

**A thesis submitted to the Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy of
Central European University in part fulfilment of the
Degree of Master of Science**

**Towards sustainable tourism: exploring the Green Destinations
Certification in the South African Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region**

A case study of Shik Shack and the Nourish Eco-Village

Supervisor: Brandon P. Anthony

Maria POYATO SALA

July 2023

Vienna

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Maria POYATO SALA', written in a cursive style.

Maria POYATO SALA

ABSTRACT OF THESIS submitted by:

Maria POYATO SALA

For the degree of Master of Science and entitled: *Towards sustainable tourism: exploring the Green Destinations Certification in the South African Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region. A case study of Shik Shack and the Nourish Eco-Village.*

July, 2023.

The tourism industry can promote positive environmental, social, and economic impacts but can also harm a tourism destination's natural environment and local communities. In response to these adverse effects, sustainable tourism has gained worldwide recognition. Sustainable tourism certifications, such as the Green Destinations Certification (GDC), have emerged as a guide for stakeholders to implement sustainable tourism. This thesis studies the implementation of the GDC in the South African Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region (K2C BR) and its promise to promote sustainability. Through the investigation of Shik Shack and Nourish as a case study, the research proves that the GDC is a valuable tool to promote sustainability practices. Still, it requires a local intermediary and tailoring it to the characteristics of the destination to achieve its maximum potential. Additionally, it should be applied through the lenses of the stakeholder theory to unify tourism stakeholders and maximize their possibilities to promote sustainable tourism within the K2C BR. Drawing on a qualitative research methodology, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The findings contribute to understanding paths to promote sustainable tourism in the Global South, especially in conflicting zones nearby protected areas (PAs). This thesis also provides strategies to be implemented in the K2C BR to uplift local communities and preserve natural resources through the use of the GDC.

Keywords: Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region, sustainable tourism certifications, Green Destinations Certification, South Africa, Nourish Eco-Village and Shik Shack, Kruger National Park, stakeholder theory, protected area.

Acknowledgments

The research supporting this thesis was fully sponsored by Central European University Foundation of Budapest (CEUBPF). The theses explained herein represent the ideas of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of CEUBPF.

I want to take this opportunity to thank my family, my parents, my sisters, and my aunts. You made me what I am and have supported me to this day. Thank you for encouraging, motivating, and reminding me of my qualities, which enabled me to pursue this master's degree. But most of all, I would like to thank you for your unconditional love and support throughout my life, which has enabled me to fight for what I want and believe in.

Celia and Anouk, you are an inspiration, encouragement, a fundamental pillar, and the purest significance of friendship that I have known. I am so thankful for my other friends, my chosen family, who made my mind full of ideas of growth and acceptance. A special mention goes to my beloved partner, Marvin, who has been essential in my life this year, providing me with kindness, understanding, and help in countless ways; you have brought so much brightness, joy, and food to my year.

To my MESP(OM) friends, I feel so grateful to have crossed paths with you. Thank you for your support, commitment, study sessions, laughs, and difficult moments together. We have been a wonderful group that shared a commitment to help each other succeed. To Montse, Paula, Maria, Mila, Lizzy, and Caro, thanks for making me feel at home in this new country.

I want to express my gratitude to all the South African stakeholders who offered kindness and collaboration, allowing me to make this thesis a reality. Particularly, I want to thank the K2C Non-Profit Company, Nourish, Shik Shack, and Wayne for all their constant support. I came back home with a heart and soul full of unforgettable memories and wider academic and cultural horizons.

A special acknowledgment goes to the Open Society University Network (OSUN) for granting me their Master's Research Mobility Scholarship; this on-site research was made possible only because of you. I am also thankful to the Central European University (CEU), the Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg, and the WITS rural center (as a part of the Witwatersrand University) for making my research in South Africa possible.

To my supervisor, I extend my appreciation for his patience and guidance through this process. Thanks to Tamara, my faculty mentor, for being the best mentor I could have asked for, and for your exceptional support through the year. I direct one last acknowledgment to all other professors and master's coordinators for their kindness, sympathy, ability to make anything possible, and engaging attitude toward all students; all this was possible thanks to you.

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List of Abbreviations

CEU	Central European University
GDC	Green Destinations Certification
GSTC	Global Sustainable Tourism Council
K2C BR	Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region
K2C NPC	K2C Non-Profit Company
KNP	Kruger National Park
Nourish	Nourish Eco-village
OSUN	Open Society University Network
PAs	Protected Areas
SD	Sustainable Development
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
WITS	University of the Witwatersrand

1 Introduction

1.1 Relevance of the topic

Before COVID-19, the travel and tourism industry was the biggest service sector worldwide (“Tourism and Competitiveness” 2022). In 2019, it was estimated to have a value of almost 10 trillion USD and a contribution of 10.4% to the global GDP (“Tourism and Competitiveness” 2022). The industry also contributed to job creation, with one out of every five new jobs worldwide attributed to tourism (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019). In Africa, the tourism industry has a vital impact on the continent, with pre-covid tourism supporting around 24 million jobs (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019). By 2030 the number of tourists arriving in Africa is supposed to double its 2019 numbers reaching 130 million (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019).

Following the tendency of the African continent, the travel and tourism industry in South Africa is expected to witness an annual growth of around eight percent (“South Africa’s Travel & Tourism’s Growth” 2022). This growth is expected to generate approximately 800,000 job opportunities, making tourism a crucial industry in South Africa’s economic (“South Africa’s Travel & Tourism’s Growth” 2022). However, the growing number of travelers exercises immense pressure on the resources of tourism destinations, particularly when sustainable practices are not utilized (UNEP and UNWTO 2005).

Tourism has the capacity to impact, positively and negatively, the natural environment and local communities in the destination that is being visited (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). Some examples of these adverse effects are related to the destruction of a place's natural and cultural heritage, changes in the culture and habits of local people, or political and cultural

conflicts in the destination (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinescu 2018). It is, therefore, necessary to develop and implement it sustainably to avoid the adverse effects it can bring (UNEP and UNWTO 2005). This becomes even more critical in natural areas, such as the Kruger to Canyon Biosphere Region (K2C BR), as tourism activities can threaten biodiversity (UNEP and UNWTO 2005; Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021).

Nature-based tourism is the primary motivator for tourists to visit South Africa (Spenceley 2003). Because of this, preserving its natural environment is vital for the survival of its local communities and the tourism industry. In addition, tourism faces a twofold challenge as the sector contributes to accentuating climate change but also suffers from its impacts (Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021; Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). The Kruger National Park (KNP), one of the most important touristic attractions of the K2C BR (the area under study in this thesis), already presents visible negative consequences of climate change (SANParks 2018; Dube and Nhamo 2020).

Therefore, by recognizing the economic significance of tourism and understanding its global magnitude, the concept of sustainable tourism gains greater relevance and urgency and should be used as a contributor to tackle challenges such as community development and climate change, especially in the Global South (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015; Dube and Nhamo 2020). To accomplish this, sustainable tourism certifications emerged as one of the most recognized tools to promote sustainability within tourism (Lampreia-Carvalho's 2021).

Sustainable tourism certifications guide tourism stakeholders in achieving sustainability as their programs provide a structured and standardized framework for assessing and recognizing sustainable tourism practices (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). Additionally, these tourism

certifications offer many other benefits, such as cost-savings through sustainability performance, compliance, marketing and visibility, and a competitive advantage in the market (Spenceley 2019; Sucheran and Arulappan 2020). By aligning with these certifications, tourism stakeholders can contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) and address environmental and social challenges. Moreover, they guide tourists in making sustainable choices and aid in monitoring, analyzing, developing, and managing sustainability.

Nevertheless, their accessibility and implementation currently face several problems that hinder their capacity to promote sustainable tourism worldwide (Fennell and Cooper 2020). Within these challenges, the following can be highlighted: (1) disagreements and different objectives between stakeholders, (2) the inadequate policies and infrastructure provided by governments to promote and allow adaptation to the certification's standards, (3) the distrust towards certifications as a result of greenwashing, and (4) the dominance of the Global North and large companies developing and implementing sustainable tourism certifications, which lead to the misrepresentation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Especially in the South African K2C BR, SMEs are heavily impacted by the beforementioned challenges, which hinder their capacity to access sustainable tourism certifications and promote sustainability.

Therefore, this thesis's relevance is linked to its ability to find paths for tourism businesses in the K2C BR, especially SMEs, in accessing the benefits of sustainable tourism certifications without facing all their challenges. This would promote sustainable tourism in the Global South, especially in delicate tourism destinations where tourism's adverse effects can be heavily felt.

1.2 Aims and objectives

This thesis assesses the possibilities of the GDC to promote sustainable tourism in the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region (K2C BR), focusing on the perceptions and realities of SMEs, such as Shik Shack and Nourish, towards sustainable tourism certifications.

The aims of this thesis are divided into three goals: (1) to aid Nourish and Shik Shack to improve their sustainability practices, (2) to promote a strategy to achieve enhanced sustainability in the K2C BR through the use of the GDC, (3) to replicate these strategies in areas with similar challenges and characteristics to the ones presented in the K2C BR, therefore increasing sustainability worldwide.

The objectives of this thesis have helped these aims. These are distributed as follows (1) to investigate how the GDC can benefit sustainable tourism in the K2C BR, focusing on Nourish and Shik Shack as case study, (2) to understand the perception of the case study towards sustainable tourism certifications in general and the GDC in particular, and (3) to possibly help the K2C Non-Profit Company (K2C NPC) to obtain the GDC, as they are currently applying for it, to improve tourism sustainability within the K2C BR.

1.3 Research Questions

The main question of this thesis is: What promise does the Green Destinations Certification (GDC) hold to promote sustainable tourism in the South African Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region (K2C BR), focusing on the Nourish Eco-Village and Shik Shack as a case study?

To help answer the main question, a number of more specific sub-questions are explored:

1. What are the perceptions of selected tourism stakeholders regarding sustainable tourism in the K2C BR?
2. What do Nourish and Shik Shack staff believe are the opportunities and barriers to the GDC within the K2C BR, and to what degree would they possibly implement the GDC framework in their activities?
3. How do Nourish and Shik Shack contribute to sustainable tourism in the K2C BR, and how can they benefit from the GDC?
4. What are some of the challenges associated with stakeholders' collaboration within the K2C BR's tourism industry?

While answering the research questions, the findings reflected the potential of the GDC to uplift the sustainability levels within the K2C BR by connecting its tourism stakeholders and reducing the challenges that SMEs face when requesting and implementing sustainable tourism certifications.

Some of these challenges include the inadequate policies and infrastructure present in South Africa, the inadaptability of certifications to the tourism destination where they are applied, the dominance of the Global North and big corporations in the decision-making and implementation of certifications (therefore hindering the representation of SMEs' necessities within these certifications), and the lack of accessibility and resources that SMEs present.

Once these challenges are tackled, the benefits that the GDC can bring to the region and to SMEs, such as visibility and marketing, connectivity between stakeholders, improved sustainability performance, and tackling social and environmental issues present in the area,

will unfold the capacity of the GDC to promote sustainability within the region. To unlock this potential, one of the recommendations of this thesis includes having an intermediary body, such as the K2C NPC, that can manage and promote the GDC's benefits and frameworks. Nevertheless, the K2C NPC must adapt the GDC to the necessities and context of the region to implement the GDC successfully.

Therefore, this study is particularly important for academia and the tourism industry, as it tackles one of the biggest challenges of sustainable tourism: its implementation in the real world. The recommendations show paths that can improve sustainability practices within SMEs and tourism destinations, with a particular emphasis on the Global South and the K2C BR, while making certifications' benefits available for disadvantaged tourism businesses.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The first section of this thesis presents a characterization of the available literature on sustainable tourism, sustainable tourism certifications, and stakeholder theory. This provides the necessary background information to understand the challenges of sustainable tourism and its certifications while highlighting the importance of collaboration between tourism stakeholders to achieve sustainability in the tourism industry. Following this section, chapter three focuses on providing relevant information on the case study, touching upon the characteristics of K2C BR, where the GDC will be developed. Additionally, this chapter introduces the GDC and the two businesses that compose the case study. Moreover, to validate the veracity of the methods employed in this research, chapter four gives an understanding and resonating of the selected research methods. Lastly, this chapter finishes by mentioning the research ethics and the limitations faced during this investigation.

After providing all the above information, which serves as a context to understand and analyze the gathered data, chapter five examines the results obtained on the on-site investigation. The final section, composed of chapter six, provides a general overview of the implications of this thesis' literature and results, followed by recommendations on how these findings can assist the tourism industry in promoting sustainable tourism in the Global South and particularly in the K2C BR through the use of the GDC.

2 Literature Review

Poor management of tourism development in destinations can harm the sociocultural and natural surroundings that it depends on (Sucheran and Arulappan 2020; Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021). Therefore, in recent years there has been a growing understanding of the significance of environmentally responsible tourism practices on a global scale (Bricker 2017; Fennell and Cooper 2020; Von Essen, Lindsjö, and Berg 2020). This recognition has prompted many businesses, including those in the travel and tourism industry, to prioritize sustainability in their operations, positioning themselves as leaders in the green economy while innovating and creating value for their businesses, ultimately gaining an advantage (Bricker 2017).

Tourism is particularly connected to the overall socioeconomic and environmental welfare of countries in the Global South (“Sustainable Tourism” n.d.). Additionally, sustainable tourism has the capacity to address widespread environmental and social challenges and can contribute to achieving the UNSDG. To accomplish this, sustainable tourism certifications have emerged as a tool to guide the responsible implementation of sustainable tourism practices (Sucheran and Arulappan 2020; Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021). Despite their importance in promoting sustainable tourism, they face several challenges which should be addressed (Fennell and Cooper 2020). In that sense, and to achieve their maximum potential, it is essential that all possible tourism stakeholders engage in sustainability and contribute to the development and implementation of sustainable tourism (Backman and Munanura 2015; Song, Zhu, and Fong 2021).

2.1 Sustainable tourism

This section offers a basis for understanding sustainable tourism and its problems. Hereby its origins, definitions, principles, challenges, and importance are covered here, also focusing on

achieving a more balanced and harmonious approach to tourism that considers the environment, society, and economy. To better understand the meaning of sustainable tourism, this thesis delves into its concept by exploring its roots in sustainable development (SD). Moreover, additional emphasis lies on the significance of tourism and the growing need for sustainability in this rapidly expanding industry, particularly in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa.

2.1.1 Definition: tourism and sustainable tourism

Before digging into the complexities of defining sustainable tourism, it is essential to understand tourism itself. In the White Paper of the Government of South Africa (1996, 6), tourism is understood as any type of travel “for whatever purpose, that results in one or more nights being spent away from home.” Other definitions of tourism, such as the one expressed by Leiper (1979), include a broader meaning encompassing the tourism industry's complexity. This definition mentions that tourism is the voluntary movement of persons for “one or more nights” (Leiper 1979, 404) from their regular residence except for travel done to earn any remuneration (Leiper 1979). This explanation also defines the tourism system as one that involves different elements such as “tourists, generating regions, transit routes, destination regions and a tourist industry” (Leiper 1979, 404) and points out that all these elements coexist within the following environments: “physical, cultural, social, economic, political, technological” (Leiper 1979, 404). Both definitions shed light on the movement of a person for at least one night to be considered a tourist. Still, Leiper’s definition specifies that the motive of the travel shouldn’t be related to earning money. It provides an understanding of the broader framework and components of the tourism industry, emphasizing the need to apply and study it holistically as many stakeholders are involved.

Similar to the concept of SD, sustainable tourism encompasses sustainability principles. Accordingly, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) developed the following definition of sustainable tourism “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities” (UNEP and UNWTO 2005, 24). This definition serves as a framework that guides and underscores the necessity to develop all forms of tourism in a sustainable manner (UNEP and UNWTO 2005; Häusler 2011). Some definitions of sustainable tourism, such as the ones by UNEP and UNWTO (2005) and Häusler (2011), explicitly mention that the term can be applied to any kind of tourism and destination, consequently indicating that sustainable tourism can be implemented in even the highly criticized mass tourism. The UNEP and UNWTO (2005) mentioned that sustainable tourism should be applied to describe a state or condition of tourism rather than a category.

In the context of this thesis, the definition of sustainable tourism will be a comprehensive combination of the definitions put forth by the Government of South Africa (1996), Leiper (1979), UNEP and UNWTO (2005), and Häusler (2011). The decision to combine these definitions stems from the specific requirements of the case study's business model and the significant impact that the GDC might have on all forms of tourism in the K2C BR, including mass tourism.

The adopted definition in this thesis will encompass a broader scope, acknowledging the intricate nature of the tourism industry, as highlighted by Leiper (1979). However, this thesis considers tourists as individuals traveling for one or more nights away from home for any purpose, including earning remuneration or acquiring new knowledge or skills, as the

businesses of the case study (Shik Shack and Nourish) have volunteers participating in their daily activities. Furthermore, it will align with the definition proposed by UNEP and UNWTO (2005) and Häusler (2011), emphasizing the three main sustainability spheres (environmental, economic, and socio-cultural) and encompassing all types of tourism. This definition recognizes the impact of the GDC, not only on the specific type of tourism examined in the case study, which could fall under pro-poor tourism, community-based tourism, or eco-tourism, but also on all forms of tourism within the K2C BR.

In light of these considerations, the definition of sustainable tourism I developed and adopted in this thesis is as follows:

Sustainable tourism refers to any form of tourism that involves one or more nights away from the primary residence, regardless of the purpose of the trip. It encompasses the three sustainability spheres - environmental, socio-cultural, and economic – and presents a holistic approach that recognizes the complexity and interconnectedness of the tourism system.

2.1.2 Origins: sustainable development as a promoter of sustainable tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism originates in the broader notion of SD, which emerged during the 1970s and 1980s due to the growing awareness of the adverse effects of the Industrial Revolution (Fennell and Cooper 2020). In 1987, the term SD gained widespread understanding and acceptance through the publication of the Brundtland Report, which emphasized the importance of incorporating the concept of sustainability (WCED 1987; Spenceley 2005a; Bramwell and Lane 2010; Fennell and Cooper 2020). Deriving from the term SD, and with the push of the 1987 Brundtland Report, the concept of sustainable tourism emerged in response to concerns about the impacts of tourism (Butler 1999; Hardy, Beeton, and Pearson 2002; Fennell and Cooper 2020). Fennell and Cooper (2020) highlight that these concerns were seen

worldwide, while authors such as D'Sa (1999) recognized that contemporary tourism practices negatively affected societies and resources.

In all this discussion, mass tourism was often identified as one of the main culprits of the negative impacts on societies and the environment (Spenceley 2005; Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019; Fennell and Cooper 2020). This allowed emerging alternative forms of tourism which align more with sustainable practices, such as ecotourism or responsible tourism (Fennell and Cooper 2020). Mass tourism is often perceived as unsustainable due to its scale, a non-local workforce in management or administration positions, and seasonal employment (Fennell and Cooper 2020). Nevertheless, scholars such as Butler (1999) highlighted that the persistent criticisms of mass tourism have hindered exploring its potential for more sustainable practices. Therefore, while recognizing the enduring presence of mass tourism, there was a growing imperative to explore its potential for SD (Butler 1999; UNEP and UNWTO 2005).

Over time, SD and sustainable tourism have evolved from basic principles to comprehensive guidelines that encourage stakeholders to enhance the quality of life on our planet while addressing economic, ecological, and sociocultural priorities (Fennell and Cooper 2020). One globally recognized and actionable framework for achieving these objectives is the UNSDGs. The SDGs provide a comprehensive agenda encompassing 17 goals and 169 targets to be completed by 2030, which address the most pressing socio-economic and ecological challenges in our era and are guided by sustainability principles ("THE 17 GOALS" n.d.). As stated by Bricker (2018), sustainable tourism contributes to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), 12 (responsible consumption and production), and 14 (climate action). I would argue that sustainable tourism also has a direct impact on SDGs 1 (no poverty), 5 (gender equality), 10 (reduced inequalities), 13 (climate action), and 15 (life on land). In this regard, academic work

by Anna Spenceley (2003, 2005, 2007, 2012) shows how sustainable tourism contributes to reducing poverty and improving environmental performance, addressing climate change and biodiversity conservation.

