise of community development and conservation investments, place-based EJ research can offer valuable insights and significantly enhance the existing literature.

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This study seeks to address the underexplored role of CBWT in advancing distributive EJ by using a case study of the Wild Olive Tree Camp, a community-based initiative in Welverdiend, South Africa. Specifically, we evaluate whether CBWT can contribute to distributive EJ for local communities. To achieve this, we:

- explore the perceptions of local communities regarding the post-apartheid land ownership structure of the Manyeleti Game Reserve (MGR);
- analyze the role of tourism in the persistence of neocolonial structures in the region;
- critically examine the neoliberal mechanisms underpinning CBWT and their short- and long-term impacts on the community.

Wildlife Tourism: Definitions and Mechanisms

According to the World Bank (Twining-Ward et al., 2018), wildlife tourism, a form of nature-based tourism that includes the consumptive and non-consumptive use of wildlife, is the largest market-based contributor to financing protected areas (PAs). The growing demand for wildlife tourism, with 80% of international travel to sub-Saharan Africa being wildlife-related (Twining-Ward et al., 2018), has enhanced opportunities to commodify ecosystems into tourist attractions (Igoe, 2014). South Africa's iconic landscapes have the potential to expand the wildlife tourism industry significantly (Spenceley, 2005; Twining-Ward et al., 2018), in which inclusive approaches could support sustainable tourism in and around PAs (Packer, 2015; Thomsen et al., 2022). Despite ethical and systematic criticism of wildlife tourism (Fennell & Yazdan Panah, 2020; Packer, 2015; Thomsen et al., 2022), others have noted that wildlife tourism contributes significantly to the wildlife economy and provides employment opportunities for local citizens (Chidakel et al., 2020; Saayman et al., 2012).

Much of the wildlife conservation and related tourism enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa aim to be community-based, meaning local land ownership, equal environmental and socio-economic benefits, and equal participation in decision-making bodies (Zips & Zips-Mairitsch, 2019). With the approach of CBWT toward conservation in South Africa, communities displaced from their land during apartheid can now (indirectly) utilize their environmental resources. However, despite being well-intended, CBWT and other community-based initiatives where local communities manage and benefit economically from their local environmental resources (Gaodirelwe et al., 2020), face criticism. It is argued that these initiatives thrive on a market-based approach in which local ways of life cannot be upheld (Measham & Lumbasi, 2013), as conservation efforts may lead to further land loss for local communities

(Ramutsindela, 2015). Furthermore, studies argue that much of the income derived from community-based tourism does not follow economic empowerment goals and instead sustains existing social and economic inequalities (Baer, 2020; Hitchcock, 2019), which is especially evident among communities living adjacent to Kruger National Park (KNP) (Carruthers, 1995; Gaodirelwe et al., 2020). Despite the inclusive intentions of CBWT, it has furthermore led to the development of conservation approaches called “neoliberal conservation” (Büscher et al., 2014), where conservation becomes dependent on market-based mechanisms. With the assumption that conservation efforts and neoliberal market mechanisms can coexist harmoniously (Wilhusen, 2014), South African National Parks (SANParks), the national governing management body of national parks in South Africa, embraced the strategy of commercializing national parks and generating income through marketizing environmental resources for tourism (Ramutsindela & Shabangu, 2013).

The neoliberal approach to territories, now dedicated to conservation and tourism, suggests that conservation areas such as SANParks are not solely aimed at protecting nature but also focused on commodifying wildlife and expanding economic growth within the tourism industry (Nel, 2021). While some individual success in the market-based approach has been achieved, overall progress has been limited, as shown by decreasing tourism numbers following COVID-19 (Nel, 2021; South African National Parks, 2022).

The Historical Context of the Study Area

In the context of our study, understanding former colonial policies and the historical context is crucial for recognizing contemporary challenges in the regional wildlife tourism industry. In the nineteenth century, European colonialists aimed to protect wildlife from humans by establishing conservation areas where humans could not live and only tourists could visit (Carruthers, 1995). Indigenous Africans were displaced, justified by the colonial ideology that humans would harm the integrity of landscapes, while the colonialists established natural areas for their leisure (Bluwstein, 2021; Carruthers, 1995; Sterkl, 2019; Zips & Zips-Mairitsch, 2019). This exclusionary ideology was not only implemented in conservation efforts but also forced local people to adopt Western views on nature (Ramutsindela, 2004). The colonialists “formed the ideology [of] the perception of blacks as environmentally destructive” (Khan, 2002, p. 18) and portrayed the black¹ population as uncivilized (Khan, 2002) or depreciated as ‘others’ (Álvarez &

¹ “black” is being used in this article as a political statement and not as an ethnic or racial category (Dlamini, 2020).

Coolsaet, 2020; Thakholi & Koot, 2023) alienating them from their lands.

The displacement of South Africans for the purpose of conservation is known as “green grabbing” (Fairhead et al., 2012). It echoes the segregation laws during apartheid, which supported colonial land grabbing through territorialization (Woods, 2019). The land rights of local landowners were violated in the name of protecting the environment (Ramutsindela, 2015). The political ecology of conservation and the establishment of scenic landscapes for Western consumption continued to reinforce colonial territoriality (Bluwstein, 2021). Sterkl (2019) suggested that creating people-free conservation areas was financially viable as it marketized (Igoe, 2014) and romanticized “original nature” (2019, p. 234). People did not fit into this romantic colonial image of untouched nature (Bluwstein, 2021).

Currently, development and conservation agencies acknowledge the potential of heterogeneous landscapes to contribute to sustainable livelihoods and regional economies (Chidakel et al., 2020). However, thirty years after the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, the government is still working on reforming the territorialized land to establish fair and long-term sustainable policies where equity and justice are promoted (Ngam, 2021; Venter et al., 2008). This is challenging as, according to Ramutsindela (2015), private landowners in the case study area prefer to invest in community development programs over restituting the land to the former owners, leaving neocolonial practices in conservation areas intact (Ramutsindela, 2004). Also, conservationists have expressed their concerns about the risk of prioritizing non-conservation activities, such as tourism, potentially harming biodiversity and the integrity of PAs (Venter et al., 2008). At the same time, the growing wildlife economy in the study area has reinforced the unequal access to green spaces under the guise of sustainable development, with environmental resources increasingly privatized (Koot et al., 2024; Lacey & Ilcan, 2015; Ramutsindela, 2015).

