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Examining the Contribution of Protected Area-Based Tourism to Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract: This paper examines the contribution of protected area-based tourism to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at Lake Malawi National Park in Malawi, focusing on environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Adopting a qualitative exploratory cross-sectional design within an interpretive paradigm, the research engaged diverse stakeholders to explore tourism's contribution to SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 14 (Life Below Water), and 15 (Life on Land). The findings reveal that protected area-based tourism enhances local livelihoods by creating employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, facilitates biodiversity conservation through tourism operators and community-led initiatives, and supports the ecological health of Lake Malawi through sustainable tourism practices. Moreover, the study underscores the critical role of local community participation in tourism development and conservation, reinforcing the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. By integrating these dimensions, Lake Malawi National Park serves as a model for leveraging tourism as a tool for sustainable development. The study calls for sustained investment in protected area-based tourism to maximize its benefits and ensure equitable distribution of tourism-generated resources, ultimately driving progress towards the SDGs and fostering long-term conservation and community resilience.

Keywords: protected area-based tourism; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); community participation; Lake Malawi National Park.

Jel Classification: L83; Q01; Z32; R11.

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a key framework for international development, was adopted by 193 United Nations (UN) member states in September 2015. It underscores a coordinated plan to improve global

conditions by 2030 (UNWTO, 2023). The UNWTO highlights the critical role of tourism in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and integrating these goals into the tourism sector (Recchin, 2022). Boluk and Rasoolimanesh (2022) note that sustainable tourism development significantly supports global sustainability efforts, with the potential to impact all 17 SDGs directly or indirectly. Similarly, Pratt (2022) emphasises that tourism contributes to every SDG through its multifaceted activities.

Tourism has become a vital instrument for socio-economic development, particularly within the alternative development paradigm in developing countries (Lekaota & Ngidi, 2024; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). In the post-COVID-19 era, the industry has shown strong recovery and growth (Dube *et al.* 2023; Kupika & Dube, 2023; Nyikana & Bama, 2023), with increasing international visitor trips (Statista, 2024). Projections from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) indicate that the tourism sector is expected to generate USD 10,986.5 billion by 2026, contributing 10.8% to global GDP (Khizar *et al.* 2023). This growth aligns with a rising interest in natural and cultural tourism, particularly in protected areas. However, there is limited research on how the SDG framework can be leveraged to enhance sustainability within these contexts (Boluk & Rasoolimanesh, 2022).

Protected areas are formally recognised and responsibly managed regions aimed at conserving nature and cultural heritage for the long term (IUCN, 2019; Liu *et al.* 2023). They play a fundamental role in achieving the SDGs by preserving ecosystems and promoting community development (Liu *et al.* 2023). Protected Areas (PAs) stand at a critical crossroads as natural landscapes face mounting pressures from both conservation needs and tourism demands (KC & Kusi, 2025). Tourism within the protected areas directly supports SDG 1 (poverty reduction) and SDG 5 (gender equality). For example, studies by Connell (2020) and Trupp and Dolezal (2020) highlight significant female employment in tourism-related roles. It also advances SDG 8 (inclusive economic growth) and SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production) through eco-friendly practices that reduce environmental impact (Dobrea *et al.* 2023). Moreover, tourism's contributions to SDG 14 (marine conservation) and SDG 15 (land resource protection) demonstrate its ecological importance (Rasoolimanesh *et al.* 2023).

The expansion of tourism has paralleled neoliberal trends such as marketisation, deregulation, and privatisation (Fletcher, 2023). While globalisation has delivered material benefits, including substantial gains in the tourism sector, it has also presented challenges in balancing economic development with socio-cultural and ecological conservation (Wearing *et al.* 2019; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). In this regard, proper planning and inclusive community involvement are essential for achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes (Liu *et al.* 2023). In Malawi, limited research has been conducted on the contributions of protected area-based tourism to the SDGs, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context. This study focuses on Lake Malawi National Park (LMNP) and explores how tourism linked to protected areas and biodiversity conservation supports SDGs 1 (poverty eradication), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 14 (life below water), and 15 (life on land). The study is guided by the Sustainable Development (SD) theory, which emphasises meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Steer & Wade-Grey, 1993). Therefore, the study seeks to analyse the positive impacts of protected area-based tourism in relation to the SDGs and examine the nature of local community participation in protected area-based tourism and conservation initiatives.