2.1.3 Sustainable tourism development principles and conceptual framework

The above simplistic and concise definition of sustainable tourism provided by UNEP and UNWTO (2005) is further elaborated upon within the same document. The principles to which sustainable tourism development should adhere have been summarized from the UNEP and UNWTO (2005) report as follows:

- Environmental responsibility: optimize the use of natural resources, protect ecological processes, and preserve biodiversity.
- Socio-cultural preservation: respect the authenticity of local communities, conserve cultural heritage, and promote intercultural understanding.
- Economic viability: ensure long-term economic stability, distribute benefits fairly, and contribute to poverty alleviation.

For these principles to work in the complex and interconnected world of the tourism industry, Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc (2018) and the UNEP and UNWTO (2005) highlighted the importance of effective political guidance and frameworks, the active involvement of all stakeholders, and the constant monitoring and improvement of the tourism activity impacts. Achieving sustainable tourism is also an ongoing effort that demands continual monitoring of its effects. Through this process, appropriate preventive and corrective measures can be implemented whenever necessary, ensuring that any negative consequences are rapidly addressed (UNEP and UNWTO 2005; Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). Various tools

and frameworks, such as sustainable tourism indicators, eco-labels, and certifications, have been developed to facilitate these tasks.

2.1.4 Problematics of sustainable tourism

Balance between its principles

Achieving a balance between sustainability principles is essential for the long-term viability of tourism development. However, the quest for equilibrium among the three spheres of sustainability has faced criticism within academic discourse, with authors pointing out the difficulty, if not impossibility, of achieving an actual balance (Fennell and Cooper 2020).

In the case of South Africa, where wildlife tourism plays a crucial role in generating income for the country (Spenceley 2003; Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019), ignoring its environmental and social concerns would be reckless, given the heavy reliance on local communities and protected areas (PAs) for tourism revenue (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019). Therefore, failing to prioritize sustainability in tourism development could jeopardize the foundations that sustain tourism, leading to negative consequences for the environment and society. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of the spheres and recognizes that neglecting one can have far-reaching implications for the future.

A predominant environmental sphere in the understanding of sustainable tourism

Even though the (WCED 1987) report recognized the importance of social indicators in SD, subsequent discussions and key sustainability documents have primarily focused on the environmental dimension. This emphasis on the environment is evident in the laws and regulations of countries like Australia, where laws prioritize environmental sustainability

(Hardy, Beeton, and Pearson 2002). This narrow focus promotes sustainable tourism businesses struggling to understand the various dimensions of sustainable tourism.

Furthermore, the research conducted by Bausch et al. (2021) shows that tourists often associate sustainability mainly with its environmental sphere and fail to recognize its connection to sustainable tourism. They revealed that the understanding of sustainable tourism had different variations among tourists, also linked to their cultures, highlighting partial knowledge of the term and general misconception (Bausch et al. 2021). To address this issue and combat skepticism surrounding sustainable tourism, developing a better understanding between tourists is essential, assuring that sustainable tourism is not an isolated decision but rather part of consumers' broader awareness and actions.

Complexity of the term

The term "sustainable tourism" has encountered complexities in its implementation, primarily due to its multiple definitions and variations in its applicability. The first confusing point is the distinction between sustainable tourism and sustainable tourism development. As explained by the UNEP and UNWTO (2005) and Fennell and Cooper (2020), sustainable tourism development is the framework that allows sustainable tourism to be implemented in practice. Figure 1 below describes how these terms would be contextualized, showing how sustainability englobes sustainable tourism development and sustainable tourism.

One of the biggest problems seen in academia and sustainable tourism practice is that the concept is sometimes difficult to understand by all tourism stakeholders; therefore, problems arise when implementing it. Academics emphasize the need for the term sustainable tourism to have different meanings and interpretations in the Global North and Global South, considering the distinct challenges faced by each region (Fennell and Cooper 2020). This necessitates considering strong or softer interpretations of sustainable

tourism, as some argue that the stronger versions are influenced by environmentalism predominantly shaped in the Global North and that necessities between the Global North and South are different (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015; Fennell and Cooper 2020).

Moreover, Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes (2019) make a more explicit definition of the principles of sustainability previously described. Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes (2019) specify that the social sphere is also related to the living conditions of the local population, and therefore culture, health, safety, and education, among other aspects, should be enhanced. On the environmental front, the author emphasizes the responsible utilization of Earth's resources by "communities, society, and companies" (Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019, 678). This definition holds importance due to the observation made by Hunter (1995) that stakeholders in the tourism industry may vary in their level of engagement with the principles of sustainable tourism based on their perception of whether these principles should apply to them or not.



Figure 1: Contextualization of sustainable tourism, sustainable tourism development, and sustainability.
Figure by author.

Consequently, efforts have been directed toward developing new approaches to sustainable tourism that aim to mitigate these challenges and enhance its use (Fennell and Cooper 2020). However, will these new approaches effectively overcome the existing problems, or will they inadvertently introduce further confusion to an already complex concept? Caution must be exercised when introducing new approaches, as these might lead to divergent understandings and conflicting practices.

Challenges in implementing sustainable tourism: theory vs. practice

Despite being extensively discussed, sustainable tourism has yet to be fully realized in practice (Fennell and Cooper 2020). This persistent gap between theory and implementation raises doubts about the effectiveness of academic efforts in addressing the challenges of sustainable tourism. Furthermore, criticism arises regarding the responsibility of academics in creating the concept without providing practical solutions for its implementation (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). Consequently, there is a pressing need for frameworks and sustainable tourism certifications to drive transformative change and ensure the adoption of sustainable practices within the industry. Therefore, examining the outcomes of sustainability projects and assessing the industry's capacity to replicate successful models becomes essential in this context.

2.2 Sustainable tourism certifications

The following section describes the importance of sustainable tourism certifications in promoting sustainable tourism. The following literature reveals these certifications' benefits, such as visibility and improved sustainability, but it also addresses their challenges. The main visible problem in the Global South, regarding these certifications, is the difficulties of SMEs accessing them as a consequence of the Global North's influence in their development and implementation, the inadaptability of the certifications to the real challenges and necessities of

the Global South, and the limited accessibility and resources of SMEs, which hinder their possibilities to achieve certification.

2.2.1 Certification in sustainable tourism: ensuring compliance and credibility

A certification system sets the guidelines for certification while ensuring that these specific requirements are met through a third-party verification (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). A credible certification system should have standards, certification, and accreditation (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). To obtain a sustainable tourism certification, the requesting organization must fulfill specific sustainability criteria (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018; Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019), commonly referred to as certification standards. These standards serve as objective benchmarks for destinations to strive towards achieving sustainability (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). Consequently, these measurable indicators become necessary in assessing processes, tracking improvements over time, and enhancing the efficacy and objectives of sustainable practices (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). Once these standards are achieved, it can be said that the tourism practices of the requesting body follow sustainable tourism principles and can therefore be certified (Gebhard, Meyer, and Roth 2009).

Sustainable tourism certifications can be more or less reliable depending on their certification type. First-party certification relies on self-evaluation, while second-party certification involves validation from purchasers or industry bodies within the tourism sector, making both unreliable (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). The third-party certification, regarded as the one with the most credible approach, would be the only one entailing independent evaluation to assess compliance with the standards (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). Therefore, to obtain a reputable sustainable tourism certification, an accredited third-party body must state that these standards are satisfactorily met through an audit procedure (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). The

accomplishment of these criteria undergoes continuous evaluation by an external body, requiring the requesting organization to diligently maintain their compliance to ensure the renewal of their certification status (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018).

Businesses that successfully achieve certification are rewarded with a commercial logo that proves their adherence to sustainability practices (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). By providing these logos, these certifications empower tourists and investors to make well-informed choices that align with their environmental values or interests and support sustainable tourism initiatives. Moreover, certification bodies might also seek accreditation, as it proves their competence and reliability (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018).

2.2.2 Context of sustainable tourism certifications

The UNWTO (“Sustainable Development” n.d.) emphasizes that implementing sustainable tourism is an ongoing process that necessitates constant evaluation and monitoring of its effects. This approach enables identifying and development techniques that mitigate or rectify damages to our environment (“Sustainable Development” n.d.). When approached responsibly, tourism can impact the tourism destination positively; nevertheless, achieving this necessitates raising awareness among all stakeholders involved, including destinations and tourists (“Sustainable Tourism. IUCN” n.d.).

In pursuit of this objective, sustainable tourism certifications emerged to navigate detailed information related to sustainable tourism, acting as valuable tools to evaluate the impacts of tourism and enable businesses to devise appropriate strategies for mitigating and recovering from these effects (Hardy, Beeton, and Pearson 2002; Sucheran and Arulappan 2020; Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021). In this regard, Lampreia-Carvalho’s (2021) work highlights the significance of

sustainable tourism certifications as one of the most extensively researched areas in the implementation of sustainable tourism.

To delve further into the concept of sustainable tourism certifications, it is important to note that while eco-certifications and sustainable tourism certifications share a common goal of promoting sustainable practices in the tourism industry, they differ in their scope. While eco-certifications' main focus is related to the environmental sphere of sustainability (Ecotourism Australia n.d.), sustainable tourism certifications englobe sustainability's three spheres (UNWTO 2017; Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019; Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021).

This further emphasizes the above-mentioned concern regarding the necessity to avoid exclusively associating the concept of sustainability in tourism with environmental considerations. By holistically recognizing the interconnection and equal significance of the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic aspects, sustainable tourism can truly address the multifaceted nature of sustainability and tourism, achieving more meaningful and effective outcomes.

Historically, the tourism industry relied on codes of ethics to guide its practices (Goodall and Cater 1996). However, these codes were insufficient in achieving sustainable tourism goals, as they lacked specific operational guidance for making practical changes (Fennell and Cooper 2020). Recognizing the need for more robust measures, the industry shifted towards certifications and ecolabels to drive sustainable practices (Fennell and Cooper 2020). The introduction of the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria in 2008 and the establishment of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) in 2009 enhanced coherence within the

certifications industry (Spenceley 2019). These collectively played a pivotal role in shaping and unifying sustainable tourism certifications, providing consistent and standardized practices.

Therefore, certifications have thus become tools for voluntary evaluation and alignment with soft laws in both the public and private sectors (Buckley 2012). These initiatives are promoted as alternatives to government regulation, enabling industries to adopt self-regulatory measures (Buckley 2012). They also serve as a recognizable sustainability marker for tourism stakeholders, aiding them in choosing products and services that align with sustainable principles (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018; Spenceley 2019; Lampreia-Carvalho 2021).

The implementation of sustainable tourism certifications has encountered various challenges from its foundation. Some are related to stakeholder opposition to sustainability management systems (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). In this regard, and despite the industry's dependence on maintaining a high level of environmental excellence, there is still a lack of awareness among travelers, governments, and tourism operators regarding the negative impacts of tourism (Fennell and Cooper 2020). Nevertheless, organizations are driven to change their tourism businesses towards achieving sustainability, particularly in the environmental sphere, due to its effective cost-efficiency management approach (Bricker 2017; Lampreia-Carvalho 2021).

Apart from the evident environmental and social benefits associated with embracing sustainability practices, certifications also contribute to the accountability of businesses and provide a competitive edge over stakeholders lacking such certifications (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015; Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). Additionally, certifications offer a market advantage, positioning certified businesses as trustworthy and committed to sustainable principles (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015; Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018).

2.2.3 Sustainable tourism certifications in Africa

Africa is home to one-third of the world's biodiversity (Spenceley 2019). A vast number of wild animals, which represent the main touristic attraction for visitors, can be found within a large number of terrestrial and aquatic PAs located on the continent (Spenceley 2005; Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019). Therefore, implementing sustainable tourism certifications holds significant potential for industry improvement. Figure 2 below represents the national coverage of PAs in the African continent.

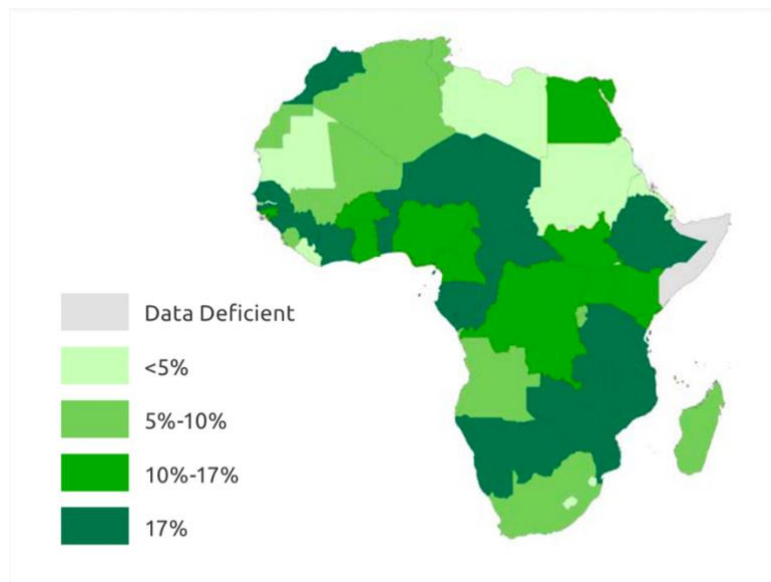


Figure 2: Coverage of protected areas in African countries in 2019. Source: Capital, Giants, and Vause (2019, 8).

Regarding actual and historical geographical distribution, Europe holds the highest number of sustainable tourism certification programs, whereas, in 2018, Africa accounted for only five percent (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018). In 2019, the African continent used nine international and nine local certifications, some of the last ones approved by the recognized GSTC (Spenceley 2019). These African certifications were created by the government, for-

profit businesses, or non-profit organizations, such as the well-known Fair Trade Tourism certification (Spenceley 2019).

Africa has embraced sustainable tourism certifications to effectively manage its increasing tourism market and mitigate its impact on natural resources and ecosystems (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). Nevertheless, the number of certified hotels remains relatively low and dispersed throughout the continent (Spenceley 2019). When looking at the motivations for obtaining these sustainable tourism certifications in Africa, Spenceley (2019) found that hotels pursued them for marketing purposes, cost savings, and to avoid criticism, but many were unaware of the potential economic benefits associated with certification.

2.2.4 Benefits of sustainable tourism certifications

Improving sustainability performance

Research in the tourism industry consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between economic and environmental performance within businesses (Buckley 2012). Certifications establish requirements encouraging businesses to mitigate or reduce environmentally harmful practices, such as water usage or energy consumption, leading to improved resource efficiency and cost savings (Bricker 2017; Lampreia-Carvalho 2021).

Furthermore, theories suggest that meeting, not only environmental, but also social and economic standards for certification can lead to improved business performance (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018; Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). Nevertheless, to ensure certifications' competitiveness and positive outcomes, it is important to follow certifications approved by recognized organizations such as the GSTC (Bricker 2017).

Adhering to sustainability indicators enables companies to gain a deeper understanding of sustainability, as they provide a simplified understanding of the term and practical guidance for incorporating sustainability practices into the tourism industry (Punzo et al. 2022). Therefore, it is imperative for destination managers and tourism stakeholders to utilize sustainability indicators to monitor and analyze a destination's sustainability performance (Punzo et al. 2022).

Certifications also play a pivotal role in continuously motivating businesses to improve their sustainability performance, as many certifications require continuous improvement due to their external audits (Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018; Sucheran and Arulappan 2020). This focus on ongoing progress pushes businesses to consistently enhance their sustainability practices, leading to positive economic, environmental, and social impacts. Research even suggests that certifications promote better working environments, contributing to employee happiness and commitment (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). This might boost employees' productivity and overall job quality, thereby further enhancing company performance.

Providing market advantages

According to Buckley (2020), there are several reasons why companies apply for eco-certifications. Some of these motivations include alignment with market or government requirements, internal concerns within the company, and the need to operate in accordance with industry or country-specific regulations Buckley (2020). However, Buckley (2020) emphasizes that the most significant reason for seeking eco-certifications is related to the company's profitability. As sustainable tourism certifications represent a broader spectrum of sustainability, these motivations can also be applied to them.

Sustainable tourism certifications are recognizable and reliable symbols of a company's commitment to sustainability due to the rigorous examination and fulfillment of various

standards. For instance, sustainable tourism certifications can attract clients who are aware of sustainability issues, thereby facilitating their choice of sustainable products (Spenceley and Goodwin 2007; Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019). However, there remains a question about the extent to which tourists truly understand the importance of sustainable tourism certifications and fully grasp the concept of sustainable tourism, as raised by Bausch et al. (2021). Nevertheless, these certifications provide quality and sustainability assurance to clients, leading to improved revenues for the company (Buckley 2020), and serve as powerful marketing tools for businesses and destinations (Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019).

Sustainable tourism certifications offer access to niche markets where businesses can charge higher prices for their products and services (Blackman and Rivera 2010). Additionally, they can provide opportunities for funds aimed at helping businesses achieve sustainability. This combination of market advantage and financial assistance creates favorable conditions for businesses to thrive while maintaining sustainable practices (Blackman and Rivera 2010).

In addition, sustainable tourism certifications also benefit the industry or government agencies, as holding sustainable certifications can lead to preferential treatment compared to businesses without such certifications (Buckley 2020). Furthermore, sustainable tourism certifications can attract investment, as many stakeholders now require tangible evidence of companies' sustainability performance (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021).

Addressing environmental and social issues

These certifications have also been recognized as a powerful tool for addressing social and environmental concerns (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). The importance of tourism certifications in promoting sustainable practices is evident in various regions. For example, in

Botswana, certification programs have facilitated sustainable tourism, particularly in nature-based tourism regions Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015). Similarly, in Mexico, successful examples such as the Chakay Lobster ecolabel have been implemented to preserve marine PAs and their ecosystems through sustainable management practices (IUCN 2021).

By adhering to the sustainability standards set by these certifications, businesses and destinations can actively contribute to preserving natural resources and protecting delicate ecosystems (Coldrey and Turpie 2020; Punzo et al. 2022). The conservation of fragile natural environments, which forms the basis of nature-based tourism destinations, is of utmost importance for continuing the tourism industry (Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021) and for other ecological reasons such as climate change mitigation.

Moreover, these certifications prioritize the well-being of local communities and the preservation of their cultural heritage, guaranteeing that tourism activities contribute to upholding the cultural values of host communities (Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019). Notably, Spenceley and Goodwin (2007) emphasize that using reliable, sustainable tourism standards could enable academia and the tourism industry to monitor the impact of nature-based tourism businesses and assess their contribution to poverty reduction in tourism destinations.

2.2.5 Challenges of sustainable tourism certifications

Limited capacity of small-scale tourism enterprises

Given the prominent presence of SMEs in the tourism industry (Fennell and Cooper 2020), it is essential to recognize the challenges these stakeholders encounter when seeking sustainable tourism certifications.

Sustainable tourism certifications have significant costs (Sucheran and Arulappan 2020; Buckley 2020). These costs can be attributed to the need for business operational modifications to meet the certification's standards, for example by changing to solar panels, the administrative requirements involved in the certification process, and the regular audits (Buckley 2020). Moreover, Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter (2002) highlight the challenges SMEs face in accessing sustainable tourism certifications due to resource limitations, particularly regarding time and workforce. SMEs' financial constraints make it difficult for them to acquire qualified personnel, with the necessary expertise and technical knowledge, to pursue sustainable changes within a business and to obtain infrastructure that allows them to make these changes.

Furthermore, the limited resources available to most stakeholders for conducting the extensive sustainability processes required for obtaining sustainable tourism certifications further worsen the situation. Consequently, larger-scale enterprises have better chances to contribute to the decision-making process of sustainable tourism certifications. This leads to misrepresenting SMEs' interests within the tourism industry (Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter 2002).

Dominance of the privileged countries

Critics contend that, both in their production and implementation, sustainable tourism certifications exhibit a dominant presence from the Global North and large international (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). This dominance raises concerns about potential imbalances and biases within these certifications. As previously highlighted in this thesis, sustainable tourism should be subject to varied interpretations, particularly when considering the disparities between the Global South and North, arising due to their specific characteristics (Fennell and Cooper 2020). Consequently, SMEs in the Global South can face challenges in meeting certification requirements that have been developed in the Global North (Sasidharan,

Sirakaya, and Kerstetter 2002). To achieve the maximum potential of sustainable tourism certifications, it is essential to account for these discrepancies between countries and understand their understanding of sustainability when developing and implementing certification frameworks. Failure to do so may result in certification programs that inadequately address the specific challenges and priorities of the Global South.