Theoretical Framework: Distributive Environmental Justice

In the scope of our study and to address the research gap, we implement the theoretical framework of EJ as it has emerged as a tool for comprehending challenges related to the environmental distribution of Indigenous land (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). EJ studies originate from exploring the “unjust distribution of environmental benefits and harms between different socio-economic groups” (Massarella et al., 2020, p. 2). However, it is essential to recognize the challenges associated with applying the EJ framework, particularly the risk of uncritically transferring Western EJ perceptions to the so-called ‘Global South,’ which may inadvertently reinforce environmental injustices (Álvarez &

Coolsaet, 2020). A critical application of the EJ framework must prioritize analyzing power structures that underpin environmental injustices while integrating an intersectional approach (Menton et al., 2020).

The EJ framework consists of four dimensions of research: “distribution, recognition, participation, and capabilities” (Schlosberg, 2007, p. 5). Although all four dimensions are imperative, this article focuses mainly on distributive EJ. The distributive EJ dimension acknowledges the unequal sharing of environmental resources, including the benefits and opportunities linked to resources, and aims to protect the rights of those most affected by imbalanced hegemonic exploitation of resources (Gebeyehu et al., 2019). Distributive EJ concentrates on communities that are considered minorities within society, who experience unequal access to environmental resources and are disproportionately affected by challenges caused by environmental threats (Schlosberg, 2007). Distributive EJ research investigates the distribution of environmental resources and their byproducts within society, considering social, economic, and environmental factors (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010).

Within this framework, Álvarez and Coolsaet (2020) argue that distinct worldviews exist between cultures and that a capitalist and Western-centric approach may not align with alternative perspectives. They state that a comprehension of place-based colonial history, coupled with an understanding of contemporary place-based knowledge systems, must be established when studying potential inequitable environmental distributions resulting from imbalanced neocolonial dependencies. Bluwstein (2021) argues that such alternative perspectives are undermined by neocolonial power relations, where worldviews are silenced in furthering the local production of knowledge. In acknowledging hegemonies in South Africa within the distributive EJ framework, our study questions neocolonial dependency on the Western neoliberal approach of commodifying wildlife for tourism enterprises to enhance community development (Lacey & Ilcan, 2015). By rethinking the distribution of environmental resources in a post-apartheid time, place-bound EJ research can allow us to understand the “remainders of colonialism that are still at work in our discourses and practices, while at the same time providing us with alternatives to a Western model of society” (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020, p. 54). The remains of colonialism are further mentioned in this article as neocolonial as it “signals the continuation of colonialism beyond independence” (Táiwò, 2022).

In the case of South Africa, research has shown that the forceful removal of people from their land has caused neocolonial trauma and resulted in many people being settled in areas with insufficient ecosystem services for the population (Njongonkulu, 2002). Involving place-based knowledge and local communities in decision-making is, according to Bunn et al. (2023), a more appropriate way of commodifying

environmental resources beyond just their instrumental value. This approach emphasizes making informed and equitable decisions while considering both human stakeholders and environmental resources (Swemmer et al., 2015).

Materials and Methods

Case Study Area

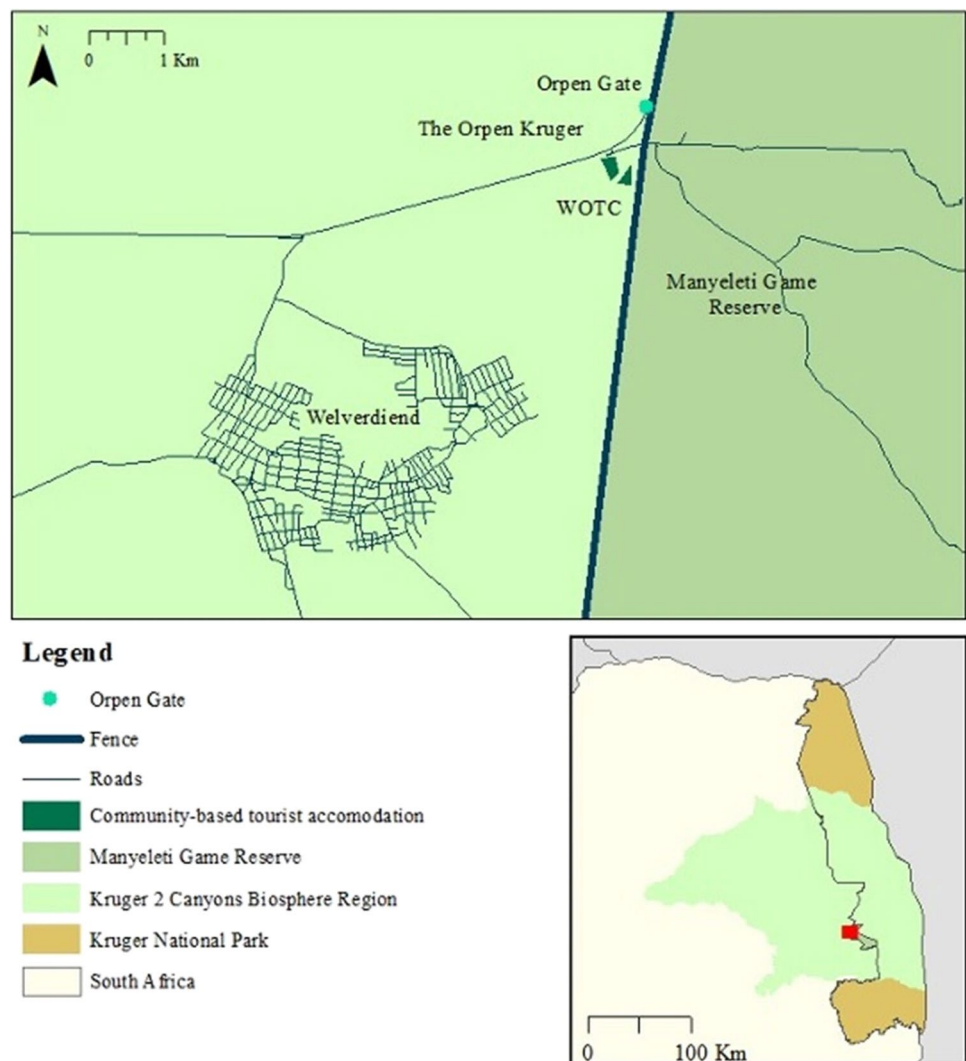
The case study area (Fig. 1) was carefully selected because it represents the local complexity of historical land dispossession, unequal access to environmental resources, community-based conservation, and CBWT efforts, making it relevant to the themes explored.