This study enriches the tourism and sustainable development literature by providing empirical evidence from Lake Malawi. This study advances tourism and sustainable development scholarship by unveiling how protected area-based tourism in Lake Malawi National Park drives progress toward SDGs 1, 8, 14, and 15 in the post-COVID-19 era. It offers critical insights into the dynamics of community participation and inclusive planning, illuminating pathways to harmonise economic growth with socio-cultural resilience and ecological integrity in sub-Saharan Africa.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Protected Area-Based Tourism

Africa is endowed with a wealth of biological diversity, and sub-Saharan Africa features a wide array of ecological communities across its eight terrestrial biomes, which include forests, savannahs, woodlands, grasslands, scrublands, deserts, and mangroves (Imboma, 2022). Protected area-based tourism serves as a crucial link connecting biodiversity conservation with community development (Bello, 2021; Gidebo, 2023). The academic field of tourism recognises the well-established correlation between tourism and sustainability, supported by a substantial body of literature exploring this relationship (Boluk & Rasoolimanesh, 2022; Lambulira & Bello, 2022). Globally, there is consensus on the potential of protected areas to conserve biodiversity effectively, provided they receive adequate funding, political support, competent management, and community engagement, regardless of their governance structure (Chardonnet, 2019).

The sub-Saharan Africa views tourism as an accessible tool for economic development and diversification (Lambulira & Bello, 2022). In 2019, the travel and tourism industry contributed up to 7.7% of Malawi's GDP (World Bank, 2020). Bello (2021) argues that effective protected area-based tourism requires the participation of local communities in the planning and development of tourism. Abukari & Mwalyosi (2020) agree, noting that community involvement in natural resource management initiatives gives residents a sense of representation in the governance and management of their local resources. Proper management of protected area-based tourism yields mutual benefits for a wide range of stakeholders. For example, studies in Ethiopia on Bale Mountain National Park have demonstrated economic benefits through tourism activities, as tourists were willing to pay for the protection of the Ethiopian wolf (Estifanos *et al.* 2021). However, the sub-Saharan Africa region faces numerous obstacles to tourism development, including poverty, inadequate marketing and information dissemination about tourist destinations, a lack of essential services such as healthcare, education, and labour mobility, insufficient transportation and infrastructure, a shortage of domestic investment, and a political environment often marked by civil conflicts and insufficient political support for tourism (Lambulira & Bello, 2022).

1.2 Sustainable Development Goals and Protected Areas

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a central component of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. This agenda promotes sustainable development by advocating for the responsible use of natural resources, supporting conservation efforts, creating employment opportunities for local communities, preserving local cultures and products, and sustainably utilizing marine resources to enhance economic benefits for small island developing states and underdeveloped countries (Rasoolimanesh *et al.* 2023). The SDGs are essential for eliminating poverty, reducing hunger, improving health and education, preserving the environment, and promoting social equity, serving as a global guide for achieving sustainable development by 2030 (Liu *et al.* 2023). However, since the SDGs were introduced in 2015, limited research has been conducted on how the tourism industry can effectively use these goals to promote sustainability within the sector (Boluk & Rasoolimanesh, 2022).

SDG 1 (No Poverty) aims to eradicate extreme poverty, currently defined as living on less than \$1.25 a day, by 2030, and to halve the percentage of people living in poverty in all its forms by that year. This goal also promotes equal access to financial services, technology, land ownership, and basic amenities, with a focus on the impoverished and vulnerable. Additionally, it advocates for policy frameworks that support pro-poor and gender-sensitive development at national, regional, and global levels to increase funding for poverty reduction (UNWTO, 2023). Protected area-based tourism aligns closely with SDG 1 due to its intrinsic ecological value and its role in providing ecosystem services. These services, including nature-based tourism, enhance human well-being, alleviate poverty, and provide economic incentives for local communities to conserve biodiversity (Gupta *et al.* 2023).

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) calls for policies that support sustainable tourism, generating employment, and celebrating local culture and products. It also emphasizes eliminating forced labour, human trafficking, and child labour, promoting labour rights, and ensuring safe working conditions. Additionally, it advocates for development-oriented policies that create decent jobs, foster entrepreneurship and innovation, and help formalise small and medium-sized enterprises by improving access to financial services. Countries are also encouraged to aim for full and productive employment and equal pay for equal work, including opportunities for youth and individuals with disabilities (Dobrea *et al.* 2023; UNWTO, 2023). Protected areas provide significant social and environmental benefits, including job creation (Castro, 2024; Liu *et al.* 2023). Tourism to these areas stimulates local economies by increasing demand for goods and services, supporting local businesses, and contributing to the economy through visitor spending on park fees, accommodations, transportation, leisure, and recreation (Gupta *et al.* 2023). Job creation in tourism-related sectors, such as agriculture and education, fosters local economic growth and helps reduce poverty (Liu *et al.* 2023).

SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production) promotes sustainable consumption and production through policies, laws, regulations, and international agreements on managing toxic materials. By 2030, it aims to halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses throughout production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses (UNWTO, 2021). Strengthening the link between tourism, food sourcing, and production processes, including agriculture and fishing, is crucial for sustainable development (Pratt, 2022). Scheyvens & Laeis (2021) identified various obstacles in food-tourism systems, particularly in sourcing diverse food types for resort menus in their study of multinational holiday resorts in Fiji. Other challenges included tourists' limited interest in local cuisine and the difficulty of incorporating local produce into menus favoured by international guests (Movono & Hughes, 2022).

SDG 14 (Life Below Water) aims to prevent and reduce marine pollution from land-based activities, such as debris and nutrient runoff, by 2025. Additionally, it seeks to enhance economic benefits for Small Island Developing States and least developed countries by promoting sustainable use of marine resources, including fisheries, aquaculture, and tourism. The goal also prioritises access for small-scale artisanal fishers to resources and markets and emphasizes sustainable management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems to improve resilience and support restoration efforts, achieving healthy, productive oceans (UNWTO, 2021). Tourism places considerable pressure on fragile marine ecosystems, including coral reefs, mangroves, and intertidal zones (Tolkach & Pratt, 2022). A study in Fiji by Singh *et al.* (2021) found that tourism had negative impacts on marine environments, including habitat destruction, over-fishing, coral souvenir collection, and noise pollution.

SDG 15 (Life on Land) advocates for urgent measures to reduce habitat degradation, halt biodiversity loss, and prevent the extinction of endangered species by 2030 (Pratt, 2022). It also supports equitable sharing and access to genetic resources following international agreements. Additionally, the goal calls for actions to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species, targeting both the supply and demand of illegal wildlife products (UNWTO, 2021). Protected areas are essential to achieving the SDGs by conserving biodiversity, fostering community development, and building resilience and sustainability (Liu *et al.* 2023). Biodiversity is currently in crisis, with extinction rates estimated to be 1,000 times higher than natural background levels. The international community has responded by prioritising biodiversity protection and expanding protected areas through various international frameworks, including the Aichi Biodiversity Targets and the SDGs (Palfrey *et al.* 2020).

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Sustainable Development theory emphasizes that the endeavours to meet present needs should not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Steer & Wade-Grey, 1993). The theory stresses the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental domains, asserting that sustainable progress requires a holistic approach that addresses all three aspects in tandem (Newell *et al.* 2019). While sustainable development has gained traction as a guiding principle for global socio-economic transformation, its implementation faces challenges due to misinterpretations of its theoretical foundations (Shi *et al.* 2019). For example, economic sustainability within sustainable development can be advanced through initiatives like ecotourism, which promotes responsible tourism that supports conservation and benefits local communities economically without degrading the environment (Hutchison *et al.* 2021). The scope of sustainable development has evolved to incorporate not just sustainable resource use but also the broader objectives outlined by the SDGs (Shi *et al.* 2019).

Therefore, the theoretical framework of this study is rooted in sustainable development, with a focus on socio-economic sustainability factors such as employment generation, local business growth, and women's empowerment. These elements are crucial in understanding how tourism enterprises can provide economic benefits to local communities, as highlighted by Rasoolimanesh *et al.* (2023). The sustainable development theory also guides the study's exploration of environmental sustainability within protected areas, encompassing ecosystem and biodiversity preservation alongside wildlife protection measures. This aligns closely with Goal 15, which advocates for the sustainable management of terrestrial ecosystems and halting biodiversity loss (Rasoolimanesh *et al.* 2023).

An integral aspect of the theory is the fair distribution of social costs and benefits associated with conservation among various stakeholders. Ensuring equitable benefit-sharing can foster positive community attitudes toward conservation initiatives, thereby increasing support and reducing resistance. Conversely, if conservation activities are perceived as infringing on local communities' socio-economic or cultural rights, it may lead to resentment and hinder support for these efforts (Abukari & Mwalyosi, 2020). Hutchison *et al.* (2021) argue that decision-makers must ensure that development benefits are equitably shared across society, considering both current and future generations. They also advocate for precautionary measures to avoid irreversible environmental or social harm, especially in the face of uncertainty. Singh *et al.* (2021) echo this sentiment, recommending that sustainability considerations be integrated into all levels of decision-making, including policy development, planning, and implementation, to foster lasting positive outcomes.

2. Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative exploratory cross-sectional design and adopted an interpretive paradigm, allowing for the subjective interpretation of protected area-based tourism's contributions to specific SDGs (Mbanaso *et al.* 2023). Thanh & Thanh (2015) note that interpretivism accommodates diverse perspectives on complex

phenomena, which was essential for this study, as different stakeholder groups may have understood the contributions of protected area-based tourism differently. This approach enabled stakeholders to express their viewpoints in their terms.

The population for this study consisted of Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) staff, tourism operators, and local communities in and around LMNP. The study employed non-probability purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques to select participants presumed to be experts, experienced, and knowledgeable about tourism and conservation initiatives. Purposive sampling targeted respondents likely to provide valuable and relevant information (Campbell *et al.* 2020). Snowball sampling utilised networking and referrals (Parker *et al.* 2019). Bhardwaj (2019) indicated that purposive sampling is suitable when specific individuals possess essential knowledge about the phenomenon under study. The sample size for the study was 30. It assumed that after 30 interviews, data saturation would be reached. Cobern & Adams (2020) suggested that 11 or 12 interviews achieve 95% saturation, while Hennink & Kaiser (2022) recommended 9 to 17 interviews for data saturation.

Two sets of interview guides were developed, one for DNPW staff and tourism operators, and the other for local communities. The interview guides were structured into three distinct sections for comprehensive data collection. The first section focused on demographics. The second section examined the relationship between local communities in and around Lake Malawi National Park (LMNP) and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW), exploring DNPW's role in tourism development and conservation and identifying how protected area-based tourism contributes to poverty reduction, socio-economic development, and ecosystem conservation in relation to the SDGs. The third section delved into local community participation, exploring respondents' involvement in community activities, engagement with DNPW, and participation in decision-making processes, probing the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits of tourism in relation to the SDGs.

The researchers obtained permission from DNPW to conduct the study at Lake Malawi National Park. An introductory and consent letter was also used to secure informed consent from prospective interviewees. Each prospective participant was briefed about the study. Upon receiving formal consent, participants were asked for permission to digitally record the interview to ensure that the researcher did not miss any information provided. The digital recording was only done with the interviewee's consent. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with all participants, and each interview lasted no more than 45 minutes.

The data were analysed using a 6-stage thematic analysis process, as proposed by Attri & Ganesh (2023). In Stage 1, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data collected from both groups of respondents to develop appropriate codes for each research objective (Stage 2). Audio data were also transcribed during this preliminary stage. In Stage 2, initial codes for each research objective were created. Stage 3 involved searching for and identifying codes within the narrative datasets. In Stage 4, the researcher reviewed emerging themes, while Stage 5 entailed defining themes, subthemes, and relevant labels to facilitate the grouping of related data. The final stage involved writing the research report and interpreting themes in relation to the literature to derive meanings from the findings.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Participant Demographic Information

As illustrated in Table 1 below, all the targeted 30 people participated in the study representing a 100% response rate. Fourteen participants were female while sixteen were male.

Table 1. Profile of study participants

Participants' code	Gender	Stakeholder group
1	Female	Local community
2	Male	DNPW
3	Male	Local community
4	Female	DNPW
5	Male	Local community
6	Female	Local community

Participants' code	Gender	Stakeholder group
7	Female	Tourism operator
8	Male	Tourism operator
9	Male	Tourism operator
10	Female	Local community
11	Male	Local community
12	Female	Tourism operator
13	Male	Local community
14	Male	Local community
15	Female	Local community
16	Male	DNPW
17	Female	Local community
18	Female	Local community
19	Male	Local community
20	Male	Local community
21	Male	Local community
22	Female	Local community
23	Male	Local community
24	Female	Local community
25	Female	Local community
26	Male	Local community
27	Male	Local community
28	Male	Tourism operator
29	Female	Tourism operator
30	Female	Local community

3.2 Contribution of Protected Area-Based Tourism to SDGs

Protected area-based tourism, as exemplified by destinations like LMNP, plays an instrumental role in advancing the SDGs. By integrating environmental preservation, economic growth, and social equity, this form of tourism can serve as a vital mechanism for driving sustainable development. The findings highlight LMNP's contribution to the SDGs through protected area-based tourism. Results indicate that protected area-based tourism is making meaningful contributions toward the SDGs by promoting environmental conservation, historical preservation, cultural heritage preservation, and community engagement. It fosters a collaborative approach to environmental management boosting economic growth and creating employment opportunities. Additionally, it contributes to social services support such as infrastructure development and healthcare improvements.