Imbalance between environmental and social dimensions

Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015) criticize the standards of sustainable tourism certifications for prioritizing environmental sustainability over its socio-cultural and economic spheres. This emphasis on the environmental aspect often neglects the interconnected nature of these three dimensions, especially failing to recognize that improvements in social aspects can have significant positive impacts on the environment. In that sense, Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015) mention that despite the holistic nature of sustainable tourism, the effective incorporation of the socio-cultural sphere into its practices remains a challenge.

Inadequate policies and infrastructure

Numerous businesses encounter difficulties when implementing sustainable tourism certifications due to inadequate government support, insufficient infrastructure, and policies that hinder or fail to facilitate proper certification implementation (Sucheran and Arulappan 2020). In a similar way, Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015) provide an example of how waste management systems in various countries do not align with certification requirements. This misalignment might arise from governments that fail to promote or provide a reliable infrastructure for effective waste management. Moreover, while some countries have the capacity to constantly adapt to the evolving tourism industry and international sustainability

standards, many nations struggle to do so due to inadequate policies, insufficient support for certification implementation, and lack of infrastructure (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015).

Tourists' behavior and preferences: exploring the lack of public awareness and skepticism

Certifications in the tourism sector can generate skepticism and distrust among tourists. The abundance of certifications, accompanied by technical language, often generates confusion and indifference among tourists (Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). Some tourists consider certifications as self-regulatory, subjective, and driven by market interests, which ultimately affects their willingness to choose them (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015; Lampreia-Carvalho 2021).

Challenges also arise from the behavior and preferences of tourists themselves. Despite the growing interest in sustainable and ethical tourism practices (Bricker 2017; Von Essen, Lindsjö, and Berg 2020), only a small portion of tourists actively seek certified travel options, even if they express concern about sustainability (Budeanu 2007; Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). This lack of engagement may be due to a limited understanding of the various issues and terms related to sustainable tourism (Bausch et al. 2021). Additionally, the industry's constant greenwashing and misuse of terms aggravate the situation (Von Essen, Lindsjö, and Berg 2020).

Companies claiming similar benefits without undergoing official certification processes, using self-made logos, and acclaiming their self-certified systems as superior, create a significant imbalance in the sector (Buckley 2020). As a consequence, the difficulty in distinguishing reliable and accredited certifications from others further complicates tourists' ability to make informed choices about sustainable products (Buckley 2020).

To address these challenges, providing tourists with more information and education is essential

(Von Essen, Lindsjö, and Berg 2020). Collaborative efforts between different stakeholders such as academia, NGOs, and local communities play a key role in providing credible information to tourists while empowering them and businesses to make responsible choices during their travels (Von Essen, Lindsjö, and Berg 2020). Improving brand recognition of certifications and ensuring a robust verification process, including accreditation, are additionally crucial considerations in attracting customers and building trust (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). Budeanu (2007) also suggests reducing the costs associated with choosing sustainable options (in transportation, accommodation, etc.) as a solution. In addition, creating a higher global accreditation organization for sustainable tourism certifications has also been discussed as a possible solution to the above problems (Buckley 2012; Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015).

Disagreements and challenges among stakeholders

Disagreements among stakeholders can significantly hinder the effective implementation of sustainable tourism certifications. This issue became evident in Belize, where debates arose concerning the interpretation of concepts outlined in sustainable tourism certifications (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). These challenges are rooted in the diverse opinions and perspectives surrounding the meaning and scope of the terms utilized within these frameworks.

The involvement of various stakeholders in the tourism industry can generate conflicts of interest during implementation and the decision-making process. While large international companies tend to determine the rules and tendencies in the sustainable tourism certifications world, SMEs (especially in the Global South) tend to avoid certification as they fear they might not achieve these standards (Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter 2002). This disparity, which occurs due to the lack of involvement of relevant stakeholders in the implementation and

decision-making process, discourages the involvement of SMEs and affects the comprehensive development of sustainable tourism programs (Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter 2002).

As a result, these conflicting viewpoints create obstacles in certification implementation. To overcome these hurdles, fostering collaboration and striving for consensus among stakeholders becomes crucial, ensuring a unified approach toward addressing sustainability.

2.3 Stakeholder Theory

The challenge of stakeholder collaboration is critical for promoting and implementing sustainable tourism certifications. With numerous stakeholders involved, each with their unique interests and perspectives, it becomes imperative to recognize the interdependence and interconnectedness among them to achieve true sustainability within the tourism sector. Therefore, this thesis will use the stakeholder theory to navigate the importance of stakeholder involvement and collaboration in the K2C BR tourism industry and the difficulties that might arise from these interactions.

The father of this theory, Edward Freeman (1984), initially developed this idea for the business industry. Nevertheless, with time this theory has been applied to different industries, including tourism. Freeman (1984) highlighted the importance of incorporating all stakeholders in working towards a common goal, which in the case of tourism, would be the achievement of sustainability. To this, Laplume, Sonpar, and Litz (2008) suggest that the cooperation and involvement of multiple stakeholders can improve the performance in the process of achieving this common goal. Therefore, the lack of unanimous support or understanding of sustainable tourism principles poses a problem for the tourism industry.

To have a clear definition, stakeholders encompass individuals or groups who possess influence over the tourism industry or are affected by it (Freeman 1984). Planners and developers must carefully consider which stakeholders to engage and how to involve them in the decision-making and development processes. Thus Cárdenas, Byrd, and Duffy (2015) highlighted that stakeholder collaboration aims to foster meaningful participation among various tourism stakeholders. However, the success of such collaboration is contingent upon raising awareness, understanding the level of involvement, and comprehension of each stakeholder regarding tourism and its development and management (Cárdenas, Byrd, and Duffy 2015).

For successful implementation, all stakeholders must have a voice and their opinions should carry equal weight in the industry's decision-making processes (Song, Zhu, and Fong 2021). In the Global South, stakeholder collaboration becomes even more crucial due to inadequate management practices associated with tourism development, which can adversely affect local communities (Queiroz 2009). Therefore, particularly in areas where the negative impacts of tourism can significantly harm local communities, it is vital to consider their ideas and perspectives in decision-making processes (Queiroz 2009). The attitude of local communities towards the tourism industry also plays a pivotal role in its proper implementation. If local communities perceive benefits for themselves, they are more likely to support and facilitate the successful implementation of sustainable tourism practices, resulting in tourist satisfaction (Song, Zhu, and Fong 2021). Conversely, if they perceive inconveniences or adverse impacts, their reaction may be more negative (Song, Zhu, and Fong 2021).

However, stakeholder collaboration also presents challenges due to the diversity of opinions and attitudes among stakeholders involved in different processes of the tourism industry, such as development and implementation (Backman and Munanura 2015). Recognizing and

addressing these differences becomes crucial. It requires understanding the varying interpretations of concepts and life, acknowledging diverse interests, evaluating how sustainability affects each stakeholder, fostering transparency and accountability, and promoting benefit-sharing and value creation through collaboration and partnerships.

2.4 Summary

This literature review has revealed the complexities of achieving sustainability within the global tourism sector, especially in the Global South. The literature portrayed the difficulties faced by sustainable tourism in finding successful ways of implementing the term and achieving a good level of understanding and recognition from its different stakeholders. Certifications, therefore, appeared in the tourism industry as tools to guide stakeholders in their way to achieve sustainability. Despite their benefits and positive impacts on the industry, they face several challenges. Therefore, to achieve the maximum benefits that certifications can bring to the tourism industry, they must overcome the challenges that businesses, especially SMEs, face when applying for and acquiring sustainable tourism certifications.

One of the highlights that the literature revealed was the restricted representation and consideration of the Global South and SMEs in developing and implementing sustainable tourism certifications, creating imbalances and a lack of representation of their interests in the sustainable tourism certification world. The literature showed a predominance of the Global North in the certifications' frameworks and practices, making it very challenging for SMEs to achieve the standards required to obtain certification. This lack of inclusivity and contextualization of the sustainability needs adapted to the characteristics of the tourism destination inhibits the great possibility that sustainable tourism certifications have to promote

sustainability, especially in locations where the harmful effects of tourism can harshly impact local communities and the natural environment the tourism depends on.

A notable research gap identified within the literature pertains to implementing the GDC in the specific study area. The absence of published studies highlights a valuable and unexplored area for future research. Therefore, the literature review has served as an indispensable guide, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the main problems related to the research topics examined in this thesis. Additionally, it has offered valuable insights into the prevailing academic discourse and perceptions regarding sustainable tourism.

The findings and insights generated from this thesis can potentially contribute to promoting sustainable tourism within the K2C BR. By addressing the challenges associated with sustainable tourism certification, and by addressing region-specific obstacles that contribute to the degradation of socio-cultural, economic, and natural resources, this research aims to facilitate the implementation of sustainable tourism practices in the area.

3 Case study: the Nourish Eco-Village and Shik Shack

This chapter examines the context in which the case study is developed to understand the GDC's role in promoting sustainability within the K2C BR. For simplicity purposes, this thesis will refer to the Nourish Eco-Village as Nourish and Shik Shack Backpackers as Shik Shack. The chosen case study is located inside the K2C BR, nearby the KNP. In this area with a high flow of tourists, Nourish is dedicated to wildlife conservation and addressing community concerns in the buffer zones near the KNP ("Nourish Foundation" n.d.). As a financial pillar for Nourish, Shik Shack generates revenue through its tourism activities, providing crucial support for Nourish's community project. Both Nourish and Shik Shack positively impact the environment and local communities of the K2C BR, with a particular emphasis on the Sigagule village.

This chapter provides the necessary context for understanding the research findings. It offers insights into the research area where the GDC will be implemented (through the K2C NPC). It underscores the tourism value of the area, introduces the GDC, and provides an overview of the selected case study. To have a better understanding, please see figure 3:



Figure 3: Mental map of the relationship between K2C BR, the K2C NPC, the GDC, and the case study. Figure by author.

3.1 Main elements of the case study

3.1.1 South Africa and tourism

Africa's exceptional biodiversity holds immense potential to change the continent's economy (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019). In fact, Africa's PAs alone contribute nearly 50 billion USD through direct in-country disbursement (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019). This rich wildlife heritage acts as a major drawcard, attracting almost the total number of tourists in Africa (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019). Unfortunately, despite its natural wonders, Africa's biodiversity often remains neglected and insufficiently protected due to inadequate policies, limited government support, and a lack of funding for conservation efforts (UNEP and UNWTO 2005; Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019; Lindsey et al. 2021).

As the tendency presented in the continent, tourism in South Africa is nature-based¹ (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019; Dube and Nhamo 2020). The tourism industry is a big contributor to the income needed to protect the region's natural sites through permits, fees, accommodation, concessions, etc. (UNEP and UNWTO 2005). In that sense, tourism can also be a contributor to jobs and income in rural areas Dube and Nhamo (2020) and a tool to alleviate poverty (UNEP and UNWTO 2005; Godlove Ngek Chifon 2010; Meyer and Spenceley 2017).

In South Africa, the tourism industry has undergone substantial changes in response to its complex social and political history, particularly the legacy of apartheid and subsequent efforts to rectify past injustices (Spenceley and Goodwin 2007). Following the democratic elections in 1994, a transformative decade of transition commenced, characterized by implementing policies and initiatives to foster a more egalitarian and inclusive society (Spenceley and

¹ Nature-based tourism is the type of tourism that is practiced with the aim of enjoyment of nature (Häusler 2011; Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019; Dube and Nhamo 2020).

Goodwin 2007). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa served as the basis for these reforms, advocating for the empowerment of previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) (Spenceley and Goodwin 2007). PDIs encompass women, persons with disabilities, and individuals from diverse racial backgrounds who experienced discrimination during the apartheid era (Government of South Africa 1996).

Recognizing the significance of sustainable tourism development, the South African government presented the *White Paper on the Development and Promotion of the Tourism* (Spenceley and Goodwin 2007). This document emphasizes the concept of responsible tourism, which underscores the need for sustainable environmental practices, community involvement, and the well-being and security of all tourism stakeholders (Government of South Africa 1996). The White Paper sets key objectives to address historical sector challenges, such as fostering job creation, empowering PDIs, promoting community development, and nurturing the growth of SMEs (Government of South Africa 1996). As previously seen in this paper, while SMEs play a vital role in the tourism industry, they often face limitations regarding skills and resources, hindering their ability to attract tourists (Fennell and Cooper 2020).

According to the Department of Statistics of the Republic of South Africa (2023), the tourism industry has been severely affected by the impacts of Covid-19. Nevertheless, the tourism industry started to recover in 2022, resulting in almost 6 million tourist arrivals (“SA Tourism Shows Slight Recovery after COVID-19 Pandemic” 2023). Despite these positive developments, it is important to note that the industry is still recovering (“SA Tourism Shows Slight Recovery after COVID-19 Pandemic” 2023). Between 2022 and the preceding year, South Africa’s largest tourist arrivals were originally African tourists, with almost two and a

half million arrivals (South African Tourism 2022). Following them, Europe and the Americas accounted for the second-highest number of tourist arrivals (South African Tourism 2022).

3.1.2 Research location: the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region

In 2001, the K2C Biosphere Region (K2C BR) was designated by UNESCO as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, recognizing its remarkable biodiversity (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023a). This designation under the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme marked a significant shift in the area's conservation approach, focusing on SD and including local communities' interests in promoting the biosphere while ensuring environmental preservation (Coetzer, Witkowski, and Erasmus 2014).

Located in the northeastern region of South Africa, the K2C BR is one of the country's largest biosphere reserves (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023a). It touches the provinces of Mpumalanga and Limpopo, and it hosts two important South African attractions: the Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve and the KNP. Figure 4 shows the location of the K2C BR within African and South Africa, while highlighting the coverage of the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces within the biosphere. The case study of this thesis is located in Mpumalanga, in the nearby of the southern border between the two provinces.



Figure 4: The K2C BR location within the African continent, with permission from K2C Non-Profit Company (NPC).

According to the report by the Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company (2023a), the K2C BR stands out for its remarkable biodiversity, diverse topography, and rich cultural heritage. It encompasses various South African biomes, including grasslands, Afro-montane forests, and lowveld savannah, contributing to its exceptional ecological and natural development (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023a). The K2C region contains extended biodiversity, which comprises “75% of all terrestrial bird species, 80% of all raptor species, 72% of all mammals, 50% of all butterflies, and 50% of all frog species” found in South Africa (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023a, n.p.).

The main employment sectors in K2C BR are agriculture, forestry, mining, and tourism (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023b). While driving through the region, coal mines were

observed alongside extensive citrus and timber lands. Tourism activities ranged from hiking and boat trips through the Blyde Canyon to the numerous lodges, restaurants, and tourism activities surrounding the KNP.

Figure 5 illustrates the geographical location of the KNP and the Blyde Nature Reserve within the K2C BR. The red boundary delineates the K2C BR, while the darker green portion within the label "Kruger National Park" represents the KNP's extension within the K2C BR. Below to the left side, within the K2C BR line and under the municipality of Maruleng, the Blyde Nature Reserve can be found. The area adjacent to the KNP, on the right side, indicates the location of Mozambique.

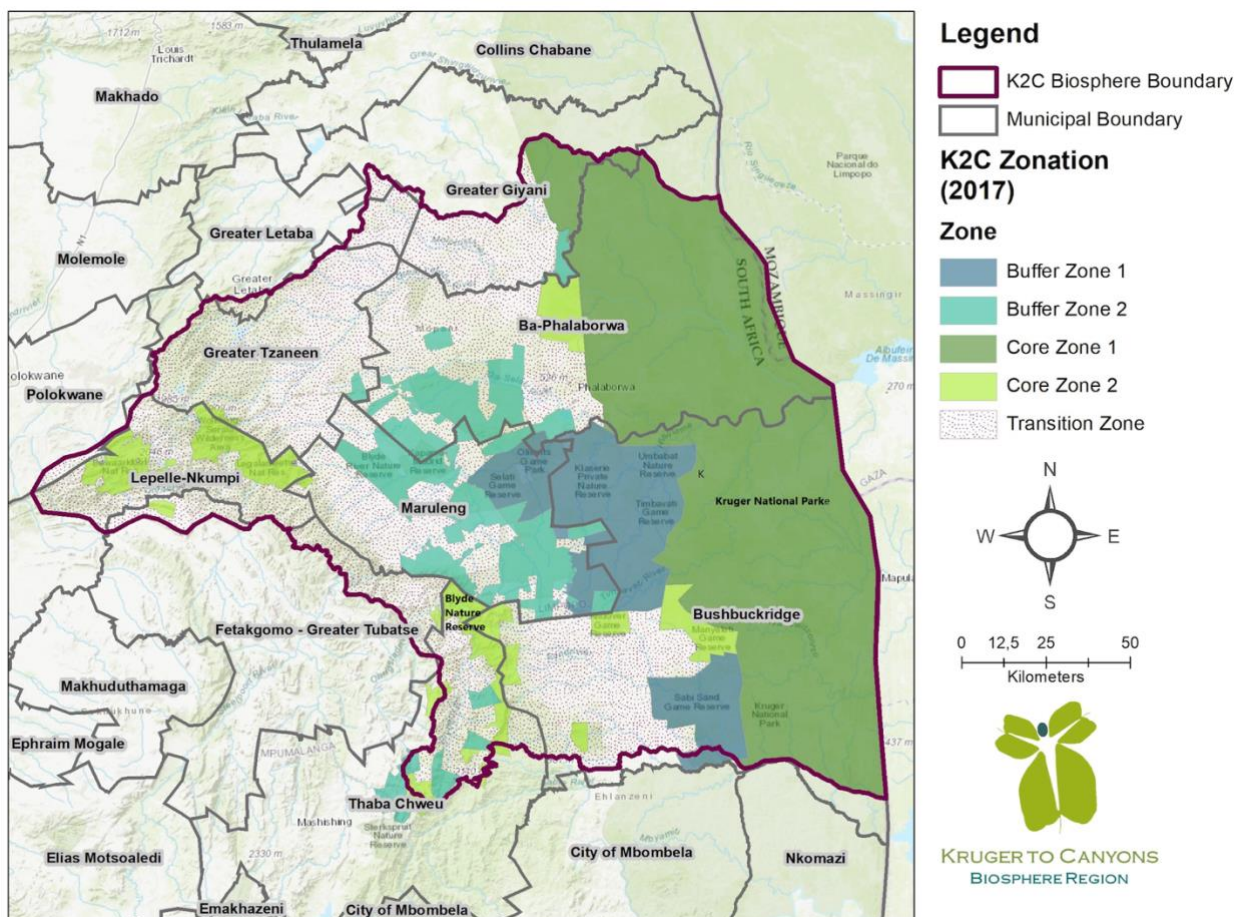


Figure 5: Location of the Kruger National Park and the Blyde Canyon within the K2C BR, with permission from K2C Non-Profit Company (NPC).

During the late 1980s, the management of the KNP was primarily controlled by the white population, as Bunn et al. (2022) noted. However, the decisions regarding the involvement or exclusion of local communities in the wildlife economy have been shaped by various actors, including the KNP, private reserves, and wildlife ranches (Bunn et al. 2022). In an effort to facilitate the free movement of animals, these private reserves have removed fences that once separated them from the KNP (Bunn et al. 2022). These reserves often consist of private lodge owners who cater to wealthy tourists, generating substantial profits per night spent by each visitor (Bunn et al. 2022).

Despite diverse industries providing employment opportunities, the area faces significant challenges regarding unemployment (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023b). With high rates prevalent in the region, especially in Mpumalanga, where the latest census conducted in 2011 shows that the population number was 4,039,939 persons (Bushbuckridge Local Municipality 2020), job creation remains one of the key issues to be addressed (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023b). The stark contrast between private lodge amenities, such as individual swimming pools in each room, and the challenges faced by local villages in accessing capital, tourism benefits, or even accessing clean drinking water serves as a reminder of the impacts of the apartheid era and these disparities highlight the complex legacy and inequality that persists in the region.