The MGR is a 22,740 ha privately-owned reserve situated in the former Gazankulu homeland of apartheid South Africa (Mahony & Van Zyl, 2001) and lies along the western boundary of the KNP (de Koning, 2010). In

1922, the unoccupied land was used and settled by the Mnisi community for grazing and subsistence farming until 1964. When the apartheid government removed the Mnisi community without their consent or compensation, they developed the land into a game reserve accessible for black people, whereas the rest of the KNP was mainly accessible to white people (de Koning, 2010). After the end of the apartheid government in 1994, 253 households in the Mnisi community started reclaiming Manyeleti, their tribal land. They agreed that the land should not be used for human settlement but only for conservation (de Koning, 2010), creating an appealing tourism destination, the MGR.

The MGR exemplifies the broader challenges of land use, neocolonial power dynamics, and socio-economic inequality central to the EJ framework. It is a popular tourist destination, highlighting the challenges between conservation, tourism, and the power dynamics in land ownership. Like other surrounding reserves, the MGR is home to several

Fig. 1 Top: location of the Wild Olive Tree Camp in relation to Manyeleti Game Reserve and Welverdiend village. Bottom: the study area in relation to Kruger National Park and Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region. Map lines delineate study areas and do not necessarily depict accepted national boundaries. Data sources: Natural Earth Data, countries; Kruger 2 Canyons Biosphere Region; Geofabrik



private lodges, likely to perpetuate colonial power dynamics through patterns of labor and ownership.

The Wild Olive Tree Camp (WOTC), located on approximately 50 ha, serves as an example of a CBWT enterprise operated by the local Mnisi community, specifically the citizens of Welverdiend (*Wild Olive Tree Camp*, n.d.). The WOTC demonstrates how Indigenous people reclaim agency over their land and livelihoods, contributing to conservation and socio-ecological empowerment. The WOTC was built by members of the “the Cooperative²” and other citizens of the village of Welverdiend on the land next to the village, adjacent to the MGR. The WOTC is partially managed by the social enterprise Indalo Inclusive as it is recovering from financial losses due to COVID-19 lockdowns.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted our study from April to July 2023 in the K2C (Kruger to Canyons) Biosphere Region at the WOTC. A qualitative case study approach was adopted because it allows for exploring phenomena and a holistic understanding of situational examples (Baxter & Jack, 2008), leading to an understanding of local activity within broader circumstances (Balvanera et al., 2017; Stake, 1995). Qualitative research, mainly through interviews, allows for a detailed place-based description while maintaining the flexibility needed for an in-depth analysis of the phenomena (Naderifar et al., 2017). Since environmental injustices may be a consequence of colonial history (McDonald, 2002), a case study approach facilitates the exploration of broader EJ challenges while simultaneously focusing on a specific case and its context.

Our study involved five distinct groups of research participants who were either interviewed individually (14) or participated in a focus group (9):

- (1) tourists visiting the WOTC (2 participants)
- (2) staff of the WOTC (3 participants)
- (3) citizens of Welverdiend (1 participant and 1 focus group)
- (4) managers in the WOTC business (4 participants)
- (5) employers in the regional wildlife (tourism) industry (4 participants).

Previous studies with contextual or spatial similarities to our research have employed small sample sizes to investigate challenges related to EJ in South Africa (Koen & Robertson, 2021), community-based tourism (Lo & Janta,

2020), or tourism and conservation (Ghaderi et al., 2022). In qualitative research, emphasis is placed on the richness and depth of the data rather than the sample size, as the quality of insights derived from in-depth analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. With a sample size of $n=23$, we have achieved data saturation regarding the perceptions of individuals closely connected to the WOTC, Welverdiend, the MGR, and community-based tourism within the study area.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity for the interview participants, all the names are coded based on the five research groups, e.g., tourist A is represented by [1A, tourist]. The interviewees were selected through a snowball method, commonly used when research participants are inaccessible. This approach facilitates trusted communication with interviewees, making it particularly effective for generating community-based data and identifying other essential informants (Ghaderi et al., 2022; Naderifar et al., 2017). In total, 23 adults consented to participate in semi-structured interviews, at which point data saturation was reached.

The interviews each lasted between 30 and 90 min and were open-coded and categorized via thematic analysis according to Williams and Moser (2019) (see Fig. 2). The interview protocols (Supplementary Material 1) were adopted per interview group. All protocols consisted of similar questions related to land claims, conservation, the distribution of benefits from the MGR, EJ perspectives, local and global dependencies, tourism benefits, and tourism challenges. These themes have been aligned with the research objectives and the literature review.