SDG 1 (No poverty)

The findings from the study underscore the profound socio-economic impact of protected area-based tourism in and around the park. Tourism has emerged as a pivotal driver of socio-economic development, delivering substantial benefits to local communities through revenue generation and infrastructural advancements. Its

multifaceted impact extends to funding essential social services, enhancing living standards, empowering local populations, and fostering sustainable economic practices, underscoring its critical role in advancing development and poverty alleviation.

Tourism revenue is essential for funding social services, including infrastructure, education, and healthcare in areas around LMNP. The DNPW allocates 25% of park fees and concession fees to local communities through the Mangochi–Salima Lake Park Association (MASALAPA). MASALAPA is a local community organisation that helps manage how revenues from Lake Malawi National Park are shared with local communities. The organisation then supports projects such as school and bridge construction, road repairs, and medical supplies in communities within and around the park. The construction of a bituminous road to the park and the electrification of Chembe Village (an enclave village in the park) have greatly improved living conditions and accessibility, supporting economic activities by enhancing access to markets, healthcare, and education. Educational sponsorships for underprivileged students, including higher education and study abroad opportunities funded by international visitors through various trust funds, also empower locals with skills for better employment, contributing to long-term poverty reduction.

Tourism brings economic benefits to local farmers and fishermen by providing new income opportunities. Farmers supply produce to restaurants and lodges, while fishermen sell fish locally and to broader markets. Sustainable Cape Maclear, a local organisation in Chembe Village introduced a revenue-sharing model, allowing glass cutters, designers, and arts and craft sellers to form groups and share profits from their sales. This model also applies to village and fishing tours, where local tour guides share proceeds with participating farmers, fishermen, and community members. Sourcing of supplies from local businesses lodges in the park boosts suppliers' incomes and strengthens the local economy, creating a positive multiplier effect for the community.

...as an association, our role is to help allocate the 25% revenue share we receive from the DNPW to community projects. VNRCs [Village Natural Resource Committees] develop project proposals for their villages and submit them to MASALAPA for consideration. (Participant 10)

...we source all our food items from local shops, ... the vegetable seller, being invaluable to us. I also support local fishermen by purchasing fish from them. (Participant 12)

The findings show that protected area-based tourism in LMNP is contributing towards the attainment of SDG 1. Protected area-based tourism is generating both direct and indirect employment and supporting local entrepreneurship, thereby creating economic opportunities and improving local livelihood. As noted by UNWTO (2023) and Mabibibi *et al.* (2021), tourism contributes indirectly to SDG 1 through park fees, tax revenue, voluntary poverty-reduction contributions, and infrastructure investments. However, studies show that the establishment of protected areas often imposes opportunity costs on local communities, such as displacement and restricted access to natural resources, potentially exacerbating poverty and causing resentment (Anaya & Espírito-Santo, 2018). But with LMNP, Chembe Village residents were not displaced as the village remains an enclave village and residents are still allowed to access natural resources such as fish within the confines of park regulations.

In contrast with Moyo & Cele (2021), who argue that strict protectionist policies in protected areas marginalize indigenous communities, the study findings from LMNP highlight the importance of balancing conservation efforts with inclusive governance and equitable resource access to effectively alleviate poverty and promote sustainable development. The positive economic impacts of tourism position LMNP as a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting sustainable development.

SDG 8 (Economic growth, employment, and decent work for all)

The findings from the study highlight the significant role tourism plays in enhancing economic contributions and increasing employment opportunities in and around the park. It was established that tourism in LMNP significantly contributes to the attainment of SDG 8 by fostering employment opportunities and generating income through various entrepreneurial ventures. Participants acknowledged that tourism has created a diverse range of employment opportunities for locals, particularly in the hospitality sector. Roles such as lodge managers, accounts staff, waiters, bartenders, housekeepers, chefs, gardeners, security guards, lifeguards, and tour guides are now accessible to community members. Currently, LMNP boasts nearly 30 hospitality facilities (most of which are in Chembe Village), with additional lodges under construction, indicating a growing demand for local labour and skills. This influx of employment opportunities not only provides individuals with a source of income but also contributes to the overall economic development of the area.

Other activities and initiatives undertaken by the local communities include homestays, village walks, organised fishing tours with local fishermen, traditional dining in local restaurants, and the sale of art and crafts, offering visitors an authentic experience of Malawian culture and traditional life in Chembe Village. Cultural dance performances and live music by local bands are also effectively organised by locals. These initiatives not only generate income for the locals but also play a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of the area.