Figure 6 displays the Poverty Index within the K2C BR, indicating regions with higher poverty rates. The case study for this thesis is located in close proximity to Mapulaneng, which is depicted as a pink-red area in the southern part of the map, signifying that it is one of the regions with elevated poverty rates.

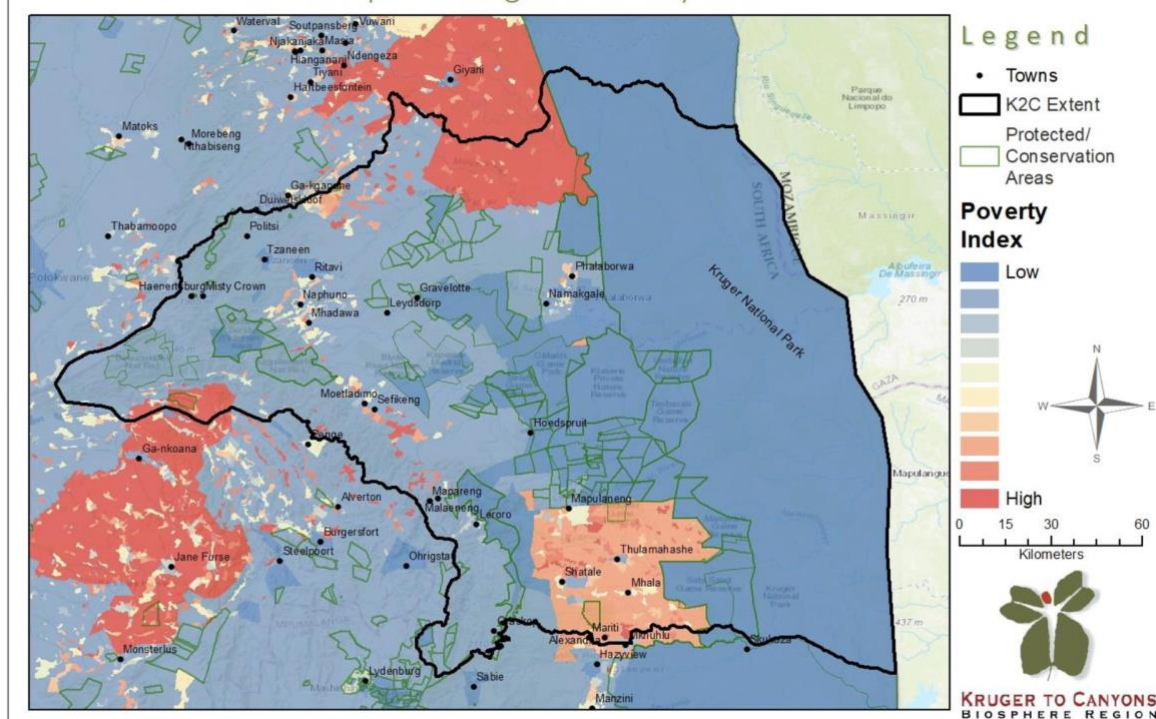


Figure 6: K2C BR Poverty Index. Source: Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company (2023b, 81).

According to the UNEP and UNWTO (2005), tourism presents a promising avenue for poverty reduction, particularly in rural areas where a significant portion of the global impoverished population resides. As an industry with relatively low barriers to entry, tourism can generate new streams of income (UNEP and UNWTO 2005). However, the problem lies in effectively directing visitor expenditures toward impoverished communities (UNEP and UNWTO 2005).

According to Rylance and Spenceley (2013), tourism activity in this area has led to the development of numerous lodges around PAs or within private reserves. These lodges accommodate tourists willing to pay significant sums of money for the opportunity to immerse themselves in nature and encounter the called “big five²” game animals. Often these luxury lodges are located adjacent to rural areas where poverty is prevalent (Rylance and Spenceley

² The term “Big Five” is used when referring to the following five African mammals: leopards, rhinoceros, African buffalo, lions, and elephants (“Ten Wild Facts about the ‘Big Five’. WWF” n.d.).

2013). Overall, the combination of the region's large tourism flows, high-end lodges, and proximity to economically disadvantaged rural areas highlight the complex dynamics between different tourism stakeholders in this tourism destination.

3.1.3 The Kruger to Canyon Non-Profit Company

The K2C NPC was created in 2011 as a Public Benefit Organization (PBO) to manage the goals set out by the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme (“Who Are We” n.d.). Currently, the K2C NPC is applying to the GDC (“From the Region For the Region (FrFr) Initiative” n.d.). This makes them the stakeholders that will implement the GDC in the K2C BR, having, therefore, an impact on all tourism in the biosphere, including this thesis case study.

The primary objectives of the K2C NPC are to protect the biodiversity and cultural heritage of the K2C BR, while promoting the sustainable use of resources and the SD of societies and economies and to raise awareness about environmental issues while implementing projects to mitigate them (“Who Are We” n.d.).

To achieve these objectives, the K2C NPC has undertaken approximately 21 projects in the K2C BR since 2013 (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023a). Figure 7 illustrates some of these projects’ impacts on the K2C BR within a five-years timeframe (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023a). These projects are crucial in promoting SD while balancing human interests with environmental preservation throughout the K2C BR.

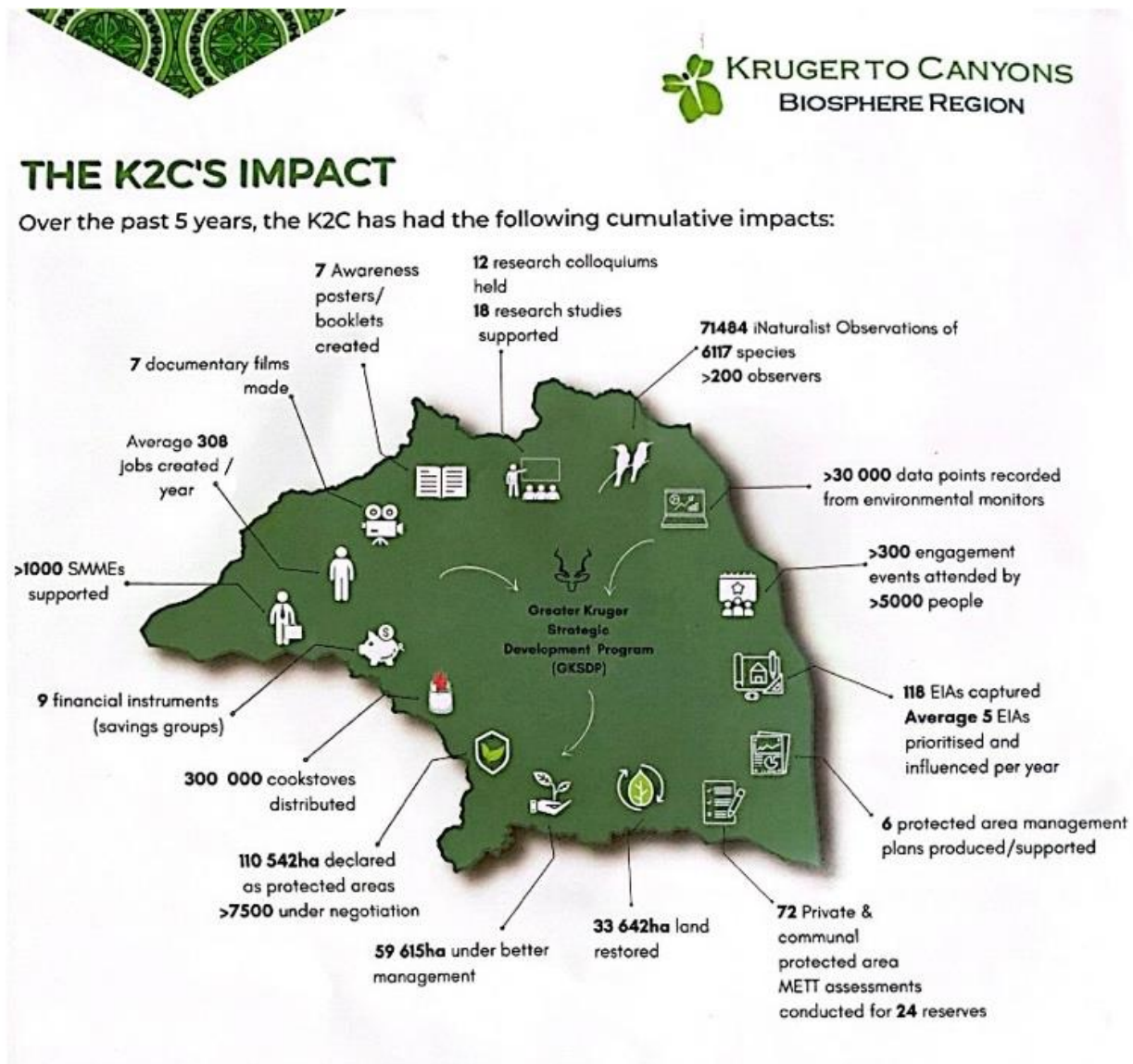


Figure 7: K2C NPC impacts over the last five years in the K2C BR.

Source: Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company (2023a)

As K2C NPC mentions in their report, stakeholders' involvement was vital in the implementation of their projects to make them function and to achieve sustainability within their practices, mixing collaboration between local management authorities, funders and implementation partners such as the South African National Parks, (SANParks), the company that manages the KNP (Kruger to Canyons Non-Profit Company 2023a).

3.1.4 The Green Destinations Certification

The K2C NPC initiated the process of requesting the GDC in February 2023 (“K2C Newsletter, June 2023” 2023) with the objective of obtaining certification. The duration of this process may exceed more than one year, depending on their success in completing various phases of the GDC. The GDC, a global non-profit certification body headquartered in the Netherlands, supports destinations, businesses, and communities in achieving sustainability (“Tourism for People, Nature & Climate.” n.d.). It aims to enhance destination recognition and improve the quality of the tourism industry (“Destination - Become Certified” n.d.).

As a reliable certification system, the GDC encompasses standards, certification, and accreditation. This last one was granted in 2018 by the GSTC (“Green Destinations is now GSTC-Accredited” 2018). Accreditation by the GSTC is important as it indicates compliance with the highest sustainable standards (Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes 2019). The GDC focuses on different stakeholders within tourism destinations at various geographical levels, offering them a set of standards against which to evaluate the sustainability of their respective destinations (“Green Destinations is now GSTC-Accredited” 2018). To support sustainability improvement and assessment, the certification provides tools to destinations for evaluating and monitoring their sustainability performance, as well as developing strategies for continuous improvement (“Destination - Become Certified” n.d.).

The Green Destinations Standard and its processes are overseen by the Green Destinations Standards Committee (“Green Destinations Standard V2 Recognised by GSTC” 2021), which awards different levels (Platinum, Gold, Silver, or Bronze) based on the achieved sustainability level (“Destination - Become Certified” n.d.) Although the standard is applicable to any destination, it should be tailored to the specific tourism sector of each destination (“Green

Destinations Standard V2 Recognised by GSTC” 2021). A tourism destination is an attractive geographic area that travelers can pass through within a day (Bricker 2017).

The Green Destinations Standard V2 comprises six themes with 84 criteria (“Green Destinations Standard V2 Recognised by GSTC” 2021). These themes include “Destination Management, Nature & Scenery, Environment & Climate, Culture & Tradition, Social Well-being, and Business & Communication” and their criteria are divided into three groups based on their importance: “Core Criteria”, “Optional” Criteria (criteria encouraged but not mandatory), and “Not Applicable” Criteria (criteria relevant only for specific destinations based on their conditions) (“Green Destinations Standard V2 Recognised by GSTC” 2021, 4). Certification requires compliance with the core criteria, while the other two groups are considered case-by-case (“Green Destinations Standard V2 Recognised by GSTC” 2021). A complete list of the GDC standards can be found in the Appendix.

It is important to note that the standard solely oversees the sustainability management of the destination through the managing entity (“Green Destinations Standard V2 Recognised by GSTC” 2021), in this case, the K2C NPC. Consequently, other businesses and local communities within the K2C Biosphere Region are not evaluated within the scope of this certification, nor can they utilize the certification logo (“Green Destinations Standard V2 Recognised by GSTC” 2021). Nevertheless, the effects of the GDC will impact them as the certification applies to the entire destination. If not approached correctly, the benefits provided by the GDC would be solely driven by the K2C NPC without considering a stakeholder approach. This thesis demonstrates the importance of having a holistic and broader approach, that comprises different stakeholders, in order to achieve the most significant impact of the GDC on promoting sustainability throughout the entire K2C Biosphere Region.

3.2 Businesses within the case study

Situated in Mpumalanga, a northeastern province of South Africa, Shik Shack and Nourish are in close proximity to the neighboring province of Limpopo and the countries of Eswatini and Mozambique to the east. From the location of the case study, a 31-kilometer drive along the R531 Orpen Road leads to the renowned KNP. As a result, Shik Shack and Nourish find themselves in the park's buffer zone, surrounded by abundant wildlife and private game reserves, many of which offer luxurious accommodations such as Manyeleti and Timbavati. They are also located within walking distance from Sigagule village, focusing its social function primarily on serving this local community, even though its outreach programs help nearby communities. Consequently, around 75% of their employees come from Sigagule, and the rest come from nearby local communities (Marta, pers. comm.)³.

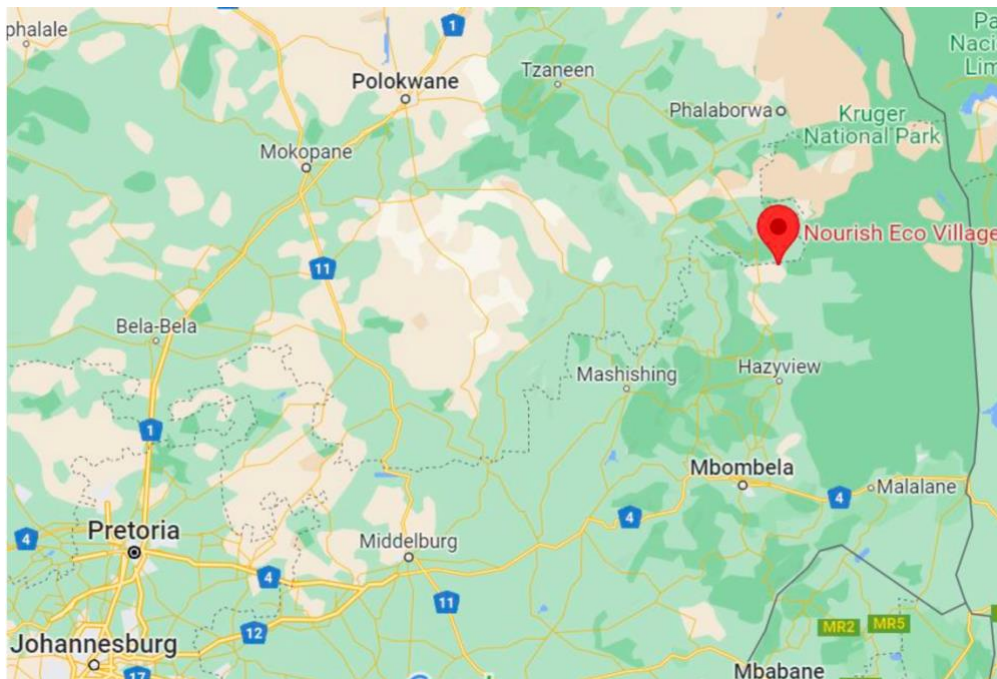


Figure 8: Location of Shik Shack and Nourish. Source: Google Maps (2023).

³ Marta. Management Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 22nd May 2023.

3.2.1 The Nourish Eco-Village

The Nourish Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) is an NGO focusing on community projects. It englobes the Nourish Foundation and the Nourish Eco-Village. The first one is governed by a board comprising six individuals, including the founder (“Nourish Foundation” n.d.). In contrast, the Nourish Eco-Village, also known as "Nourish" in this thesis, serves as the site for implementing the project's activities and operates under a top-down management model.

The conservation area surrounding the KNP faces significant challenges, such as wildlife poaching driven by economic necessity and social inequalities in the nearby regions (“Nourish Foundation” n.d.). In response, the Nourish project was established in 2011 to bridge the gap between conservation and community issues by developing sustainable solutions for conservation efforts and local communities' well-being (“Nourish Foundation” n.d.). Over the past decade, Nourish has undertaken various projects, especially in the Sigagule village, which focused on promoting food security, employment, education, and poverty reduction. The ongoing issues of underdevelopment and lack of employment opportunities in rural wildlife villages neighboring the KNP highlight the crucial role of Nourish in breaking the cycle of poverty and empowering communities. Because of this, Nourish is called a place of “Ubuntu” which could be defined as *“a place of hope, a place of future, a place of happiness and sharing between all races, between all cultures, between all humanity”* (Peter, pers. comm.)⁴.

After years of dedicated work, Nourish is currently working on implementing two new eco-villages in other areas close to the KNP that share similar characteristics with Sigagule village,

⁴ Peter. Staff Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 26th May 2023.

including high unemployment rates, food insecurity, and significant poverty levels (Marta, pers. comm.).

Nourish's objective is focused on addressing wildlife-related issues while simultaneously alleviating poverty through community development. This aim is achieved through diverse initiatives that revolve around three main areas: enterprise, education, and tourism (“Nourish Foundation” n.d.). Nourish primarily oversees the enterprise and education initiatives, while Shik Shack manages the tourism aspect. However, it's important to note that the tourism activities organized by Shik Shack are an integral part of the overall Nourish project, as many of them depend on the relationship of Nourish with the Sigagule village and other ones are related to the daily activities of Nourish.

The accompanying figure 9 illustrates the organizational framework of Nourish's impact model. The funds for Nourish's projects come from a combination of investments, particularly the income generated by Shik Shack, and donations raised from various donors (Marta, pers. comm.). The funding serves to execute different education and enterprise projects. The implementation of these initiatives takes place within the physical space provided by the eco-village, serving as a sustainable hub for their activities.

SUSTAINABLE IMPACT DELIVERY MODEL

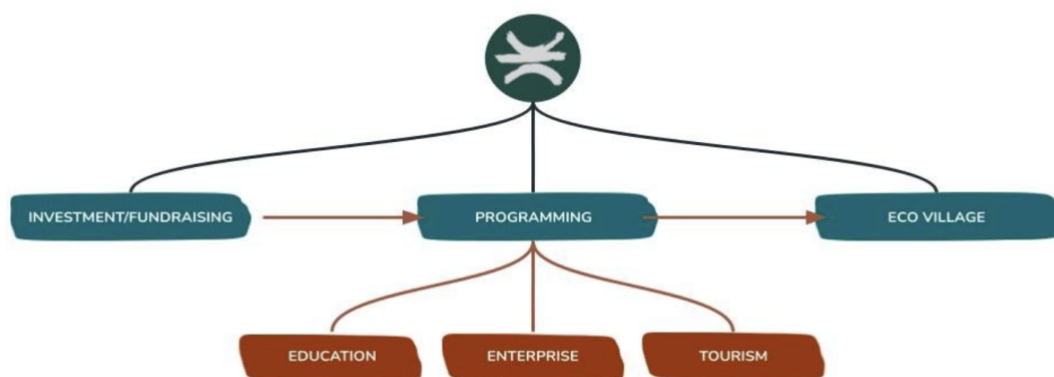


Figure 9: Nourish impact business model. Source: “Nourish Foundation”(n.d.).

3.2.1.1 Education

The educational projects of Nourish comprise the Rise Creche and the Green Kidz Club. These are focused on disadvantaged children of different ages that face challenges due to poverty. Their goals emphasis mainly on educational projects and feeding schemes which happen within the eco-village. Their different programs aim to educate kids to grow into resilient adults that can make their own decisions while being aware of the richness of their cultural heritage and natural environment (“Education” n.d.). All these projects are focused on the local community of Sigagule; nevertheless, other surrounding communities have the possibility to also access them directly on-site at Nourish or through their outreach programs, which have different focuses depending on the necessities of the communities (Care, pers. comm.)⁵.

The Rise creche

The eco-village creche provides an educational space for 60 children, aged 0 to 5 years old, to start their education and development (Daniel, pers. comm.)⁶. The creche operates on a “low or

⁵ Care. Staff Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 24th May 2023.