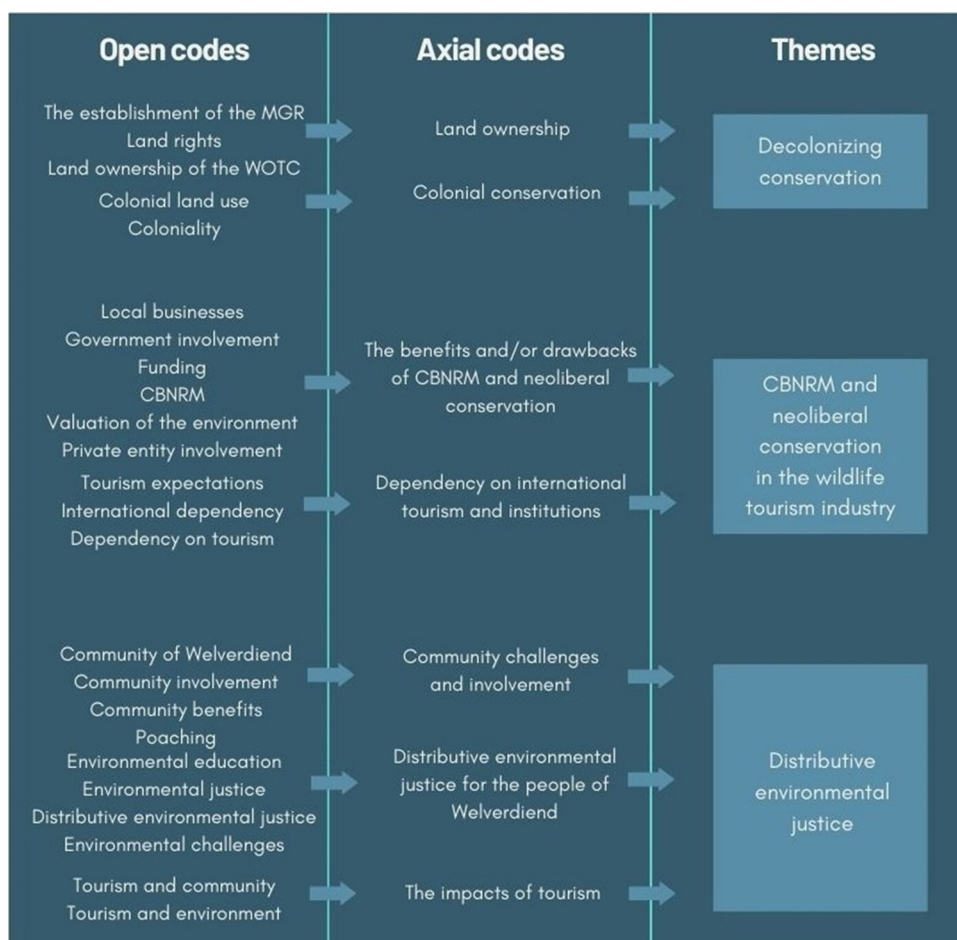
Ethics Protocol

Following the ethics guidelines of Central European University and the Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company (K2C NPC), each interviewee was asked to sign a consent form (Supplementary Material 2) or give verbal consent before the recordings and interviews began. An agreement was signed with the University of Witwatersrand, the K2C NPC research team, and the non-profit organization Indalo Inclusive to conduct interviews with the staff of the WOTC. Each interviewee was informed about voluntary participation, their ability to withdraw from the interview, their right to privacy, potential threats, and how the data would be used and managed after the interview and publication. If a translator was arranged, the consent form was translated and verbally agreed upon with the interviewees. This was only the case with interviewees 3A and 3B [citizens of Welverdiend].

This research was made possible by the K2C NPC and a local social enterprise called Indalo Inclusive. Both organizations promote tourism in the case study area. OSUN's external funding ensured researcher independence.

² The Cooperative is known as the Muthlwareni Cooperative but is called “the Cooperative” within the community. Muthlwareni is the Shangaan translation for a wild olive tree. “The Cooperative” was formed in 2001 by 17 people from Welverdiend to create employment opportunities for themselves and for their community.

Fig. 2 Scheme of the thematic analysis process from open coding (left) to themes (right)



Discussions with the previously mentioned organizations and informal chats with locals and employees of the WOTC helped confirm the findings and reduce author bias.

Results

Case Study Area

The History of the MGR

The Manyeleti land claim is one of the longest pending land claims that cannot be settled due to the large interest in the land [4B, staff Indalo Inclusive]. The land interests traditional authorities, the Mnisi community, private companies, and, more specifically, the tourism industry [4D, member of Cooperation]. The land claim settlements by formerly displaced families aim for 100% ownership of the benefits of tourism and other forms of businesses within the MGR.

Although the number of land claimants in the MGR has varied over the last decades due to unclarity of who had lived on the land, who used the environmental resources, and which families were forcefully removed from the land, the

current land claimants in the MGR comprise 151 families [4D, member of Cooperation]. The first land claim settlements were rejected due to the lack of clarity, leading to a collaboration of those who could provide evidence, presenting a prominent land claim case [4D, member of Cooperation]. Below, we present a timeline of the land claims according to data from the semi-structured interviews (Fig. 3).

The History of the WOTC

The WOTC opened in 2013 (Fig. 4) and consists of 12 tents built on the Mnisi community's communal land next to the village of Welverdiend and the MGR (Fig. 1). During the first two years of operating the WOTC, K2C NPC assisted in covering the salary costs [5C, employee local NGO]. After two years, the camp became financially self-sustaining. Due to COVID-19 and the associated decrease in tourism, the WOTC could not run independently. Therefore, since May 2023, the WOTC has been partially managed by the non-profit social enterprise Indalo Inclusive to make the WOTC, again, a self-sustaining CBWT tourism enterprise that benefits from the MGR and the KNP [4B, staff Indalo Inclusive].