...as tourism operators, our presence in LMNP has provided the local community with opportunities to secure jobs at lodges. (Participant 7)

... our relationship with the local community is very good. Whenever we have visitors, we hire local tour guides to lead them on sightseeing tours. These guides possess deep knowledge of the area, as they are native to Chembe Village. Their ancestors were the original inhabitants, and they [themselves] were born and raised here. They serve as excellent sources of information about the village and its history. (Participant 8)

The findings highlight tourism's significant contribution to economic growth and job creation in and around the park, directly supporting SDG 8, which aims for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full employment, and decent work for all as noted by Dobrea *et al.* (2023) and UNWTO (2023). The expansion of protected area-based tourism in the park creates diverse job opportunities, boosts local businesses, and stimulates a cycle of economic activity that benefits the entire community. As tourism grows, it enhances residents' livelihoods and strengthens the village's economic resilience. By integrating local culture and traditions into tourism experiences, the community preserves its heritage while enriching the visitor experience (Movono & Hughes, 2020). This approach fosters pride and identity among residents, empowering them to take ownership of their cultural assets and contribute to the local economy. However, challenges remain, as many locals around protected areas in Malawi face low-paying jobs due to limited education as they lack the requisite qualifications and skills for most of the senior jobs in the sector. This lack of educational attainment and skills affects their ability to engage with new initiatives, including ecotourism, potentially limiting the achievement of SDG 8's employment goals (Bello & Lambulira, 2024; Bello *et al.* 2016). Collaborative efforts between local communities and tourism operators, however, can benefit both visitors and residents while supporting the sustainability of the environment and economy. Continued support for protected area-based tourism is therefore crucial for advancing sustainable development, showcasing tourism's role as a catalyst for inclusive prosperity aligned with SDG 8.

SDG 14 (Life below water)

The findings underscore the substantial role, protected area-based tourism plays in conservation efforts within LMNP, particularly through the efforts of the DNPW and VNRCs. The VNRCs with the support of tourism operators and in partnership with the DNPW, conduct patrols in the lake and across the islands within LMNP to combat illegal activities. Protected area-based tourism has been instrumental in protecting cichlid (Mbuna) fish species in Lake Malawi and curbing unauthorized tree-cutting by fishermen and the community, which poses a threat to the ecological balance of the islands within Lake Malawi National Park.

Sustainable Cape Maclear collaborates with stakeholders including tourism operators and local communities on waste management strategies to prevent water pollution, promote reduce, reuse, and recycle practices, and organize beach clean-ups. These initiatives help preserve the lake's cleanliness and ecological health, benefiting both the environment and tourism. Additionally, Sustainable Cape Maclear partners with VNRCs to establish artificial breeding sanctuaries for cichlid fish, supporting population growth. The organization also trains tour guides as divers to remove underwater waste, contributing to the conservation of aquatic ecosystems.

...one of the mandates of the DNPW is to protect the cichlid fish, an endemic species found only in Lake Malawi National Park, which attracts tourists from around the world. (Participant 4)

...with the support of NGOs, our organization has trained seven women tour guides to be divers to assist with underwater waste collection and disposal. (Participant 5)

...Sustainable Cape Maclear helped us set up cichlid fish sanctuaries to boost the population of these unique fish species, a major attraction for tourists at LMNP. (Participant 6)

Marine resources are essential for global well-being and economic progress, with conservation being particularly crucial for coastal communities, which comprised 37% of the global population in 2017 (UNWTO, 2023). Tourism in LMNP supports SDG 14 by advancing conservation and cultural preservation. Initiatives to prevent illegal practices align with SDG 14, target 4 on sustainable marine management, while beach clean-ups

to reduce pollution, directly support SDG 14, target 1. Furthermore, breeding sanctuaries help boost biodiversity and attract tourists, contributing to sustainable tourism. As noted by Bello *et al.* (2023) and Kuseni *et al.* (2024), conservation-focused tourism provides significant benefits to biodiversity and local economies.