⁶ Daniel. Staff Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 24th May 2023.

no fee-paying” basis (Marta, pers. comm.), making it accessible for parents with a limited income. The proximity of the creche to the Sigagule village, also allows parents to access education and care for their children by walking distance. The creche playground is created from upcycled materials (“Education” n.d.), such as reused tires from cars. This demonstrates the commitment to sustainability practices by Nourish. Also, the creche offers two nutritious meals daily for the kids (“Education” n.d.), ensuring their correct physical and mental development. A part of the in-house activities, its outreach programs focus on workshops to teach centers and its workers and aid to other pre-schools located in rural villages to maintain and acquire new infrastructure (“Education” n.d.).

The Green Kidz Club

On the other hand, the Green Kidz Club is an after-school program where around 70 kids receive a free nutritious lunch and evening educational programs (Daniel, pers. comm.). All these educational programs are undertaken in English, offering the children opportunities to develop good English skills. In their adult life, this can allow them to access various industries, including tourism, where proficiency in English is often a main requirement.

The program consists of different activities each day of the week, with a special focus on environmental education. Therefore, Monday is environmental education, Tuesday is computer literacy, Wednesday is scout day, Thursday is creative art, and Friday is sports and animal kindness (Care, pers. comm.). Moreover, the Green Kidz Club includes field trips on weekends, where the kids get the opportunity to learn about their local natural environment. This is a valuable experience, as local communities often present challenges in accessing their own natural heritage (Peter, pers. comm.). Therefore, Nourish’s promotion of environmental awareness among children is vital in spreading a sense of responsibility for caring about their

environment. Additionally, the Green Kidz Club hosts the “Ubuntu Girls Club”, providing young girls with a safe space to speak up against abuses and to defend themselves.

3.2.1.2 The Sediwa Enterprise Hub

The Sediwa Enterprise Hub is a training space in the eco-village which aims to promote social enterprise development within the K2C BR (“Enterprise” n.d.). This space, created out of construction containers, encompasses an office for the case study’s management team, a computer training center, and a conference room.

This space also comprises the Nourish Villagemarket, which contains a craft, sewing, coffee, and bakery corner (“Enterprise” n.d.). As described by Ana (pers. comm.)⁷, the craft shop offers products crafted by local communities and products made from repurposed waste and created in the eco-village. The focus of the sewing shop is to empower individuals by providing sewing skills and employment opportunities, especially through sewing products that otherwise are often inaccessible to local communities such as menstrual pads. The coffee and bakery space is destined to train local people while promoting local food products (“Enterprise” n.d.). This place represents a space for tourists to contribute to local communities through their purchases.

The Sediwa Enterprise Hub is divided into the Sediwa Academy and the Sediwa Incubator (“Enterprise” n.d.). The Sediwa Academy serves as a platform for educational programs destined for adults facing disadvantages, empowering them with skills for business and work. These courses cover a wide spectrum, varying from permaculture training to financial skills workshops (“Education” n.d.). On the other hand, the Sediwa Incubator focuses on helping individuals develop and improve their businesses (“Enterprise” n.d.).

⁷ Ana. Staff Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 26th May 2023.

3.2.2 Shik Shack

Shik Shack emerged in 2016 as a financial response to Nourish's unstable funding economic model (Marta, pers. comm.). Therefore, Nourish is the NGO community project and Shik Shack is the profit-oriented tourism business that provides funds and visibility to Nourish and to local communities through tourism (Lisa, pers. comm.)⁸. Their motto is to create an authentic community-based experience through an eco-village (“Welcome” n.d.). In that sense, they identify themselves as a responsible tourism business that positively impacts the local communities and nature of the region (“Welcome” n.d.).

The management team of Shik Shack recognized the KNP and the Blyde River Canyon as the main attractions for tourists to visit the area and seek accommodation with them (Lisa, pers. comm.). Shik Shack is located within the land of the eco-village and includes several accommodations and tour offers. The Shik Shack team comprises ten people who provide tourism services to national and international tourists (Lisa, pers. comm.). Shik Shack’s tourists receiving accommodation have been divided into workers, interns and volunteers, international backpackers, and locals (Lisa, pers. comm.).

The volunteering and internship programs of Shik Shack are focused on international tourists that aim to help local communities while learning new skills and cultures (“Nourish Internship Brochure” 2021). Lisa (pers. comm.) commented that the fee which volunteers pay to participate in the program is donated to Nourish and dedicated to covering their Shik Shack’s accommodation and food.

⁸ Lisa. Management Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 15th May 2023.

3.2.2.1 Tourism

Shik Shack is not just an accommodation; they also provide tours that connect tourists with local communities and the beautiful nature of the K2C BR. On the other hand, and as previously mentioned, the tourism activities of Nourish (such as the “Nourish immersion tour”) fall under the organization of Shik Shack.

Accommodation

Shik Shack offers a range of backpacker-style accommodations for its guests, including three safari tents and two teepees (“Shik Shack Backpackers” n.d.) with space for two people in each of them. Moreover, they also have four traditional huts, which are normally used for volunteers and interns. The price per night varies depending on availability and season, but it comprises low prices, especially compared to the expensive nearby lodges. Shik Shack’s facilities comprise a bar, a lounge, a fireplace, a swimming pool area, a self-catered kitchen, and communal showers and bathrooms (“Stay with Us” n.d.).

During the on-site research, I could observe that the beforementioned Shik Shack accommodation facilities have been built following the idea of reusing, reducing, and recycling. As Marta (pers. comm.) mentioned, the aim has always been to construct Shik Shack in a very ecological manner, and therefore they already integrate sustainable initiatives to improve their sustainability performance while reducing costs and their impact on their environment.

Tour offers

Their main, in-house organized tours are the “Sigagule village walking tour” and the “Nourish immersion tour” (“Play with Us, Tours” n.d.). The Sigagule village walking tour provides an immersion into the Shangaan culture and Sigagule way of living (“Shik Shack Guest Brochure”

2023). The tour starts in Sigagule by learning how to make one of their traditional mats and eating local peanut butter. It continues with a visit to the village streets and a short talk about some of the traditions you encounter in Sigagule. To continue, a visit to the traditional healer allows tourists to learn more about the healer's functions and beliefs. To finish, the tourists have the possibility to have a local meal accompanied by traditional homemade beer.

The Nourish immersion tour offers a guided visit around Nourish and its projects with the aim to learn how this community project works ("Play with Us, Tours" n.d.). With this tour, tourists have the possibility to learn about the case study's permaculture gardens, their recycling workshops, and the different parts englobing the eco-village, including Shik Shack, the educational programs of Nourish and the Nourish Villagemarket.

Additionally, they also partner with local tour operators to offer a wide range of nature-based tourism activities. Some of them are horse safaris, game drives, bush walks, KNP day drives, camping, panorama routes through the Blyde River Canyon, visits to the Blyde River Canyon dam, and quad safari experiences ("Shik Shack Guest Brochure" 2023). Additionally, they also have in-house spa treatments that are offered by a local massage therapist ("Shik Shack Guest Brochure" 2023).

4 Methodology

This chapter will present an overview of the research methodology used to address the research questions of this thesis while establishing the appropriateness of the research methods and materials selected to answer these questions. To answer these research questions, the on-site field research undertaken with qualitative methods was piloted over a 35-day period in the K2C BR to conduct a case study of two businesses: the Nourish Eco-Village and Shik Shack.

The on-site research is the result of a collaborative effort between the Central European University (CEU), the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) in Johannesburg, and the Wits Rural Campus in the K2C BR, which is part of the WITS University. Through collaboration with CEU and WITS, I was able to connect with the K2C NPC. After discussing my potential thesis research goals and the K2C NPC aims to obtain the GDC, Nourish and Shik Shack were selected for this thesis' analysis as stakeholders of the K2C NPC. This last company connected me with the founder and executive director of Nourish and Shik Shack, who approved the on-site research on the case study while facilitating some of this thesis' interviews.

4.1 Case study as a research design

To answer the research questions mentioned in the introduction, this research design is based on a case study approach. The two-business selected for this study, which complement each other's activities, served as prime examples of sustainable tourism practices in the K2C BR. The possibility to analyze them as a case study allowed me to understand their perspective on the implementation of sustainable tourism certifications in the area and, more precisely, the GDC. Furthermore, this analysis aimed to ultimately increase the overall sustainability of the region and promote sustainable tourism within businesses that share similar characteristics to those of the case study (located next to PAs where local communities have limited access to

basic resources and wildlife conservation represents a challenge). The findings of this research also serve as a framework for implementing similar initiatives in other regions around the world.

4.2 Field research and interviews with stakeholders

4.2.1 Field research

The field research was conducted in the K2C BR, which presented a unique geographical and cultural background. The fieldwork's main objective was to access data otherwise unavailable remotely and gain first-hand knowledge of the social, economic, and environmental relationships that develop in the K2C BR. To achieve this, I had the chance to meet local people and tourism stakeholders and observe daily activities undertaken in Nourish and Shik Shack. All this and the interviews lead to a better understanding of the area's culture and the case study.

Before the field visit, several meetings were held with K2C NPC, a representative of the Wits Rural Campus, Nourish and Shik Shack executive director, and two researchers who had previously collaborated in the K2C BR. During the first weeks of the stay, I conducted several meetings with the case study's management team, where the case study's model and its sustainable tourism practices were discussed, and further information about the projects was requested. Additionally, several on-site interviews were conducted. The following section will go in-depth into the semi-structured interviews data collection process.

4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

A qualitative approach was used as the main method to collect empirical data for this study. In-person semi-structured interviews were used as a qualitative method of data collection to address the main research question and its sub-questions. The choice of this method is justified

for two reasons. Firstly, many of the organization and sustainability practices of the case study and its impacts on its environment are not well documented online or in academic papers. Secondly, one of the research questions focuses on understanding the perceptions of selected stakeholders regarding the implementation of the GDC in the K2C BR, and as described by Grossoehme (2014), interviews are a valuable method for gaining insights into the experiences of participants and their interpretations of different situations through the use of various types of interview questions. Figure 10 below provides a navigation map of this thesis' qualitative research methodology.

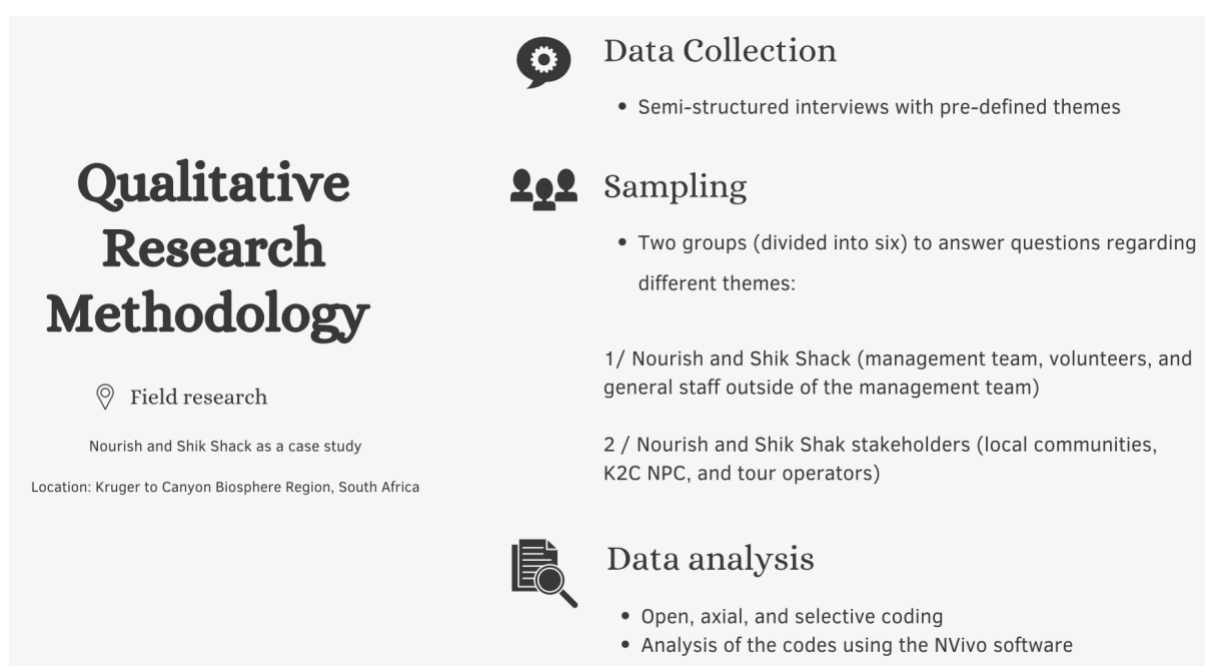


Figure 10: *Qualitative research methodology navigation map. Figure by author.*

As seen in figure 10, the interviews were conducted in different parts of the K2C BR, where the case study and the interviewees were located. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Of these, five are in-depth interviews that lasted 120 min or more. The rest of the interviews are between 20 and 90 min. Semi-structured interviews allowed room for follow-up questions depending on the direction of the conversation. This approach was chosen over

structured interviews as it permitted further exploration of topics that emerged as important to the study objectives during the interview process (Grossoehme 2014).

The semi-structured questions were organized following the below pre-defined themes. Each interview used selected themes based on the person interviewed:

1. Perceptions and definitions of sustainable tourism and its certifications
2. The implementation of the GDC in the K2C BR
3. Challenges in the region, especially focused on sustainable tourism
4. Sustainability practices of the case study
5. Organization and structure of the case study
6. Stakeholders' collaboration in the K2C BR

The selection of interviewees for the semi-structured interviews was based on consultations with the CEO of the case study. To ensure diversity in the sampling (whenever possible), an equilibrium between gender, level of studies, and relationship with the case study was kept in mind. Table 1 provides an overview of the attributes of the interviewees, including their interview date and their assigned pseudonym.

Table 1: Attributes of the interviewees. Table by author.

Gender	Organization	Team	Pseudonym	Date of interview
Female	Nourish / Shik Shack	Management	Lisa	15th May 2023
Female	Nourish / Shik Shack	Management	Marta	22nd May 2023
Male	Nourish / Shik Shack	Staff	Care	24th May 2023
Male	Nourish / Shik Shack	Staff	Daniel	24th May 2023
Female	Nourish / Shik Shack	Staff	Ana	26th May 2023
Female	Nourish / Shik Shack	Staff	Belle	26th May 2023
Male	Nourish / Shik Shack	Staff	Peter	26th May 2023
Female	Nourish / Shik Shack	Staff	Koa	26th May 2023
Male	Nourish / Shik Shack	Volunteer	Anders	24th May 2023
Female	Nourish / Shik Shack	Volunteer	Olive	24th May 2023
Male	Stakeholder	Sigagule Village	James	1st June 2023
Male	Stakeholder	Sigagule Village	Justin	1st June 2023
Male	Stakeholder	Sigagule Village	Pravin	1st June 2023
Female	Stakeholder	Tour Operator	Maria	19th May 2023
Female	Stakeholder	Tour Operator	Monica	19th May 2023
Male	Stakeholder	Tour Operator	Triano	27th May 2023
Male	Stakeholder	K2C NPC	Paul	19th May 2023
Female	Stakeholder	K2C NPC	Paula	25th May 2023

Group one was related to people directly employed or volunteering in the case study: volunteers, the management team, and other staff. Three sub-groups arise from group one, dividing it into management, staff, and volunteers. The management interviewees were chosen based on their expertise and working years in the case study.

In group two, a range of stakeholders connected directly or indirectly to Nourish and Shik Shack were interviewed. They belonged to the following groups: K2C NPC, the Sigagule village, and other tour operators. The selection process for the sample size was based on the relevance of the stakeholders to the topic and case study, as well as the availability of the potential interviewees. The Sigagule village was selected as a representative local community due to its profound susceptibility to Nourish and Shik Shack operations. To have a good representation of the perceptions of the Sigagule village towards Nourish and Shik Shack, the interviewees

were part of the tribal authorities of the village. To have unbiased answers from these interviewees, the study selected villagers who were not employed or directly affected by the case study but were aware of its existence and practices. Tour operators who collaborated with or were familiar with the practices of Nourish and Shik Shack were also interviewed.

4.3 Data analysis

In order to enhance the qualitative research, the initial three interviews were transcribed to test and refine subsequent interviews. This process allowed modifying questions to suit better the context of the thesis and the inclusion of new and intriguing topics or inquiries.

The data analysis encompassed identifying codes aligned with the previously pre-defined themes and exploring possible emerging themes in the data. To ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the results (Maher et al. 2018), I carefully selected and employed open, axial, and selective coding techniques to analyze the data. These methodical steps enabled a deep investigation into the obtained information while transitioning from specific details to a comprehensive overview of the data (Maher et al. 2018). These steps are briefly explained here for a better understanding of this process.

Open coding is the primary step in qualitative data analysis, involving deconstructing the interviews' data into smaller components (Strauss and Corbin 1998). During this process, researchers assign labels or "codes" (elements in the data which have similar characteristics) to these components and create categories, facilitating the exploration of new theories and perspectives (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Subsequently, axial coding focuses on establishing relationships and connections among the data identified in the open coding phase (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The categories are developed and organized, which serve as the cohesive link

that binds the codes together, providing a deeper understanding of the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Selective coding is the process where all the categories identified during the previous step are defined under a main or core category (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

After an initial review, the data was imported into NVivo, a qualitative research software program. This step was intended to improve the understanding of the data and facilitate the identification of further emerging codes. It is important to note that NVivo does not perform the code analysis itself but rather provides a more comprehensive overview of the data and helps organize the information for the writing process (Maher et al. 2018).

4.4 Research ethics

In accordance with the CEU Research Ethics Policy and Guidelines, this study only included adult participants who were fully informed of the research objectives and participated voluntarily. Before conducting any interviews, written consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed for all participants, and to ensure this, the names of the interviewees are exposed in this thesis under a pseudonym. The interviewees were also informed of their right to withdraw from this investigation.

Given my unfamiliarity with the cultural background of the research site and the inclusion of interviews with local communities, Nourish provided ethical guidance to ensure proper cultural alignment of the interview questions before realizing them. An employee from the case study, who understood local communities' culture and rules, was instrumental in proofreading these interview questions from an ethical point of view, organizing interviews with the necessary stakeholders, and overcoming potential language barriers that I might have had.

Although no potential risks to participants were identified, the collaboration between this study and Nourish and Shik Shack, may yield potential benefits, such as possibly enhancing the sustainable tourism practices at the research site through the use of the GDC framework. In addition, this research could contribute to the K2C BR's efforts to obtain the GDC, thereby promoting the region's tourism sustainability practices.

4.5 Limitations

During the on-site research, the following constraints were encountered. A major obstacle arose when realizing that not all interviewees were familiar with the GDC and its attributes. To address this, the question was expanded to cover sustainable tourism certifications in general. Access to certain stakeholders also proved difficult due to cultural and language barriers. In addition, it was common for the interviewees to reschedule their interviews on a very short period notice. To overcome these difficulties, intermediaries were used to facilitate contact with interviewees, and rescheduled interviews' were flexibly allowed.

In addition, there were cases in which understanding the interview questions was culturally difficult, despite speaking the same language. The semi-structured interview structure was helpful in these situations, as it allowed the possibility to bring up new adapted questions. In certain cases, help was requested from the case study's community liaison to formulate more adequate interview questions and to aid with possible local language issues. This approach also helped to identify unperceived social codes. Another limitation emerged from the scarcity of online information about the case study, but the on-site observation helped obtain all the necessary information to have a full understanding of their practices and impacts.

Moreover, the management team of the case study was quite new. This limited the number of

management staff available for interviews to only two people. To solve this problem, short interviews were replaced by in-depth interviews, which allowed for a better understanding of the participant's knowledge and perceptions. Subsequent interviews were conducted with the new management team, but the questions had different focus and approaches. Resource constraints also posed challenges, such as the need to share a room or car and frequent power outages in the region, which made it difficult to access electricity and essential resources, such as Internet and lighting, for the thesis development. To address these issues, the research timing was rescheduled, allowing certain tasks to be completed once back at the home residence.