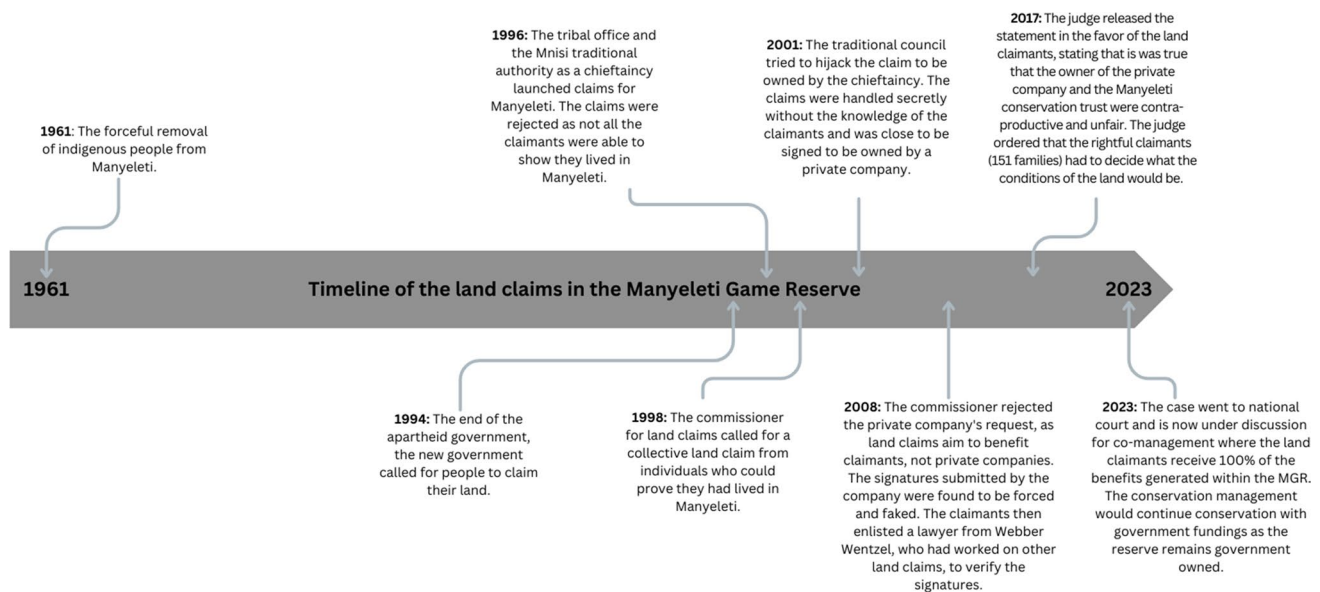


Fig. 3 Timeline of the land claim process in the Manyeleti Game Reserve

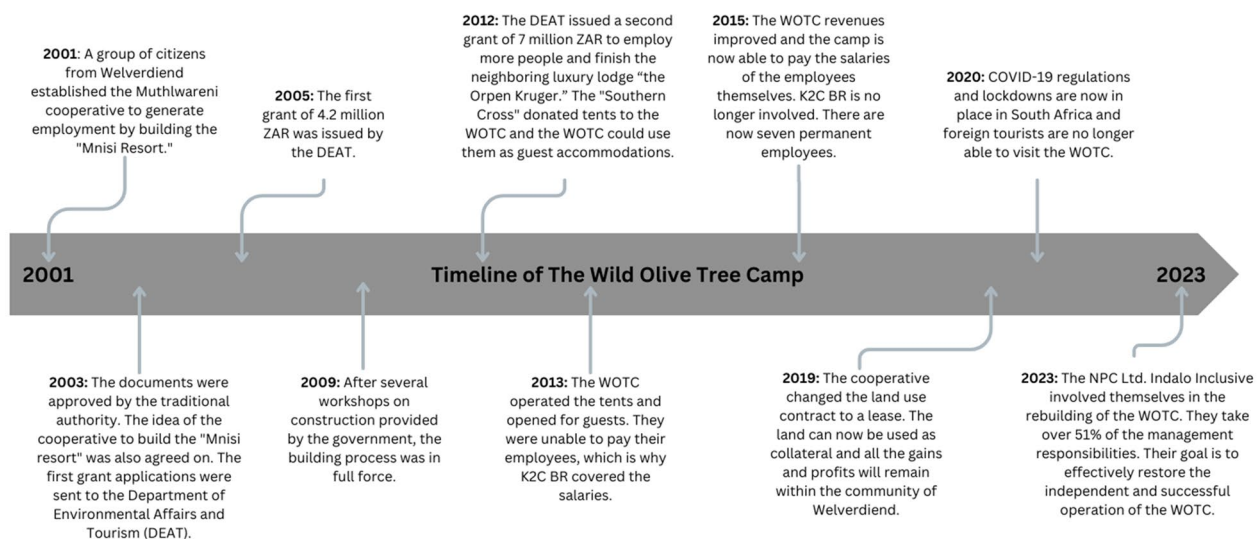


Fig. 4 Timeline of the establishment of the Wild Olive Tree Camp

During its establishment, the WOTC depended on funding from both the government and private investors. Investors that have been mentioned throughout the interviews are:

- Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism
- the Wildlife Collage (an education center across the road from Welverdiend, funded by World Wildlife Fund)
- K2C NPC
- the Industrial Development Corporation (a national development finance institute)
- the Southern Cross Foundation

- the Andover Reserve (a reserve neighboring the Welverdiend village)
- private individual investors.

Environmental Justice

Interviewees were asked how they perceive distributive EJ. Most of the interviewees mentioned distributive EJ concerning access to employment, access to harvesting resources, and ensuring that all stakeholders benefit from local environmental resources [2A, staff WOTC; 2B, staff WOTC; 2C staff WOTC; 3A, citizen of Welverdiend]. While acknowledging the current

state of conservation and Western influences, (re)implementing local knowledge and integrating Indigenous systems into conservation practices have also been mentioned as directing toward just processes.

“...to the whole of jurisprudence systems and looking at a way of integrating Indigenous systems. Unfortunately, you have to acknowledge the Western influences because it’s there and it’s what’s making a lot of the other functions possible.” [5C, employee local NGO]

The equal inclusion of local communities in both conservation and tourism was mentioned as it not only addresses neocolonial relations enforced by the international community [4C, member of Cooperative; 5B, local veterinarian] but also improves the relationship between humans and their environmental surroundings [4C, member of Cooperative; 4D, member of Cooperative; 5C, employee local NGO].

Knowledge and Land Ownership

The respondents acknowledged that the past colonial injustices through territorialization and green grabbing have led to an education gap in conservation management and the management of CBWT enterprises [4C, member of Cooperative; 5C, employee local NGO]. They recognized that equal access to knowledge on conservation and CBWT management could support in tackling neocolonial injustices [4D, member of Cooperation]. Multiple interviewees also mentioned that regaining land and ownership in the MGR could help achieve equality and reconnection between people and their homeland [4C, member of Cooperate, 5C, employee local NGO]. Further benefits of including local landowners that were named are cultural benefits [5A, employee in wildlife tourism], pride within the community toward their environmental resources [5C, employee local NGO], and local involvement in conservation [4D, member of Cooperative]. Furthermore, it was stressed that educating relevant stakeholders on (neo)colonial structures and injustices is vital to increase the support for conservation and CBWT within the community [4D, member of Cooperative].

“It wasn’t a nice thing how this protected area has been created because it was in the sacrifice, in the pain of others, but the concept itself was good when you see it now because the natural resources have been conserved and out of it the ecotourism has been introduced and it’s creating a lot of jobs.” [4D, member of Cooperative]

Local Perceptions of ‘the fences’

The barriers and perceptions of fences were discussed with the interviewees. The interviews highlight that fences around

PAs and private game reserves are perceived as contemporary barriers rooted in colonial history, continuing the unequal access to environmental resources and the benefits derived from those barriers [5A, employee in wildlife tourism; 5B, employee in wildlife tourism; 5C, employee local NGO]. It was emphasized that fences hinder access to the MGR and KNP and foster negative perceptions, symbolizing the loss of ancestral land. Furthermore, the results show that the fences not only restrict physical human and animal movement but also create mental barriers, reinforcing historical injustices [5B, local veterinarian] and highlighting the need to address the perception that the fences create without necessarily dropping them [5C, employee local NGO].

Most interviewees also acknowledged the challenge of wild animals escaping due to sub-standard fencing [4C, member of Cooperative; 4D, member of Cooperative].