SDG 15 (Life on land)

The findings indicate that tourism in the park significantly enhances ecosystem conservation, restoration, and sustainable management, including forest preservation, desertification prevention, and biodiversity protection. In each village within the park's catchment area, the DNPW has assisted in forming Village Natural Resources Committees (VNRCs) to strengthen conservation efforts and local communities' involvement in tourism. VNRCs work alongside DNPW in joint patrols to monitor and protect the park, actively discouraging illegal activities and promoting sustainable practices, such as planting household woodlots. This initiative reduces local dependence on park resources, fostering ecological preservation within LMNP and contributing to broader environmental sustainability across the community. Tourism also supports cultural heritage preservation within LMNP by safeguarding cultural sites, including rock paintings at *Mwala wa Mphini* and *Mwala wa Ntanda* and missionary graveyards. The local communities, with support from the tourism operators and Sustainable Cape Maclear, a conservation community organization, are involved in conservation efforts through waste management initiatives to reduce park pollution and recycling projects, such as converting glass bottles into functional items and producing organic manure from waste. Additionally, local community-based tourism and conservation organizations, like the Beach Village Committees in collaboration with Sustainable Cape Maclear, have improved hygiene by constructing restrooms along the beaches, benefiting both community well-being and destination cleanliness.

...as the VNRCs, we establish tree nurseries and distribute seedlings to households, enabling each family to plant its woodlot. This effort helps to reduce reliance on natural resources instead locals use trees from their woodlots for both household use and smoking fish, ensuring that visitors to the park can continue to experience the unique natural beauty of our community and our children should enjoy the same resources in the future. (Participant 1)

...as a local community conservation committee, together with Sustainable Cape Maclear, we constructed restrooms for fishermen and residents, helping to reduce water and beach pollution from human waste. (Participant 3)

SDG 15 promotes sustainable forest management, reversing land degradation, combating desertification, and preventing biodiversity loss to secure ecosystem benefits and sustainable livelihoods (UNWTO, 2023). The findings have revealed that tourism operators and other organisations support local communities to have household woodlots thereby reducing reliance on natural resources. This initiative aligns with SDG 15, target 1 on ecosystem management, and benefits both the environment and tourism. Protecting cultural sites, such as rock paintings and ancestral graves, preserves the heritage and aligns with SDG 15, Target 4, while waste management and recycling, including alternative livelihoods like vegetable farming, also support the goal. However, as Loos (2021) points out, the effectiveness of protected areas in conserving biodiversity is often limited due to factors like inadequate funding, staffing, and management capacity, compounded by human pressures and poor spatial representativeness. These issues are especially pronounced in the Global South, where socioeconomic constraints hinder protected area management. In LMNP, sustainable resource use is strengthened by local organizations, which attract diverse stakeholders and foster key conservation principles, as noted by Campos-Silva *et al.* (2021). This highlights the importance of integrating ecological, socio-economic, and cultural factors for effective conservation.

3.3 Local Community Participation in Protected Area-Based Tourism and Conservation

The involvement of local communities in protected area tourism and conservation efforts is both diverse and impactful, as evidenced by their active participation in various initiatives. From guiding tourists and hosting homestays to promoting cultural heritage and sustainable practices, the community plays a vital role in enriching the tourism experience while contributing to the preservation of the protected area. Community involvement in tourism within the protected area is multi-dimensional. Local tour guides facilitate visitor experiences by leading excursions from lodges to islands within the park, providing valuable employment opportunities while sharing their in-depth knowledge of the protected area. Additionally, the community engages in homestays, offering visitors an authentic immersion into traditional life in Chembe Village, thereby enabling direct economic benefits for local residents. Cultural contributions, including art, crafts, and performances organised by community members,

further enhance the tourist experience by showcasing and preserving traditional practices, while simultaneously promoting local heritage.

Community involvement in conservation within Lake Malawi National Park (LMNP) exemplifies a collaborative and proactive approach to sustainable resource management. Village Natural Resources Committee (VNRC) members work alongside Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) rangers to conduct joint patrols, effectively deterring illegal activities and reinforcing local stewardship. As noted earlier, to reduce reliance on park resources, residents are encouraged to establish household woodlots, which help mitigate illegal tree cutting. Regular clean-up campaigns further underscore the community's dedication to maintaining the park's cleanliness and appeal for tourism. VNRC women members play a critical role in resource management by effectively making use of regulated permits for firewood collection, and ensuring sustainable access twice weekly. Conservation awareness initiatives, led by the community, foster greater understanding and appreciation of both conservation and tourism among local residents. Additionally, the integration of indigenous knowledge and adaptive skills strengthens conservation efforts, promoting effective and culturally relevant natural resource management practices.