Another concern was the potential interference of interviewees' private interests in the research results. To mitigate this, efforts were made to interview a wide range of stakeholders from different backgrounds and locations, therefore broadening the diversity of perspectives. Finally, a potential limitation was my frequent presence at Shik Shack and Nourish, which could be perceived as a hindrance to objectivity. However, it was necessary in order to establish relationships and truly understand the sustainability practices of the case study. Considering the objectives of the thesis, it was deemed crucial to immerse oneself in the context, ultimately promoting trust without jeopardizing the objectivity of the research.

5 Results and discussion

To address the main research questions of this thesis, this chapter focuses on the findings of this investigation. To discuss the findings, the literature review allowed me to engage with the academic background revolving around the topics of sustainable tourism, sustainable tourism certifications, and stakeholder collaboration. To understand in which way the GDC could potentially promote sustainable tourism in the K2C BR, the findings have been organized into five main sections: (1) perceptions towards tourism in the K2C BR, (2) certification challenges for SMEs in the K2C BR, (3) perceptions of the case study towards sustainable tourism certifications, (4) dynamics of collaboration in the K2C BR's tourism industry, and (5) promotion of sustainable tourism through the GDC in the K2C BR.

5.1 Perceptions towards tourism in the K2C BR

When interviewing locals from Sigagule, they had an optimistic vision of the tourism industry, which could be associated with the function of the case study as a link between tourism and local communities, *"I can see that tourists are actually changing the lives of people or the lives of this community which is the Sigagule, because when tourists come here our community benefits a lot, the kids that they come here also benefit a lot and myself also benefit a lot so I can see that the community it's uplifted from where it was"* Care (pers. comm.). The perspectives of local communities shed light on the importance of tourism in the K2C BR for local communities and the environment. Therefore, the data presented three main perceptions of locals towards tourism (1) ability to meet new people and culture, (2) job creation, and (3) promoting environmental conservation.

Interviewees expressed amazement about the opportunity to learn from tourists' different ways of life. Ana (pers. comm.) commented, *"Meeting new people, sometimes I become so amazed*

[...] Tourism I think, is something that is good because you learn every day out of it. You learn some new things. You learn how people live. You learn a lot of things. Things that you never knew that they existed". Koa (pers. comm.)⁹ also shared a positive sentiment, stating, "I love tourists because I believe they bring joy to our country. They make things alive."

Interviewees recognized the important role of tourism in providing employment opportunities for the local community: *"[Tourism] gives a lot of opportunities to the people in the village, especially the jobs. Most of the people in the village are working at Kruger. Some of them are here. So it helps a lot"* (Belle, pers. comm.)¹⁰; *"they [tourists] create jobs for us; we used to say one tourist one job"* (Pravin, pers. comm.)¹¹. This is connected to the tourism's capacity to improve the Global South's overall socioeconomic welfare ("Sustainable Tourism" n.d.).

The interviews revealed that the local community is aware of the close link between tourism and the environment. This is a very valuable fact as the literature review highlights, with the work of (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019), the tourism industry's heavy reliance on the natural environment and local communities of the destination for its survival.

Koa (pers. comm.) expressed in this way the sentiment that tourists inspire the community to value and protect their natural environment: *"They [tourists] make us want to conserve our natural things. I can say that if they didn't come to this place, maybe we would have destroyed everything"*. When asked about the reason behind this, the interviewee highlighted the differences in cultural perspectives toward wildlife, stating *"Because we think differently. There*

⁹ Koa. Staff Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 26th May 2023.

¹⁰ Belle. Staff Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 26th May 2023.

¹¹ Pravin. Sigagule Village stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Sigagule. 1st June 2023.

are some people when we see a giraffe passing, someone will say: meat! and someone will say, oh, that's a giraffe, it's beautiful" (Koa, pers. comm.). This idea was reinforced by Triano (pers. comm.)¹², *"Anywhere you go, if you speak about the value of a thing, the value of an animal, the value of a natural resource, mostly the answer to that question, the value is linked to people"*, and by James (pers. comm.)¹³ *"We are working with tourism, we are working especially with this nature"*.

The above three points align with the principles of sustainable tourism development presented by the UNEP and UNWTO (2005) and the holistic view of Leiper (1979). Following these principles, the quotes prove that tourism is understood, by the local communities in the K2C BR, as a tool that preserves the environment and biodiversity, unites cultures and promotes intercultural understanding, and ensures economic stability while contributing to poverty alleviation. This highlights once more the impact that tourism has on the natural environment and communities of the destination and, therefore, the importance of practicing it sustainably to ensure its positive effects are achieved and enhanced.

Despite the above positive meanings attributed to tourism by the interviewees, some negative opinions were also expressed, but only one member of the local communities emphasized the importance of tourism's impact on the destination, which, as seen in the literature, can be critical for the destination and its stakeholders (Spenceley 2003, Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019; Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021; Song, Zhu, and Fong 2021). Peter (pers. comm.) mentioned, *"It depends, if you talk about what tourism is all about, it is all about maybe coming and seeing animals and just going away, or maybe wanting to see the animals and the local people and the local surroundings"*. This notion coincides with the need for sustainable tourism practices that

¹² Triano. Tour operator stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Timbavati. 27th May 2023.

¹³ James. Sigagule Village stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Sigagule. 1st June 2023.

consider the destination's sociocultural, economic, and environmental aspects, and therefore with the definition of sustainable tourism (UNEP and UNWTO 2005; Häusler 2011).

Many interviewees pointed out the fact that tourism, to be positive for the destination, needs to involve a certain type of giving back to the tourism destination; this quote from a staff of the case study shows it clearly *“The flight emitted a lot of carbon in the air, that’s pollution, and to make up for that, you should actually go and improve sustainability where you flew to. So you should make sure that you do make the most of what you came to do here and so on, and then leave that place improved and developed”* (Peter, pers. comm.). This is consistent with the literature review's emphasis on the importance of responsible and sustainable travel practices (UNEP and UNWTO 2005). This recognition is very important as, if tourism is practiced in an unsustainable way, the negative impacts that it might bring can negatively influence local communities and therefore hamper, as described by Song, Zhu, and Fong (2021), the development of tourism destinations.

It is important to highlight that local people also recognized the need for the tourism industry to engage more with local communities. For example, Belle (pers. comm.) mentioned, *“People from tourism industry, they have to communicate with the villagers. So they will come up with an idea that will benefit both of them, not only one side”*. Therefore, and following Peter’s and Belle’s recognition of the need for a different type of tourism management, caution shall be exercised in the K2C BR, as avoiding engaging with local communities might result in negative reactions from the local communities towards the tourism industry (Song, Zhu, and Fong 2021).

Regarding the perceptions of international tourists (the case study volunteers), the data showed that they were also conscious of the negative impacts of the tourism sector. Anders¹⁴ (pers. comm.) and Olive (pers. comm.) highlighted the CO2 emissions generated by the industry from transportation when driving around the KNP or flying to the destination, pointing out the need to adopt sustainable travel practices. Additionally, Olive (pers. comm.)¹⁵ also mentioned, *"Especially here in a country where I know that they have water problems, I pay more attention to my water consumption, to my waste production, and I also feel like here it's important to support the local community"*. These statements go against the idea of travelers being unaware of the negative impacts of the industry, supported by Fennell and Cooper (2020). Nevertheless, this result might be influenced by the fact that Olive and Anders recognized having certain environmental courses in their degree studies.

However, the question raised by Bausch et al. (2021), regarding the extent to which tourists understand the importance of sustainable tourism remains present, as the tourists showed confusion when asked about sustainable tourism certification, *"Well, that's a good question. I'm not that... I don't really..."* Anders (pers. comm.). After explaining the meaning of these certifications, Anders (pers. comm.) continued, *"I haven't been to any hotels yet that had these types of certificates. So basically, if I would see it, I probably wouldn't know at first if it's just like a given out label for themselves"*. Moreover, Olive (pers. comm.) commented, *"To be honest, I've only heard of certificates of environmental organizations"*. These affirmations expose two of the problems presented by the literature on certifications. Firstly, the fact that tourists often link sustainability only to its environmental sphere Bausch et al. (2021). Secondly,

¹⁴ Anders. Volunteer Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 24th May 2023.

¹⁵ Olive. Volunteer Nourish and Shik Shack. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 24th May 2023.

the confusion and distrust that tourists present as companies claim being certified with self-made logos, making it difficult for tourists to choose sustainable products (Buckley 2020).

Challenges also arise from the preferences tourists' have when traveling. In this regard, Anders (pers. comm.) commented that his decisive factors in choosing an accommodation are "*price and reachability*", and sustainability will only follow once these two are reached. This clearly show that, despite showing interest in sustainable tourism practices and recognizing the negative effects of traveling, only a small portion of tourists would proactively seek sustainable tourism certifications, as argued by Budeanu (2007) and Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015).

This section showed the perceptions towards tourism in the K2C BR from two of the most important tourism stakeholders: local communities and tourists. Despite seeing a shift in some of the interviewees towards recognizing sustainable tourism as the way forward, it is clear that the tourism industry has work to do until achieving a full engagement and understanding with sustainable tourism worldwide and in the K2C BR. Therefore, using the GDC as a tool to promote sustainable tourism within the K2C BR, would allow to promote sustainability within the region in the meantime that other stakeholders, such as tourists and local communities, acquire a better understanding of the necessity and benefits of adapting sustainable pathways.

5.2 Certification challenges for SMEs in the K2C BR

Companies such as Nourish and Shik Shack align with sustainability practices and are perceived by their environment as sustainable tourism promoters. Despite their positive impact, the collected data revealed their difficulties accessing sustainable tourism certifications. This section of the results summarizes them:

5.2.1 The Global North

As revealed by the literature review, sustainable tourism certifications and their correct implementation in the Global South are often challenged by the fact that the Global North and large enterprises are in charge of developing and implementing worldwide sustainable tourism certifications (Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter 2002; Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015). This complexity was reflected in the interviews as one of the main problems of the tourism businesses in the K2C BR requesting and applying the certifications properly. Paul (pers. comm.)¹⁶ highlighted the following difficulties he faced when applying for a sustainable tourism certification *“when I was writing up my 15 criteria [to apply for a sustainable tourism certification] I was kind of looking at it and thinking, these people, the assessors, are going to judge this with a First World mind. They don't understand the issues like the infrastructure collapsing”*.

Acknowledging and addressing these differences is vital to achieving sustainability in the Global South. Therefore, certifications should be adopted by experienced organizations that understand the dynamics and problematics of the region where the certification will be applied, reaching this way the maximum benefit of a certification. This would allow certifications to align with the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental situation of the destinations while setting realistic expectations to be established by the certification standards.

Additionally, the findings supported the claims of Fennell and Cooper (2020), which debate about the different understandings of sustainable tourism, with the stronger versions linked to the Global North. This makes it difficult to adapt a uniform certification to destinations and business, as each has different needs and characteristics depending on their location. This was

¹⁶ Paul. K2C NPC stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Hoedspruit. 19th May 2023.

reflected by Marta (pers. comm.) *“I think community members don’t necessarily have an understanding of sustainable processes because it’s like westernization came into Africa and it broke what was already happening”*.

5.2.2 Policies and infrastructure

The lack of consideration for the unique characteristics represented in the K2C BR, is felt in how sustainable tourism certifications do not reflect the government’s limited involvement in the waste management system of the region. The interviewees recognized the difficulties that local communities and businesses present when disposing of their waste in a responsible manner due to the lack of effective waste management infrastructure. To this, Paul (pers. comm.) commented, *“So waste management, the municipalities don't offer the facilities (well, they do offer them, but they don't really function), so you will find, for instance, all the garbage dumped into a river”*. Monica (pers. comm.)¹⁷ pointed out the challenge that local communities have when dealing with their personal waste *“I say, don't throw your rubbish out, but where do you put it? That's the part, waste management is a huge problem”*.

As seen in the literature, inadequate government support and lack of infrastructure can hinder the ability of tourism businesses to achieve certification, as those challenges affect businesses’ possibilities to achieve the necessary standards required by a certification (Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi 2015; Sucheran and Arulappan 2020). Therefore, countries with a restricted capacity to adapt to tourism’s sustainability requirements may face challenges in attracting tourists and promoting sustainability within their businesses due to their lack of adaptation.

¹⁷ Monica. Tour operator stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 19th May 2023.

In many cases, this situation forces SMEs in the K2C BR, which do not have the financial resources to implement their own proper waste system, to have an unsustainable way of disposing of their waste. However, this thesis' case study proved to have sustainable and innovative ways of dealing with their waste by repurposing it and turning it into furniture, buildings, and jewelry. Marta (pers. comm.) explained the case study's position towards waste *"I know at Shik Shack and at Nourish no one picks up our waste. I think that's where the opportunity to see waste, not as a problem to be solved or buried, but as a resource to be converted into something"*. Commenting on their repurposing waste programs Ana (pers. comm.) mentioned, *"Nourish is doing an impact because they teach children to collect the waste [...] Out of everything that is a waste here, we make some way to make something out of it"*. Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc (2018) and the UNEP and UNWTO (2005) noted that effective political guidance and the involvement of all stakeholders are crucial to achieving sustainability within a tourism destination. In a panorama where the government is absent, Triano (pers. comm.) argued *"NGOs are doing what the government is supposed to be doing"*.

Despite the sustainable practices and efforts that the case study displayed in regard to their waste management, their limitations as a result of the failed government system hinder their possibilities to reach the goals portrayed on a sustainable tourism certification. Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge the necessity of tailoring certifications to improve their inclusivity and effectiveness depending on the characteristics of a tourism destination.

5.2.3 Imbalance between its sustainability principles

The interviews highlighted an unevenness between the importance given to the diverse principles of sustainable tourism. As the literature by Hardy, Beeton, and Pearson (2002) and Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015) revealed, there is an imbalance between the different

sustainable tourism spheres, which affects the definition of sustainable tourism and the certifications' standards. Marta (pers. comm.) reflected on this, mentioning that often the social sphere lacks a presence on the certifications and, on the opposite, the environmental sphere is usually highlighted *"I haven't found a lot of certifications in my perception that are subtle enough to ensure community engagement [...] I think it's a lot easier to look at the greening aspect, it's a lot easier to look at water and energy and waste [...] and then it's almost like there's this giant gap in terms of expertise around real community engagement"*. Marta (pers. comm.) mentioned that, in her opinion, a good certification would be one *"that has more indicators around community and how communities can benefit from tourism"* and that these indicators would need to be *"crafted by an expert who understands dignity and development"*. The case study is focused on community engagement projects and tourism, and therefore it would be important to pursue a certification that can guide them through their projects. Unfortunately, this situation translates into certifications that do not align with the expectations of certain businesses, such as Nourish and Shik Shack.

Additionally, a better linkage between sustainable tourism's socio-cultural and environmental spheres should be pursued within certifications, as these have proved to be strictly related. The interviews in the K2C BR revealed that challenges local communities face, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and absence of resources and infrastructure (James, Justin and Pravin, pers. comm.), lead to negative repercussions on the environmental front with activities like poaching, deforestation, and pollution. Pravin (pers. comm.), one of the representatives of the tribal authorities of Sigagule, commented, *"I never heard about people poaching rhinos; I only know people are putting down these small animals like impalas. Some are for self-consuming, some are selling meat [...] they want money but it's a wrong thing; they want it in the wrong way"*. According to the UNEP and UNWTO (2005), if applied correctly,

tourism can alleviate poverty, particularly in rural areas. Especially in the Global South, certifications that consider destination-specific challenges and prioritize community engagement can uplift and redistribute tourism's benefits within the region, addressing this way the problems that local communities face.

As seen in chapter three of this thesis, the case study aims to empower local communities by introducing them to the tourism industry, providing tools and projects to enhance local villages, and creating employment opportunities. In the tourism industry, engaging and giving a voice to all stakeholders, particularly local communities, is necessary (Song, Zhu, and Fong 2021). This emphasis is especially important where local communities and their welfare are obviously interdependent with the tourism industry and vice versa (Sucheran and Arulappan 2020; Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021), as it is the case in the K2C BR.

5.2.4 Accessibility and resources

Obtaining sustainable tourism certifications is also perceived by the interviewees as a challenge due to the accessibility issues that it possesses and the number of resources that it requires.

Administrative work is contemplated by the interviewees as one of the main problematics related to obtaining a certificate, *“if it's quite a tedious process, if there's a lot of admin involved, our lodgers don't have time to make sure that they fill in this form for this thing [...] it's going to be a heavily administrative compliance”* (Maria, pers. comm.)¹⁸. Additionally, when asked the case study about their possible difficulties in obtaining certifications they pointed out *“the administration is probably heavy on the back end which would be our biggest*

¹⁸ Maria. Tour operator stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Nourish Eco-Village. 19th May 2023.

challenge” (Marta, pers. comm.). Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter (2002) mentioned that this is one way in which SMEs are restricted due to their limited resources, especially when talking about workforce and time. SMEs often have limited personnel, which makes it very difficult for them to have a specific employee dedicated to handling administrative tasks and interpreting and understanding the complex certification process: *“everyone is so busy that it almost needs a whole another person to become a sustainability officer”* (Marta, pers. comm.).

This point is strictly related to the accessibility of businesses, especially SMEs, to the certification world. As Lisa (pers. comm.) mentioned, some of the other key issues related to accessibility are language barriers, lack of technological resources, and knowledge to understand and implement the certification process. Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter (2002) highlight, as the interviewees, that resources and infrastructure to make changes in a business difficult the possibility to obtain certification, especially in the case of SMEs.

Therefore, making certifications more accessible for businesses is of crucial importance, as revealed by the data collected. This was pointed out by Lisa (pers. comm.) *“What’s the point to have only the managers who know about sustainability, but the people on the ground who are supposed doing it don’t understand it”*. This challenge is reflected in the work of Lampreia-Carvalho (2021), where she criticizes that there is a big gap between academia and real implementation. Despite sustainable tourism being constantly discussed in academia, the interviews showed that challenges arise when implementing it, especially when not considering the real necessities and difficulties of the stakeholders involved in the certification process. Therefore, certifications that don’t adapt their jargon and that make their processes difficult to understand by someone who does not have experience in sustainability limit the possibility of obtaining certifications only to corporations that have the resources to have dedicated personnel

in the sustainability area. As Cárdenas, Byrd, and Duffy (2015) mentioned, achieving a correct implementation of sustainable tourism will only be possible once the level of involvement and understanding of the tourism stakeholders in a destination is comprehended.

The interviews revealed that the financial aspect is one of the biggest challenges SMEs face in obtaining certifications. Administrative and operational requirements, certification fees, and obligatory audits are some of the costs highlighted by Buckley (2020) and Sucheran and Arulappan (2020) that hinder SMEs' possibilities. This was reflected by Marta (pers. comm.) *“one of the challenges is that a lot of accreditations are expensive [...] Fair Trade used to have an external auditor come and verify you, which was thousands of euros; this might not seem like a lot for a hotel, but for a community project or backpackers it's a lot of money and it won't necessarily generate returns for us”*.

Unfortunately, businesses such as the case study, which greatly impact its environment, struggle to access certification benefits due to all the beforementioned accessibility and resource issues. Especially when talking about financial availability, it might always be difficult for small NGOs to access certifications due to their funding systems.

5.3 Perceptions of the case study towards sustainable tourism certifications

The challenges presented in the previous points prevent businesses from obtaining the benefits of being a certified company (Bricker 2017; Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc 2018; Lampreia-Carvalho 2021). One of these benefits, perceived by the case study as vital for the continuation of their projects, was access to marketing and visibility through a sustainable tourism certification. Sustainable tourism certifications give access to niche markets that attract tourists or investors searching for sustainable businesses (Blackman and Rivera 2010). Marta (pers.

comm.) reflected on the difficulties of the case study in attracting clients and how the extra income that they could bring would have a positive impact on their environment “*you could spend your coffee in the [Kruger] park but if you just stopped 20 minutes earlier, you could have spent it here and really make a difference, knowing that coffee funded some children’s meals [...] But we haven’t been incredibly successful at getting that turnover and that traction yet*”. The staff from the case study recognized the difficulties they face marketing themselves, particularly when compared to bigger enterprises with the capacity and resources to go through the processes and changes that certifications require. Lisa (pers. comm.) expressed “*Everyone is doing tourism. The problem is if you’re big and you have the money you can be visible. So, every time that someone’s going to look up Kruger, you’re going to pop up*”.