Community-Based Wildlife Tourism

The interviewees mentioned the role of CBWT in promoting community well-being and facilitating societal transitions within the tourism industry, considering the power dynamics in the study area. Here, we report the socio-economic and socio-ecological implications of CBWT and the effects on tourist perceptions of rural South Africa.

Socio-Economic and Socio-Ecological Impacts of CBWT

According to an employee from a local NGO, CBWT benefits the community beyond the financial benefits as it enhances community agency and increases communal morale [5C, employee local NGO]. Furthermore, a common view among interviewees is that the wildlife in the MGR is crucial for the well-being of the community, as it relies on wildlife as a renewable resource for the tourism industry [4B, staff Indalo Inclusive; 4C, member of Cooperative; 4D, member of Cooperative, 5A, employee in wildlife tourism; 5B, local veterinarian]. The following quotes are presented to clarify multiple perspectives:

“...if it’s destroyed and it’s not a tourist attraction [...] there is a problem.” [4B, staff Indalo Inclusive]

“...if you remove the Kruger National Park from Welverdiend, then we become nothing, and these lodges become nothing [...] the animals are our gold; there is money behind it. If we don’t have Kruger, we are dead, we are all dead.” [4C, member of Cooperative]

“[The wildlife] is a renewable resource. The very same impala you saw last year, when you come you will find it being multiplied [...], and then so many tourists will pay a lot of money using one resource.” [4D, member of Cooperative]

“We’re in a conservation area and everybody, the private and public sector, are fighting to keep it; otherwise, there is no tourism. [...] The only reason we have tourism is environmental beauty.” [5A, employee in wildlife tourism]

Evolving Perceptions of Rural South Africa through CBWT

The perceptions of the interviewees regarding tourists varied. While one interviewee stated that tourists are wrongfully scared away from CBWT, another interviewee mentioned that tourists are very keen on connecting with local people after they have seen wildlife, specifically the ‘big five.’³

“Community-based tourism can be a sort of deterrent or a shying away factor for people to want to come into these community areas. I think a lot of internationals will land in South Africa and be pre-warned of the violence, of the dangers they could face and yes, I don’t want to say it doesn’t exist, that we should be obnoxious to it, but I do see that as a stumbling block in these areas that just general crime can really scare people away from looking at a community-based tourism organization.” [5D, employee in wildlife tourism]

Another interviewee mentioned that there is a common misconception about rural South Africa. They noted that some tourists think the people live in a “mud hut,” but when they arrive and take the chance to visit a rural village, they see a local economy happening. However, if the tourists stay in the safety bubble of their lodges, they miss out on experiencing rural South Africa, which can perpetuate negative stereotypes:

“Guests fly into the airport, the lodge goes pick them up, they take them to the lodge and so that’s where they stay until they take them back to the lodge instead of exposing them to what else is out there. There’s much more to this area than just wildlife, and we need to break that perception as well.” [5C, employee local NGO]

Neocolonial Dependencies

Although we did not explicitly ask about neocolonial dependencies, the influence of COVID-19 on tourism emerged during the fieldwork, illustrating local dependencies on global neoliberal and neocolonial structures. We further analyze this in the discussion section.

³ The term ‘big five’ originally refers to the lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and African buffalo. These five large animals were considered as difficult trophies by hunters (Nelson, 2010).

It was mentioned that the WOTC had still not recovered from financial and material losses and traumas [4B, staff Indalo Inclusive] from the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees mentioned the inability of the WOTC to pay the supportive staff salaries [2B, staff WOTC; 4A, member of Cooperative; 4B, staff Indalo Inclusive]. Despite the struggles, the interviews with staff of the WOTC showed that with the strong support of the community and the employees, the enterprise remained running with fluctuating salaries for the staff.

“The company has survived COVID-19 with the strong support of its employees, who decided to work without salary.” [4A, member of Cooperative]

“The Wild Olive Tree has gotten to a point where everybody and everyone involved has done a certain amount of work under extreme strenuous conditions.” [4B, staff Indalo Inclusive]

Discussion

Environmental Justice

As found in previous studies, EJ is centered on understanding and appreciating different worldviews (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020), where place-based systems and ideologies are acknowledged in their political ecologies. This case study adopted the EJ framework to consider the plurality of worldviews within a specific local context while recognizing its global relevance, acknowledging the interconnection between Western and Indigenous ideologies, and the need for a simultaneous approach in pursuing EJ. Integrating Indigenous systems to preserve ecosystems while acknowledging the contemporary reality of a neoliberal system can help commodify resources beyond their monetary value (Bunn et al., 2023). Moreover, an interviewee claimed that implementing Indigenous systems would safeguard the environment’s integrity, increase value, and improve community development through, for example, access to employment and the promotion of local agencies in managing environmental resources. By acknowledging both human and environmental stakeholders in decision-making (Swemmer et al., 2015), the approach moves beyond solely neocolonial structures that traditionally separate Indigenous communities from land management. Our results support previous studies (Anthony et al., 2011), showing that local agency is key in establishing an equitable land-use system and, eventually, tourism management.

The results of our study confirm the local recognition of the importance of conserving environmental resources despite their colonial associations. As illustrated by the quote from interviewee 4D, the community’s perspective

toward conservation activities has changed over time in favor of global biodiversity goals, partly due to the inclusion of locals in the management of PAs. However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously, as the interviewees have vested interests in the wildlife economy. In alignment with Gaodirelwe et al. (2020), we reiterate that including locals in managing PAs likely leads to increased engagement in the conservation, appreciation, and protection of resources, as well as the integrity of the landscapes and cultural heritage within PAs. However, while including rural communities in PA management is recognized as a step toward equitable territorial land use, it is a lengthy process. Current literature highlights that such efforts can paradoxically reinforce neo-colonial structures due to the enduring disadvantages stemming from long-term colonial segregation in land ownership and rights (Koot et al., 2024). Ramutsindela (2015) argues that the harms are often justified as necessary for a healthy planet, especially in CBWT, which is perceived to promote businesses in conservation areas. As one interviewee mentioned, the historical legacy of segregation, rooted in colonial trauma, perpetuated unequal opportunities in conservation. In addition to apartheid facilitating the dominance of the white elite in management roles in PAs, historically disadvantaged people were left behind in education and knowledge on managing PAs.