...as local communities, we participate in offering tourism activities that are uniquely provided by locals, including homestays, learning about arts and crafts, traditional dances, fishing tours, and more. These experiences allow tourists to immerse themselves in our authentic lifestyle and learn about our traditions, culture, and beliefs. (Participant 13)

...as tour guides, we create memorable experiences for our guests by engaging them in a variety of activities, including hiking, boat cruises, kayaking, snorkelling, diving, village walks, farm tours, fishing tours, and much more. (Participant 14)

The findings on community involvement in tourism emphasize its significant and positive impact on both local communities and the long-term sustainability of tourism. By engaging in roles such as tour guiding and conservation patrols, local residents play a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage and natural resources, fostering a deep sense of ownership essential for successful conservation outcomes. Local guides, through the sharing of traditional knowledge, contribute to cultural preservation, while community members aid in biodiversity conservation and economic growth by participating in wildlife monitoring and anti-poaching initiatives. The forms and levels of local involvement at LMNP are consistent with those observed at Liwonde National Park and Majete Wildlife Reserve, as noted by Bello & Lambulira (2024) and Bello *et al.* (2018), despite the differences in management structures, LMNP being a government-managed UNESCO World Heritage Site, while Liwonde and Majete operate under public-private partnerships (PPP). This alignment further underscores the broader importance of community engagement in conservation across various protected areas in Malawi. Such collective involvement not only bolsters conservation efforts but also creates economic opportunities, positioning local communities as key stakeholders in both the ecological and economic success of tourism initiatives.

Conclusion

This study has examined the significant contribution of protected area-based tourism to the achievement of the SDGs at Lake Malawi National Park, with a focus on environmental, economic, and social sustainability. The findings reveal that protected area-based tourism at LMNP plays an essential role in advancing several SDGs, particularly SDGs 1, 8, 14, and 15, by fostering sustainable tourism practices that benefit both the environment and local communities. In terms of SDG 15 (Life on land), tourism has significantly contributed to ecosystem conservation, forest preservation, and the protection of biodiversity. Through initiatives like tree planting and other community-driven conservation efforts, the local population plays a critical role in reducing pressure on natural resources and promoting sustainable practices. Similarly, tourism has also contributed to SDG 14 (Life below water), with activities aimed at preserving Lake Malawi's unique aquatic biodiversity, including cichlid fish conservation and waste management practices that safeguard the lake's ecological health.

The positive economic impacts of protected area-based tourism align with SDG 8 (Economic growth, employment, and decent work for all), as tourism creates numerous entrepreneurship opportunities, job opportunities in the hospitality services, and guiding, thereby supporting the local economy and enhancing the livelihoods of residents. Additionally, tourism revenue supports essential social services, such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare, contributing to SDG 1 (No poverty). Local communities benefit from improved living standards, access to markets, and employment, with sustainable initiatives like revenue-sharing models ensuring that the economic benefits are widely distributed.

Lake Malawi National Park exemplifies how protected area-based tourism can serve as a powerful tool for advancing sustainable development. By integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions, tourism at LMNP not only contributes to the conservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage but also generates economic opportunities and enhances community well-being. The study highlights the need for continued investment in protected area-based tourism to ensure that its benefits are maximized and shared equitably, driving progress towards the SDGs and ensuring the sustainability of both tourism and conservation efforts.

Stakeholders in protected area-based tourism should leverage partnerships that foster collective efforts among the government, the private sector, NGOs, and local communities to create synergies in achieving the SDGs. Local communities need to be supported to ensure that they maximise their benefits from tourism. Collaborative efforts can enhance resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, and capacity building. In collaboration with local community committees, the protected area management authority should conduct awareness campaigns to educate local communities about the SDGs and the role of tourism in achieving them. Empowering communities with knowledge can inspire collective action toward sustainable development. There is a need for increased awareness and education about the benefits of tourism within local communities. As noted by Lambulira & Bello (2022), effective communication strategies can help inform community members about opportunities in tourism and encourage their participation.

Tourism industry managers should also develop objective indicators to evaluate sustainable tourism practices. Engaging multiple stakeholders in the indicator development process is crucial for creating a comprehensive understanding of tourism's impact on local communities and the environment. Additionally, integrating tourists as key stakeholders in sustainable tourism initiatives can enhance the effectiveness of these practices, as tourists can contribute to the conservation of resources and support local economies.

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Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Mercy Phiri: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Validation, Writing – review and editing, Visualization, Funding acquisition.

Felix G. Bello: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review and editing, Visualization, Funding acquisition.

Mathews Lambulira: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review and editing, Visualization, Funding acquisition.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

The authors declare that they have not used generative AI and AI-assisted technologies during the preparation of this work.

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