This imbalance leads to a situation where big and powerful enterprises are the only ones that have the chance to be part of the decision-making and applicability of the certifications without necessarily portraying the real interests and necessities of SMEs (Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter 2002), ultimately giving large corporations an advantage over their competitors (Bricker 2017). The necessity of the case study to be more accessible and visible to tourists, in order to keep improving their community project was made clear by Peter (pers. comm.) “*The only thing that needs a bit of more change to improve is getting this place on the map [...] we need to market more*”; and by Paul (pers. comm.) “*Nourish is also working on a very tight budget so they can’t do the marketing that I suppose they’d like to*”.

Moreover, the importance of the case study in its environment was consistently validated by various stakeholders, including representatives of the local authorities of Sigagule and people directly involved in the case study. (Justin, pers. comm.)¹⁹, one of the authorities from Sigagule

¹⁹ Justin. Sigagule Village stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Sigagule. 1st June 2023.

mentioned “*So those guys [Nourish and Shik Shack], they've helped us a lot, especially during the time of COVID-19 [...] they went house to house into Sigagule supplying food, and then even now the children, when they knock off from the school, some of them they get free food there. When they go home, they don't have anything to eat, but with Nourish, at least they've got something to get into their stomach. And this crèche is very much cheaper than all the crèches that we have around here*” This positive attitude towards the case study was reinforced by James (pers. comm.) “*I can tell you that Nourish is a good place [...] it's making a lot of people to be happy. That's why the Nduna [the representative chief of a local community] always say, whatever Nourish needs have it there. When they call me, wherever I am, I'll have to rush there to listen to what they want to say to me, because I know that at the end of the day they're going to give my village something that is going to make me happy*”. Ana (pers. comm.) also mentioned “*So I think Nourish is having an impact to them [the kids going to Nourish] because they help them in their educational ways, in their health ways, in their daily life. Nourish and Shik Shack have an impact mostly on Sigagule village, because most of the tourists that we receive here, they took tours to Sigagule, just to see how Sigagule people live and all the stuff, our traditions. Yeah, I think they make a lot of impact*”.

Despite all those positive impacts, the case study management team recognized their difficulties continuing with their projects due to their lack of visibility “*the impact they are having [the big foundations of the K2C BR] is not necessarily as big as the smaller ones, but they are the most visible*” (Lisa, pers. comm.). Due to the importance and high number of SMEs in the tourism industry portrayed by Fennell and Cooper (2020), it is necessary that they acquire more visibility, especially in the Global South where the positive impacts of tourism can be a big promotor of change as mentioned by the UNEP and UNWTO (2005) and Spenceley (2003).

On another note, the management team of the case study also recognized other benefits of being certified, presenting therefore positive perceptions towards the GDC or other sustainable tourism certifications. Regarding this, Marta (pers. comm.) commented, “*[the GDC] would give us a bit of a roadmap for activities that are otherwise a bit all over the place, it would help us collate all those activities in one place in both, past and also present. I think that would really be beneficial for us*”. This is linked to the idea that certifications can be used as a tool to improve sustainability within a business (Lee, Jan, and Liu 2021).

Additionally, the management team of the case study recognized certifications as a valuable tool that provides companies with an opportunity to demonstrate their sustainability commitment while offering a wide number of benefits, as Blackman and Rivera (2010), Dragomir, Mazilu, and Marinesc (2018) and Buckley (2020) previously highlighted. In this sense, Lisa (pers. comm.) mentioned, “*A certificate is always a nice thing because you can prove what you are doing*”. Marta (pers. comm.) explained her view of the benefits of getting a certification as “*getting recognition for what we are doing, and if that came with marketing kudos or opportunities to engage with other lodges or other guests or have some eyes on us from the international world, then that really brings benefit because it highlights what we’re already doing, but that we’re so busy doing that we don’t tell people about*”.

To finish, the staff from the case study showed interest and positive attitudes towards learning new skills related to tourism and/or business management: “*management skills*” (Belle, pers. comm), “*project management skills*” (Peter, pers. comm.), “*management*” (Daniel, pers. comm) and “*guiding [as a guide tour]*” (Care, pers. comm) were some of their answers. These motivations can be translated into an eagerness to learn about sustainable forms of tourism and to adopt new standards and business practices using the GDC as a sustainability framework.

Therefore, the management of the case study would be happy to adopt GDC standards (even without acquiring the certification). Still, they would need help with all the beforementioned challenges to achieve this.

5.4 Dynamics of collaboration in the K2C BR's tourism industry

Through interviews with diverse stakeholders of the K2C BR's tourism industry, it became apparent that distrust, self-driven attitudes, donor rivalry, and diverse beliefs and objectives between stakeholders hinder the opportunity for stakeholder collaboration in the region. Therefore, collectively progressing towards sustainable tourism is difficult in the K2C BR because stakeholders prioritize individual benefits over the collective good. As shown in the literature by Cárdenas, Byrd, and Duffy (2015), achieving a successful stakeholder collaboration (and therefore the implementation of sustainable tourism) will only be possible once there is a good understanding of the problems between stakeholders and by understanding each stakeholder's needs and involvement in the process of achieving sustainability.

Promoting the K2C BR as a cohesive destination has been challenging due to the rivalries between the provinces of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. The number of tourists and recognition are the main problems between these two provinces that boundaries each other. In this regard, Paul (pers. comm.) mentioned, *"This is our tourism, that's their tourism. It's political power. They [Mpumalanga and Limpopo] compete for numbers"*. Marta (pers. comm.) also commented, *"Mpumalanga wants to have something to brag about and be proud of and win awards for, and sharing takes that away from them. They both want to win, they both want to be recognized for doing good [...] and I think therefore they're both more likely to do that in isolation so they can get the kudos for it"*. Therefore, despite recognizing the existence of the K2C BR, these provinces do not work towards making the land of these provinces a unified

tourism destination, losing the potential to share marketing costs and promote the region as a sustainable biosphere.

5.4.1 Competition, funding, and recognition

Other issues are added to this complicated environment for tourism stakeholders to collaborate.

Firstly, there was a visible competition between stakeholders due to donor funding and recognition. In a region where many NGOs operate, Covid-19 awakened more individualism among stakeholders as it exposed the vulnerability of these companies and how funder influence imposes constraints on NGOs' autonomy and operations. Paula (pers. comm.)²⁰ commented, *“When you work in an organization where you're reliant on donor funding, so you have to almost go where the funds are [...] you align some of your functions to the donor”*. Triano (pers. comm.) added, *“If you are donor-dependent, COVID has taught us big lessons. Many companies didn't do well and there wasn't funding to fund many NGOs [...] Every funder determines how you should operate, how you should do things, and who you should do it to”*.

Within the region, ego-driven attitudes and brand awareness were also identified. As a result, companies prioritize their own brand and promote sustainability only within their organization with the aim of obtaining clients and recognition. Marta (pers. comm.) affirmed that *“with all collaborations, the biggest challenge is ego. I think there's so much awareness around the naming rights and around how many organizations they can work with [...] because then they can talk about it, they can write about it, it brings in a better story for their board of directors. they want to diversify whom they work with, so we don't gain all those opportunities because they have already worked with us. Their donors don't want us to become the only thing they*

²⁰ Paula, K2C NPC stakeholder. Personal communication. Maria Poyato. Hoedspruit. 19th May 2023. 25th May 2023.

do". This makes it very difficult to achieve long-term partnerships and hinders collaborations that could be beneficial, as the K2C BR comprises stakeholders specialized in different projects. The fear of losing clients only contributes more to a silo effect inside the K2C BR's tourism industry, *"we are tourism entities, we're trying to hold on to our guests, and everybody is trying to go, "we're better, and we do brilliant, and we do fabulously", so it's egos"* (Monica, pers. comm.), and also to impede collaboration *"people don't like sending the guests somewhere else or giving too much information about other projects because they're scared that the guests will leave them"* (Lisa, pers. comm.).

5.4.2 Different beliefs and objectives

Another critical aspect hindering collaboration within the K2C BR is the diverse beliefs and objectives between tourism stakeholders: *"we don't believe in the same thing, we believe on different things and different approaches, so to say that we must have a uniform same thing or it's not going to work"* (Triano, pers. comm.). Also, the differences between local communities and tourism enterprises in terms of culture, objectives, and basic necessities are different, making collaboration difficult. On top of this, local communities' political and social structures work differently: *"There's a lot of politics around [the communities]. There's a lot of rules and time and you need to meet one and then you will have to meet the others[in order to make changes in your business when they might impact the community]."* (Lisa, pers. comm.).

As Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes (2019) mentioned, the social sphere of tourism is related to the enhancement of local populations. Therefore, a good understanding of their necessities and how tourism can enhance their development, especially in areas with high poverty ratios such as K2C BR, is elementary. Queiroz (2009) pointed out that tourism can harm local communities, especially in the Global South. As Song, Zhu, and Fong (2021) developed, it is

therefore necessary to engage with local communities to have their support towards tourism, otherwise they might challenge the tourism activity as explained by Triano (pers. comm.) *“if I don't have a good relationship with the community then they can become the biggest threat to the survival [of the company]. They would not allow your community tours, they would not treat tourists well. If you're also living next to a community and then you don't have a relationship with them then things like poaching, things like fence theft, things like human-wildlife conflict and all those other things, waste and all that then you cannot really deal with them when those issues arise so they will become your problem in terms of the success of your operations whether you're a reserve or just a small NGO”*.

While interviewing the authorities of the Sigagule village, the interviewees recognized that resource accessibility (such as water), unemployment, and lack of infrastructure were the most pressing challenges faced by the village and nearby local communities (James, Justin and Pravin, pers. comm.). The investigation revealed that these issues affected the accessibility that local communities had in the tourism industry. These challenges need addressing to uplift local communities, assuring the correct function of the tourism industry and the promotion of sustainability within the region through the GDC. Therefore, when implementing the GDC in the K2C BR, it is necessary that the communities are aware of it and understand what it means. In this sense, when asked Paul (pers. comm.) about the process to obtain the GDC, he mentioned *“the tribal chiefs come in, and you have to take them into consideration in the process”*.

As Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015) pointed out, disagreements among tourism stakeholders can avoid the correct implementation of sustainable tourism certifications. Therefore, diverse beliefs and objectives should be reviewed during the development and implementation of sustainable tourism. Otherwise, and as perceived by the obtained data,

sharing objectives, and reaching a consensus becomes difficult due to the different priorities and strategies of different stakeholders. Marta (pers. comm.) underscored this *“unless we can give tour operators a real motivator to get involved, there’s no reason. They’re not necessarily motivated to stop because why would they? It doesn’t benefit them”*. Consequently, establishing a unified strategy and tourism agenda for the K2C BR becomes difficult.

All these challenges hinder the potential of stakeholders to collaborate, as organizations tend to be reluctant to share information or resources between them. Additionally, this resulted in a fragmented tourism landscape. As a result, individual interests take over collective growth, perpetuating an environment in which competition is over cooperation. In this sense, Marta (pers. comm.) commented *“When it comes to projects and programs, we don’t want to share ideas because they [other NGOs] have clearly got funding to implement them and we haven’t ever been included, invited, or participated”*, to which Monica (pers. comm.) added, *“I do find people are quite proprietary, this is mine, and I don’t want to share [...] there’s definitely a need to drop barriers, and just say guys, we could get a hell of a lot more funding if we all work together, and it shouldn’t be proprietary”*.

To improve this situation and by following the theory and definition of stakeholder created by Freeman (1984), all the K2C BR tourism stakeholders should be identified and recognized. Gaining their trust and analyzing their objectives and problems becomes a necessary strategy to obtain sustainable tourism through implementing the GDC. To accomplish this, a holistic approach should be implemented under the statements of Backman and Munanura (2015), which recognize the importance of acknowledging diverse interests, evaluating how sustainability affects each stakeholder, fostering transparency and accountability, and promoting benefit-sharing and value creation through collaboration and partnerships. As a

result, the K2C BR would be able to achieve sustainable tourism while benefiting local communities and tourism businesses.

5.5 Promotion of sustainable tourism through the GDC in the K2C BR

The information below presents data-driven solutions to promote sustainability within the K2C BR through the promotion of the GDC.

5.5.1 Mitigating the difficulties of SMEs accessing certifications

Communication and understanding were recognized from the interviews as necessary for correctly implementing a certification. In that sense, Marta and Lisa mentioned the importance of their team understanding the changes that certification would bring: *“I’m trying to lead the [sustainable] change for my team, and once they see it and understand it, you can really see that there’s ownership around how they do it, but the change didn’t come from them because it’s foreign”* Marta (pers. comm.). Lisa (pers. comm.) added *“to be certificated, I don’t think that will be difficult. To spread the thinking or the reason of why to the team, I think that will be difficult [...] it is really important that the people on the ground understand”*.

Adding on this, Lisa (pers. comm.) commented, *“you can’t have someone on the ground to do the training. As a certificate provider that will probably be a huge amount of work. You need to create a tool, so that everything is online and someone who doesn’t know anything about sustainability can learn the basics of sustainability. If you need to go through some complex website or app or whatever to be certificated, probably a lot of people will actually drop it. It has to be accessible. It has to be interesting if you want your staff to be part of it”*. This criticism is aligned with the discourse of Lampreia-Carvalho (2021), which focuses on the responsibility of academics to provide practical solutions for implementing sustainable tourism. Marta (pers.

comm.) also commented, *“I think also easy measurement metrics and policies -things that could be easily accessed in terms of resources- would help shortcut our problem around the heavy administrative backload”*. As a solution, having an intermediary body familiar with the GDC and able to offer personalized training, workshops, and consultancy could be one pathway to achieving this necessary understanding.

Given the beforementioned challenges of SMEs in the K2C BR accessing sustainable tourism certifications, having an intermediary body that offers consultancy, workshops, and specific training based on the GDC framework would allow the promotion of sustainability through this certification. As Queiroz (2009) expressed, inadequate management practices in the tourism industry can exacerbate the problems in local communities, especially in the Global South. Therefore, and due to the interconnectedness of local community issues with environmental concerns in the K2C BR, these initiatives should especially enhance local communities. This intermediary body should comprehensively understand the K2C BR and its socio-cultural dynamics. This is crucial, especially for a region where the cultural background is very specific and different from any cultural dynamics that occur in the Global North. This intermediary body would need to adapt the GDC standards' sustainability practices to the reality of the K2C BR and the necessities perceived by SMEs, avoiding, therefore, the challenges presented by Sasidharan, Sirakaya, and Kerstetter (2002) and Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015) regarding the inadaptability of certifications to the Global South requirements.

A unified biosphere destination would help to address the other challenges SMEs face in the K2C BR when obtaining certification. Belonging to a recognized destination could enhance collaboration between stakeholders, at the same time that it strengthens the position of the destination worldwide. This would allow the destination to appear as a unified front and

potentially have more possibilities to access benefits such as funds or marketing potential. *“I have been approached by the mayor of Maruleng to help establish a tourism association [...] to kind of get some sort of formal structure which strengthens our hand when it comes to getting funding for traveling to events and things like that”* (Paul, pers. comm.).

To this, Paul (pers. comm.) added, *“I think that the tourism industry can put pressure on the government to do it [invest in the infrastructure of the tourism destination]. If you want tourism to flourish in this area, enable the tourists to get there, help them”*. Having a unified force can help mitigate the difficulties faced by the inadequate policies and infrastructure of the country, which, as mentioned by Mbaiwa, Magole, and Kgathi (2015) and Sucheran and Arulappan (2020), are necessary to function to achieve higher levels of compliance with certification requirements. Although challenges in the K2C BR’s sustainable tourism industry may persist in the years to come, gradual progress could be achieved by pressuring the government to safeguard the natural resources of the area and provide necessary resources to the tourism industry so they can bring positive impacts to the economy, local communities, and nature of the country, as defended by Capital, Giants, and Vause (2019).

5.5.2 Unifying tourism stakeholders

In a context such as South Africa, where governments are not investing enough in sustainable tourism and the conservation of PAs (Capital, Giants, and Vause 2019), it is imperative that businesses in the K2C BR align with sustainable practices. The previous challenges regarding stakeholder collaboration in the K2C BR shed light on the necessity for collaboration between tourism stakeholders to achieve unity, good adoption of the GDC, and sustainable tourism practices in the region. The interviews revealed different strategies to achieve this.

Marta (pers. comm.) recognized the importance of a united award to unify stakeholders and promote collaboration within the K2C BR *“having something like a regional sustainability award may make us more open to promoting each other and how we each are sustainable, as opposed to just highlighting our individual strengths because we want the tourism”*. The common goal of achieving sustainability under the umbrella of the certification and its benefits can attract tourists and redistribute their expenditures within many businesses that promote sustainability but do not have the capacity to market themselves. The GDC could be utilized as this unifying element. The GDC has the capacity to give international recognition to the K2C BR while marketing it as a sustainable tourism destination. As Bricker (2017) explained, it is elementary to be certified by a trust-worthy certification, such as the GDC, to achieve real recognition and trust from tourists and investors. By being recognized by the GSTC, the GDC's completeness, competitiveness, and trustiness are assured Bricker (2017).

Effective communication and value propositions would allow a better understanding between stakeholders in the K2C BR regarding their aims and objectives and what they can offer to the region. Marta (pers. comm.) mentioned that she would be looking for a sustainable tourism certification that would be *“really clear about who and what they are, what they deliver, how we'll benefit from it and that at the same time also makes it easy to participate and considers community as much as they consider the environment”*. While implementing the GDC it should consider the local communities and not only the natural environment. As the WCED (1987) highlighted, SD is strictly interlinked to the social well-being of local communities; therefore, social indicators should be included in sustainability practices.

Promoting collaboration in the tourism industry with local communities and allowing them to have a voice in the decision-making processes can also improve their sense of ownership in the

tourism industry, therefore leading to long-term commitment and understanding of the necessity of sustainable practices in the region for the correct development of the tourism industry. Song, Zhu, and Fong (2021) also emphasized the importance of granting equal weight to the necessities and opinions of all stakeholders in the tourism industry. However, it is important to remember Hunter (1995) arguments, which point out that stakeholders in the tourism industry may vary in their level of engagement with the principles of sustainable tourism based on their perception of whether these principles should apply to them or not.

Regarding aligning the goals of different stakeholders Marta (pers. comm.) stated, *“so I think it's about, again, cleverly propositioning things that are mutual wins”*. Paul (pers. comm.) reflected on the necessity to achieve sustainable tourism to obtain more tourists in the region, and how this could be a shared benefit for all stakeholders *“your tourists don't really want to see dirty rivers and plastics hanging in trees and things like that. So then your hotel operator, lodge operator, has got to take that into consideration”*. Paula (pers. comm.) added to this reflection, *“it's about planning towards the future of how are we going to sustain the biosphere better for tourism purposes because tourism obviously brings in quite a bit of the economic benefits for us, so looking at projects specifically that can promote that”*.

As a solution, Paul (pers. comm.) commented, *“I think if we've got the Green Destinations Certification we can make a big deal out of it as it'll allow people to say, well, that's something that's already been recognized and they might want to get involved and start thinking about those things”*. Due to the potential benefits that the GDC might bring to the K2C BR's tourism industry, this certification has the possibility to attract tourism-related organizations and local communities to collaborate in the pursuit of the shared objective of achieving sustainability through the GDC. Nevertheless, recognizing and fitting each stakeholder's goals to the

possibilities of the GDC is of absolute importance. Cárdenas, Byrd, and Duffy (2015) mentioned that stakeholder collaboration would only be achieved after raising awareness between stakeholders and understanding their level of involvement. Therefore, clarity and honesty in the communication process about what the GDC can bring to the region, and understanding how these stakeholders' goals can be aligned with the GDC, have the potential to benefit and unify the K2C BR's tourism stakeholders.