To tackle the unequal opportunities in conservation, future landholders must take over management positions in the MGR. Prioritizing the employment of (especially young) local South African citizens, as SANParks exemplify, fosters environmental, social, and economic advantages (Saayman et al., 2012). While the commitment to hiring locals is commendable to tackle short-term needs, our results show that recognizing neocolonialism and coloniality to tackle long-term structural inequalities is essential. Furthermore, the interviewees highlighted the education gap in conservation and land management, noting that it led to a disconnect between people and their land. To address this, a more comprehensive strategy that includes equitable access to education is necessary to foster a long-term shift to local involvement. In alignment with Bluwstein (2021), our study argues that it is necessary to acknowledge the political stance of stakeholders and reignite power to people who were historically dispossessed for the establishment of specific landscapes. As the Welverdiend community engages in land claims, multiple interviewees see opportunities for future land ownership within the MGR through community-based initiatives. Based on our results, we additionally suggest that the political ecological approach to participation in land management fosters cultural benefits (Hitchcock, 2019), brings back pride to the community, fosters equitable access to knowledge, and leads to improved local involvement in community-based (conservation) initiatives, enhancing conservation management according to international

standards. In alignment with the distributive EJ framework, this approach proposes restructuring international imbalanced dependencies.

Fences and Colonial Legacies

In South Africa, the role of fences and their notable significance in wildlife management has been demonstrated (Ferguson & Hanks, 2010). Research has shown that although many fences in the K2C Biosphere Region have been removed over the past decades, the remaining fences crucially serve to prevent the transfer and spread of infectious zoonotic diseases between wildlife and cattle and to keep dangerous animals away from residential grazing, and cropping land (Ferguson & Hanks, 2010). In alignment with previous studies (Anthony, 2007; Anthony et al., 2011; Ferguson & Hanks, 2010) most interviewees acknowledged the challenge of wild animals escaping due to inadequate fencing.

However, in acknowledging the positive aspects of contemporary fencing, it appeared during our fieldwork that the fences surrounding PAs and private game reserves pose additional local challenges from a political ecology point of view. An interviewee mentioned that, in addition to creating a physical barrier for both animal migration and human access to Indigenous lands, these fences also make a mental barrier that sustains the symbolic history of racial segregation within conservation practices in South Africa. The results of our study suggest that the building of fences during apartheid, along with the exclusion of people from their land in PAs, has led to a distorted perception of PAs. The areas behind the fence have become the places of “true wilderness” that tourists can enjoy. In contrast, the people who are the rightful owners of the land have no financial resources to visit and remain on the ‘other side of the fence’ [3B, women in craft; 4C, member of Cooperative]. Also, Thakholi and Koot (2023) have argued that the fences reinforce the colonial perception of belonging to either one side of the fence or the other. The interviewees mentioned that the fences prevent people from visiting their Indigenous land due to financial constraints, potentially leading to misunderstandings of worldviews on both sides of the fences [3B, citizen of Welverdiend; 4C, member of Cooperative]. When asked whether dropping the fences would be a solution, an interviewee argued, in alignment with previous literature, that this would not be the right solution, as it represents more than just a security fence: “‘Development’ [...] does not invariably mean to bring all fences down and to remove all restrictions or sanctions” (Zips & Zips-Mairitsch, 2019, p. 313). Without equalizing access and allowing conversation for people on both sides of the fence, the mental barrier and coloniality of the fences will remain.

The Value of CBWT

Our study confirms the hypothesis that the value of environmental resources (especially wildlife) is closely tied to their high potential for the tourism sector (Koot et al., 2024). Interviewees highlighted “environmental beauty” as the primary attraction for tourists visiting the WOTC, leading to the case study area becoming dependent on the wildlife economy. While some interviewees perceive tourism as an employment opportunity, others recognize the potential for further social and environmental benefits. Furthermore, our results indicate that CBWT propagates morale and local pride within rural communities, resulting in a protective approach toward the integrity of their environment. Interviewees emphasized the importance of conservation, viewing tourism as a valuable asset and a profitable and acceptable land use. This supports previous studies that show that the market-based approach to PAs is a broadly accepted mechanism as it ensures a significant source of income (Chidakel et al., 2020; Packer, 2015; Ramutsindela & Shabangu, 2013).

Although the market-based mechanism is broadly implemented (Büscher et al., 2014), Baer (2020) contends that a neoliberal approach may alleviate poverty for some but risks prioritizing profits over social equity and environmental health. Furthermore, a market-based approach, which prioritizes economic capital, has been criticized for intensifying neocolonial apartheid (Koot et al., 2024) and undermining efforts toward EJ (Leonard, 2018). The interviewees who spoke positively about the marketization of the environment perceive a direct positive effect of the economic capital coming from tourism, as it is said to be invested in community development and conservation projects. Thus, while it can be argued that the wildlife economy and CBWT initiatives generate short-term employment opportunities, we remain critical of whether the current wildlife economy effectively addresses neocolonial and environmental unjust structures in the long term.

Despite the market-based critique on CBWT, our results show that CBWT enterprises are perceived to positively influence global perceptions of rural South Africa by reducing neocolonial narratives of dependency. Current literature critiques global views on sub-Saharan Africa, where voluntourism (Remers, 2022), environmental philanthropy (Ramutsindela, 2015), and development aid (Lacey & Ilcan, 2015) often lead to well-meaning capitalists (Koot et al., 2024) or NGOs to gain control over managing environmental resources. By enabling tourist access to rural villages through initiatives such as the WOTC, CBWT is perceived as having the potential to change these global perspectives on rural communities in South Africa by highlighting the functionality of local economies. Our results suggest that tourists sometimes expect that rural South Africa is

inaccessible to foreigners and that people live ‘primitively.’ If tourists stay inside the elite tourism bubble because they are told it is unsafe outside, they cannot connect with local communities and understand rural South Africa [5C, employee of local NGO; 5A, employee in wildlife tourism]. Staying in community-owned tourist accommodations such as the WOTC allows tourists to experience rural life directly, countering the perception that local people merely receive tourism. Thus, by enabling tourist access, CBWT potentially contributes to reshaping neocolonial-induced perceptions of development and aid in rural South African communities.

This outcome suggests that tourists expand their worldview through the presence of phenomena (Berger & Luckmann, 1990). Social access between hosts and guests enables rural communities to participate in the global tourism industry and enhance their relationship with tourism. As mentioned in the interviews, this phenomenon can be beneficial for developing a positive perspective toward tourism in the study area, and initiatives such as the WOTC have the potential to benefit the reciprocal perceptions between host and guest (Lacey & Ilcan, 2015). Moreover, uniting hosts and guests through CBWT can reignite the connection between ‘people on both sides of the fences,’ dismantling coloniality.

Neocolonial Dependencies

Our study presents neocolonial dependencies by incorporating the local historical context of land use in this study on CBWT. Although some perceive the neoliberal market as an open and accessible structure in PAs (Bello & Lambulira, 2024), former studies confirm that socio-economic opportunities differentiate based on former segregation as “‘old money’ built up under colonial and formal apartheid regimes keeps having strong effects on the present-day wildlife economy” (Koot et al., 2024, p. 134). While the commodification of environmental resources has generated conservation investments (Smith et al., 2021), it has often alienated locals from their traditional practices and made conservation subject to a global approach (Büscher, 2014). The wildlife economy is not expected to change such structures (Koot et al., 2024).

Previous studies have shown that focusing on local economies through, for example, stimulating CBWT is crucial to creating independence from the private sector and supporting local development economies (Dressler & Büscher, 2008). However, despite efforts to liberalize neocolonial governance, the restructuring of post-apartheid resources and landscape management continues to be subordinated to financial gains. In the following section, we briefly discuss the example of COVID-19, uncovered during fieldwork. It can be associated with neocolonial dependencies and their connection to CBWT in tackling environmental injustices within the global tourism industry.

COVID-19

Sithole (2022) revealed a decrease in South African tourism and employment rates resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. This resulted in psychological and physical setbacks, a decrease in environmental education, hindering conservation awareness and capacity, decreased access to environmental resources from PAs, and difficulty for some stakeholders to participate in (online) meetings (Mbunge, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). This aligns with our results, which showed that people suffered economic losses and social security from the COVID-19 lockdowns, revealing the communities' strong dependence on tourism. The tourism-based salaries of local communities put the livelihoods of those reliant on a thriving industry in jeopardy and insecurity.

Since COVID-19, the WOTC has been unable to run at full capacity, the marketing has been affected, and facilities are deteriorating [4B, staff Indalo Inclusive]. While we emphasize that economic gain is not the sole factor for successful community development, the average income in the area surrounding the KNP provides, on average, 4.3 people (Chidakel et al., 2020). This finding suggests that the lack of tourists at the WOTC, which has 11 employees, can directly affect the livelihoods of approximately 50 people, highlighting the strong reliance on market-based principles.

A focus on local or national economies could ensure a more sustainable and secure income for the community of Welverdiend, becoming less dependent on the insecurity of the global tourism industry (Saayman et al., 2012). To stimulate national tourism, some tourism destinations have reduced the prices for southern African citizens on accommodations or entrance tickets to PAs [5A, employee in wildlife tourism]. Further research could focus on understanding the expansion of community-based initiatives within a local economy, decreasing dependency on international stakeholders, privatized initiatives, and increasing the diversity of income streams and dependencies on local stakeholders (Smith et al., 2021). This would decrease neocolonial dependency structures and the vulnerability of CBWT projects.

Conclusion

With the growing demand for wildlife tourism, the expanding wildlife economy, and efforts to include local communities through community-based initiatives, our study explores the role of CBWT in promoting equitable land management using the distributive EJ framework. By critically applying the EJ lens, we emphasize that power structures that underpin injustices should be considered (Menton et al., 2020). Therefore, we considered local history and explored whether colonial traumas and neocolonial structures are related to

land use and tourism challenges. This article contributed to EJ studies by contextualizing the framework in a study area that has not yet been applied, combining historical context, CBWT, and critical neoliberal theory. We advocate for further research that connects these elements.

Our findings reveal that the people of Welverdiend highly value the MGR. Yet, the physical barrier of a fence separating Welverdiend and the WOTC from the MGR is a daily reminder of persisting neocolonial structures. While locals support the fence's existence, as it benefits the community by keeping potentially damage-causing animals away from the village, the symbolic perception of the fence reinforces neocolonial power dynamics. The community stays on one side of the fence, while tourists are on the other. The people of Welverdiend depend on the MGR and conserving its environmental resources. Tourists visiting the WOTC for accommodation come because the camp is next to the KNP. While the MGR offers financial benefits to the community through the wildlife economy, we argue that dismantling neocolonial perceptions of the land requires reinterpreting artifacts like the fence, allowing them to develop their meaning. Further research could focus on understanding neocolonial perceptions of such contemporary artifacts. We argue that re-establishing rightful land ownership can help address the environmental injustices in this context.

On a constructive note, our study found that a CBWT enterprise such as the WOTC can enhance employment opportunities for local communities while regaining partial or symbolic agency of the land from which they were historically dispossessed. By participating in the wildlife tourism industry through community-based initiatives, communities can directly benefit from the commodification of environmental resources, leading to improved employment, a positive mindset towards tourism, and contributing to regenerating pride in formerly owned land. Furthermore, our results show that CBWT has the potential to shift tourists' perceptions of rural South Africa and counter neocolonial narratives. Our case study with the WOTC has presented examples of these dynamics.

However, while our case study highlights the above-mentioned dynamics, we argue that CBWT may only facilitate a short-term shift in power dynamics. CBWT remains insufficient for addressing long-term environmental injustices, as a market-based approach often perpetuates neocolonial structures and dependencies. We argue that neoliberal structures frequently fail to develop sustainable projects, as shown in the COVID-19 example. Local economies remain dependent on capitalists (Koot et al., 2024) and other private investors, perpetuating those neocolonial dependency structures. Therefore, we suggest that further research continues to explore existing power relations in the wildlife economy. In doing so, it could be explored how integrating local worldviews, narratives, and local knowledge may contribute to

establishing the autonomy of local economies and restoring agency over local environmental resources without relying on the privatized market.

The limitations of this research include that fieldwork was conducted during the off-tourist season, which resulted in fewer tourist interviews. Additionally, conducting international research presents challenges in accurately interpreting data related to perspectives. However, the interviewee pool's diversity helped mitigate this issue by providing a range of viewpoints. As this qualitative case study was explorative, we are limited in giving broad policy recommendations.

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Author Contribution L.v.M. and B.P.A. designed the study. B.P.A. supervised the research. L.v.M. carried out all field research. L.v.M. drafted the original manuscript text. L.v.M. and B.P.A. wrote the final manuscript text. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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