Additionally, unifying the destination's stakeholders is, therefore, strictly linked with the opportunity for SMEs to overcome the challenges of obtaining certification and the opportunity to use the GDC to promote sustainability within the K2C BR. To unify the destination and to promote collaboration between stakeholders, the need for a recognized intermediary organization to create and promote the GDC has been identified, *"I think certainly the opportunity for even a forum with focus on sustainable tourism would be a great way for us to start talking about it, but maybe talking about accreditation"* (Marta, pers. comm.).

The interviews showed the K2C NPC as a recognized and respected organization, making it the ideal intermediary to undertake all these changes. Triano's (per. comm.) words when defining the K2C NPC were, *"it is the bridge between natural resources and people"*. Marta (pers. comm.) affirmed that the K2C NPC *"played the role of this empty vehicle that enabled market access and opportunity and connected all of us in the landscape. [...] K2C is a great vehicle. I think it has huge potential to pull together a lot of the role players and stakeholders in this area"*. The K2C NPC is the businesses obtaining the GDC, and it will therefore be familiar with the standards and challenges that the GDC comprises. They also represent the bridge between local communities and the environment, as expressed by Triano, and have connections to politicians and tourism stakeholders in the region.

At the same time, the K2C NPC's team has a very good understanding of the socio-cultural, environmental, and economic dynamics of the region, as mentioned by Lisa (pers. comm.), *"K2C NPC should also make sure that the community is aware of what's happening. That's kind of what they're doing already. They have quite some understanding about the community"*. Marta (pers. comm.) continued *"I think the K2C should have been like a wire car, you know, have rules around governance in the K2C, have guidelines, have forums where people that are in the same roles and in the same types of fieldwork can talk together. [...] K2C NPC was an umbrella organization that has the capacity or focus to connect the rest of the stakeholders in the landscape, hold a space for forums and networking opportunities, see opportunities and not have ulterior motives and apply for the funding only as an enabling body"*.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

This last chapter of the thesis presents the conclusions and recommendations of the study. To achieve this, I analyzed different literature on sustainable tourism, travel certifications, and the stakeholder theory applied to tourism. Moreover, the obtained knowledge, combined with the findings of the on-site research, allowed me to understand and reflect on the results and discussion chapter on how the GDC could promote sustainability within the K2C BR.

Aligning with the goals and objectives of this thesis and in light of the findings presented, several conclusions and recommendations have emerged. The findings provide valuable insights for decision-makers within the tourism industry regarding promoting sustainable tourism in the Global South through sustainable tourism certifications. These insights are especially dedicated to tourism in conflicting areas nearby PAs. Nevertheless, caution needs to be exercised when implementing it in other regions different from the K2C BR, as an analysis of the various issues and characteristics of the new area needs to be considered. To continue promoting sustainable tourism in the Global South, further research is recommended regarding the application of the recommendations below in some other locations with similar characteristics.

My on-site research for this thesis in the K2C BR revealed the interconnectedness of biodiversity conservation and SD for local communities. However, despite positive attitudes towards tourism, many challenges hinder these communities' ability to access and benefit from tourism opportunities. These include limited accessibility due to inadequate infrastructure or lack of resources and unemployment.

As the tourism industry depends on the local communities and environment of the tourism destination, promoting sustainable tourism and its three spheres (environmental, socio-cultural, and economic) emerges as a crucial strategy to unlock the potential of the tourism industry in promoting positive changes in the K2C BR. Therefore, collaboration between local communities and tourism businesses plays a vital role in alleviating poverty and maximizing the positive effects of tourism. SMEs, such as those in the case study, play a crucial role in the K2C BR, connecting local communities to tourism's benefits. Still, they have difficulties acquiring tourists in the region, as luxurious high-end lodges dominate the market.

Sustainable tourism certifications are considered in the tourism industry as valuable tools for promoting sustainability. However, the literature review and the findings of the on-site research show that SMEs, particularly in the Global South, face various challenges in accessing, achieving, and implementing them. These challenges are related to various factors, such as the different understandings of the concept and application of sustainability in the Global North and South, the limited capacity of SMEs to obtain specialized personnel to implement the certification, heavy administrative tasks, the lack of specific resources needed to obtain the certification (such as specific technology), and the costs and fees associated with obtaining and maintaining these certifications. Additionally, the limited representation of the interests and challenges that SMEs in the Global South face when developing and implementing sustainable tourism certifications also make it difficult for these businesses to reach the standards required in the certifications. This is visible in countries like South Africa, where the lack of government-provided infrastructure and inadequate policies remain.

Therefore, the GDC should be used in two different ways to overcome all the above-mentioned challenges and promote sustainable tourism within the K2C BR. Firstly, the GDC can represent

an advantage for SMEs in the K2C BR, as they would gain access to the GDC's benefits without facing the challenges associated with obtaining certification. Secondly, the GDC can be used to unify the K2C BR's tourism stakeholders, promoting collaboration and common goals between them in the region.

Based on the research findings, I identified the significant potential for the K2C NPC to utilize the GDC to drive sustainable tourism in the K2C BR. If obtained by the K2C NPC, the GDC, being an internationally recognized sustainable tourism certification, would potentially have a transformative impact on the entire K2C BR tourism sector, including SMEs and other stakeholders. Following the stakeholder theory, this thesis recognizes the importance of collaboration and engagement among all tourism stakeholders, including local communities, as essential elements in achieving SDGs and sustainable tourism goals. Given the challenges revealed in the research regarding stakeholder collaboration due to competition for recognition and limited funding, using the K2C NPC as an intermediary is crucial to achieving the GDC's full potential in the K2C BR. Therefore, based on the findings of this research, several recommendations emerged:

- The K2C NPC should allocate additional resources to its sustainable tourism projects, reinforcing its commitment to promoting sustainable practices in the region. By prioritizing these initiatives, the K2C NPC can help to address the multifaceted challenges facing the K2C BR and foster stakeholder collaboration.
- In its intermediary role, the K2C NPC should actively support SMEs in their sustainability, promotion, and visibility efforts while promoting collaboration among tourism stakeholders. This support can manifest in various ways, such as creating content and marketing strategies highlighting the K2C BR and its commitment to

sustainability while recognizing SMEs aligning with sustainability practices. In addition, the K2C NPC should organize seminars and workshops focused on sustainable tourism adapted to the necessities of the K2C area, providing SMEs with valuable mentoring and knowledge-sharing opportunities. These platforms can empower SMEs to assess, monitor and improve their sustainability practices within their businesses in line with the principles of the K2C framework. Private guidance and consultation can also be provided to SMEs, offering tailored support to address specific sustainability challenges. By helping SMEs improve their sustainability practices, they can access benefits provided by the GDC without needing to overcome the barriers of obtaining certification.

This thesis has also recognized potential risks and challenges that could arise in the process of implementing the recommendations, such as funding constraints and distrust among stakeholders; therefore, the GDC implementation should be approached gradually and thoughtfully, making sure that consultation with tourism stakeholders and open communication with them is achieved. Building trust and demonstrating the benefits of sustainable tourism practices can help encourage greater participation and engagement in the certification process. Once this is achieved, it might be easier to access funds to continue implementing these recommendations, as the impact of the project and the number of tourism stakeholders joining this project would be higher.

In conclusion, this thesis revealed insights regarding promoting sustainable tourism through the GDC in the K2C BR. The research highlights the challenges SMEs face in obtaining sustainable tourism certifications while underscoring their crucial role in engaging with local communities and promoting their development, ultimately contributing to the overall sustainability and well-being of the K2C BR. Additionally, the findings emphasize the impact of the K2C NPC

promoting sustainable tourism practices within the region through the adoption and promotion of the GDC once this is adapted to the specific necessities of the area. However, all tourism stakeholders' active engagement and participation are necessary to achieve sustainable outcomes. Through the concerted efforts of the K2C NPC, SMEs, local communities, and other stakeholders, the K2C BR can see the full potential of the GDC in promoting sustainable tourism and creating a thriving, inclusive, and environmentally friendly tourism destination.

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9 Appendix

Green Destinations Standard V2 (2021)

Type:	
C15:	Primary core criteria (15)
C30:	Secondary core criteria (+15)
O:	Optional criterion
N/A:	'Not Applicable' possible

Type	#	Name	Description
Theme 1: Destination Management			
Commitment & Organisation			
C15	1.1	Sustainable destination coordinator	A person has been assigned the responsibility and authority for the adequate implementation and reporting of sustainable destination management.
	1.2	Management structure	An adequately funded organisation or management structure is responsible for coordinating and promoting sustainable tourism development and management. It works with a range of bodies in delivering destination management and follows principles of sustainability and transparency in its operations and transactions.
	1.3	Trained coordinator/team	The person or team responsible for destination development and management is sufficiently staffed and adequately trained on and/or experienced in sustainability issues.
	1.4	Stakeholder involvement	The destination management organisation or structure involves civil society and the private and public sector in sustainable destination management.
Planning & Development			
C15	1.5	Inventory of destination assets	The destination has an inventory of its tourism-oriented assets and attractions including natural and cultural sites.
	1.6	Tourism Impact Assessment	The destination has conducted a Tourism Impact Assessment analysing tourism impacts and risks on the natural, cultural and socio-economic environment and on its destination assets.
C15	1.7	Destination Management Policy or Strategy	The destination has an up-to-date, publicly available, multi-year destination management policy or strategy addressing environmental, social, cultural and economic issues. The policy is suited to the scale of the destination, developed with stakeholder engagement and is based on sustainability principles. It relates to and influences wider sustainable development policy and action in the destination.
	1.8	Tourism Action Plan	The destination has developed with stakeholder engagement and is implementing a publicly available multi-year tourism action plan. The plan is suited to the scale of the destination, based on sustainability principles and includes targets, actions, measures, responsibilities and time planning.
	1.9	Transparency and enforcement	The development of destination planning is conducted in close inclusive consultation with stakeholders and the public. Planning regulations and decisions are publicly communicated and enforced.
Visitor Management			
	1.10	Visitor monitoring	The characteristics, volume, activities, and preferences of visitors are monitored and publicly reported.
	1.11	Visitor satisfaction	Visitor satisfaction with the quality and sustainability of the destination experience is being monitored and publicly reported on. If necessary, action is taken in response.

C30	1.12	Managing visitor pressure	The destination has a system for visitor management which is regularly reviewed. Action is taken to manage the volume and activities of visitors, and to reduce or increase them as necessary at certain times and in certain locations, taking into account and balancing the needs of the local economy, community, cultures and environment.
	1.13	Visitor management for destination assets	Adequate management of visitors and visitor flows is applied to optimise tourism impacts within and around the natural and socio-cultural assets of the destination. The management system refers to the characteristics, capacity and sensitivity of these assets.
C30	1.14	Visitor behaviour at sensitive sites	Guidelines for appropriate visitor behaviour at cultural events and at cultural and natural sensitive sites are developed and made available to visitors, tour guides and tour operators before and at the time of the visit.
Monitoring & Reporting			
	1.15	Sustainability Indicators & Monitoring	Relevant destination sustainability indicators including environmental, economic, social and cultural issues and impacts from tourism are regularly monitored and responded to. The monitoring system is periodically reviewed.
	1.16	Review and evaluation	The objectives and targets of the policy and action plan and the outcome of their implementation are regularly monitored and evaluated
	1.17	Public Sustainability Reporting	The key sustainability results are reported to the public at least every two years and are available on the destination's public website.
O	1.18	Complaints against compliance	The destination has a system to deal with internal and external complaints against compliance with the Green Destinations criteria. Complaints are recorded and effective corrective actions are taken to prevent recurrence.
Legal & Ethical Compliance			
O	1.19	Ethical code & corruption	The destination has in place and is implementing an ethical code, including guidelines against corruption and bribery and for whistle-blower protection, for its management and other staff.
O	1.20	Fair competition and procurement	The destination complies with all relevant laws for public procurement and rewards contracts on the basis of quality, price and sustainability aspects.
Theme 2: Nature & Scenery			
Nature & Conservation			
C30	2.1	Nature conservation	The destination has a system to conserve ecosystems, habitats and species.
C15	2.2	Tourism impacts on nature	The destination measures and monitors the impact of tourism on the natural environment. Identified impacts of tourism on nature are adequately responded to.
O	2.3	Natural resource protection	The protection of natural resources is adequately organised and enforced, and unsustainable use is restricted.
	2.4	Invasive alien species	The introduction and spread of invasive alien species is adequately addressed and prevented.
C15 O	2.5	Landscape & Scenery	Natural and rural scenic views are protected; landscape degradation and urban sprawl into scenic landscapes is effectively avoided.
Nature & Animal Experience			
	2.6	Wildlife protection	Conservation of species (animals, plants and all living organisms) is effectively regulated in order to comply with local and national regulations and international conventions and agreements. This includes harvesting, capture, trade, display and sale of wildlife species and their products, ensuring their protection and sustainable management.

N/A	2.7	Nature & wildlife interactions	The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards for wildlife interactions. Interactions with free roaming wildlife, taking into account cumulative impacts, are non-invasive and responsibly managed to avoid adverse impacts on the animals concerned and on the viability and behaviour of populations in the wild.
C30	2.8	Captive animal welfare	The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards for animal welfare. Wild animals can only be bred or held captive, by authorized and suitably equipped persons and for properly regulated activities. The housing, care and handling of all wild and domestic animals meets the highest standards of animal welfare and is effectively controlled
Theme 3: Environment & Climate			
Land Use & Pollution			
C30	3.1	Noise	Noise is adequately regulated and minimised; tourism enterprises and visitors are encouraged to minimise noise.
C30	3.2	Light pollution	Impacts of light pollution to wildlife, resident and visitor experience are adequately addressed. Tourism enterprises and visitors are encouraged to minimise light pollution'.
	3.3	Land use & planning	The destination has spatial planning guidelines, regulations and/or policies that require an environmental, economic and socio-cultural impact assessment and that control the location and nature of development and optimise the impacts during planning, design, construction and demolition.
Water Management			
	3.4	Water sourcing	The destination's water resources and usage are adequately managed and monitored. Water risks are assessed and documented. If water risks exist, water stewardship goals are identified and actively pursued with enterprises, to ensure that water use by tourism does not jeopardise the water needs of local communities and ecosystems.
O	3.5	Water consumption reduction	Quantitative goals are set to reduce water consumption within the destination and a strategy with water saving measures is implemented.
	3.6	Water quality monitoring & response	Water quality for drinking, recreation and ecological purposes is adequately monitored, the results are publicly available and there is a system to respond in a timely manner to water quality issues.
C30	3.7	Wastewater treatment	The destination has clear and enforced guidelines in place for the siting, maintenance and testing of discharge from septic tanks and wastewater treatment systems. The destination ensures that wastes are properly treated and reused or released safely without adverse impacts on the local population and the environment.
Waste & Recycling			
C15	3.8	Solid waste reduction	Quantitative goals to reduce solid waste are set, and adequately monitored and reported on. Special attention is paid to eliminating or reducing plastic and single-use items and food waste.
C30	3.9	Waste separation & recycling	Quantitative goals to separate waste are set, and adequately monitored and reported on. All waste including industrial waste is adequately separated and treated in order to divert it from landfills, with provision of a multi-stream collection and recycling system which effectively separates waste by type.
	3.10	Waste disposal	Any residual solid waste that is not reused or recycled is disposed of safely and sustainably.
O	3.11	Littering	Measures are taken to address littering, including by visitors, especially in popular public places and areas.

Energy, Sustainable Mobility & Climate Change			
	3.12	GHG emissions and climate change mitigation	The destination sets and monitors targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from public and tourism sectors and implements and reports on mitigation policies and actions to meet these targets.
C15	3.13	Reducing transport emissions from travel	The destination has targets to reduce transport emissions from travel to and within the destination and monitors these in order to reduce the contribution of tourism to air pollution and climate change.
	3.14	Low-impact mobility	The destination has a low-impact mobility strategy to minimise traffic related air pollution and congestion in touristic zones. Walking and cycling, as well as the use of sustainable, low-emissions vehicles, is facilitated and encouraged.
N/A	3.15	Public transportation	Public transportation is adequately organised and a clear effort is made to transition towards sustainable, low-emission vehicles. Use of public transport is encouraged.
C15	3.16	Reducing energy consumption	Quantitative goals are set and measures are taken to reduce energy consumption and improve efficiency in its use in the destination.
C30	3.17	Renewable Energy	Quantitative goals are set and adequate measures are taken to increase the use of renewable energy and to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Incentives exist to encourage renewable energy technologies.
O	3.18	Effective carbon compensation	The destination promotes and takes appropriate measures aimed at an effective carbon compensation for travel to, from and within the destination.
Climate Change Adaptation			
C30	3.19	Responding to climate risks	The destination identifies risk and opportunities associated with the climate change. Climate change adaptation strategies are pursued for the siting, design, development and management of tourism facilities in order to enhance the resilience of the destination.
	3.20	Climate change information	Residents, tourism enterprises and visitors are informed about any predicted climate change, associated risks and future conditions.
Theme 4: Culture & Tradition			
Cultural Heritage			
C15 N/A	4.1	Tangible cultural heritage	The destinations has a policy and system to evaluate, rehabilitate, and conserve cultural assets such as sites and built heritage, typical or traditional architecture, town design, cultural landscapes and archaeological sites
C30	4.2	Managing tourism impacts on culture	Tourism that appreciates cultural sites, built heritage, culturally important landscapes, and land-use is carefully managed to avoid negative impacts. Any impacts such as damage, disruption of local culture, and degradation are adequately monitored and addressed.
N/A	4.3	Protecting cultural artefacts	Sale, trade, display or gifting of historical and archaeological artefacts is adequately regulated and enforced. The laws are publicly communicated, including to tourism enterprises and visitors.
People & Tradition			
N/A C15	4.4	Intangible heritage	Intangible cultural heritage, including local traditions, arts, music, language, gastronomy and other aspects of local identity and distinctiveness, is adequately protected and celebrated.
	4.5	Respecting authenticity	Tourism is sensitive and respectful of the living culture and traditions and not interfering with its practice. The practice of tourism in observing, replicating, and interpreting the living culture and traditions is genuine and authentic while involving and benefiting local communities.

N/A	4.6	Indigenous intellectual property	Intellectual property rights of indigenous people, locals and communities are effectively protected by law and policies.
Theme 5: Social Well-Being			
Human Respect			
	5.1	Resettlement	Resettlement of residents is only possible with free prior and informed consent and fair and just compensation.
	5.2	Property and user rights to resources	Property and water rights and other user and access rights to key resources are adequately registered and protected and are compliant with indigenous and communal rights. Regulations ensure public consultation and are enforced.
	5.3	Traditional access rights	The destination monitors, protects, and when necessary rehabilitates or restores local community access to natural and cultural sites.
C30	5.4	Human rights	The destination upholds international standards on human rights. It has laws, practices and an established code of conduct to prevent and report on human trafficking, modern slavery and commercial, sexual, or any other form of exploitation, discrimination and harassment of or against anyone, particularly children, adolescents, elderly, disabled, women, LGBT+ and other minorities.
	5.5	Public communication of human rights laws	The laws and established practices for the protection of people against exploitation and harassment as described in criterion 5.4 'Human rights' are enforced and publicly communicated.
	5.6	Accessibility	Where practical, sites, facilities and services, including those of natural and cultural importance, are accessible to all, including individuals with disabilities, specific access requirements or other special needs. Where sites and facilities are not immediately accessible, access is afforded through the design and implementation of solutions, whilst taking into account the integrity of the site. Information is made available on the accessibility of sites, facilities and services.
Community Participation			
C15	5.7	Community involvement in planning	The destination enables and promotes public participation in sustainable destination planning and management.
	5.8	Resident engagement and feedback	The destination has a system to enhance local understanding of sustainable tourism opportunities and challenges and to build the capacity of communities to respond.
	5.9	Stakeholder contributions	Enterprises, visitors and the public are offered opportunities to contribute to community and sustainability initiatives in a responsible manner, as a volunteer, in cash or in kind.
C30	5.10	Inhabitant satisfaction	The aspirations, concerns and satisfaction of local communities with tourism sustainability and destination management is monitored regularly; results are publicly reported; and action is taken in response to them.
Local Economy			
	5.11	Monitoring economic impacts	The direct and indirect contribution of tourism to the destination's economy is monitored and publicly reported, and should include appropriate data, such as levels of visitor volume, visitor expenditure, employment and investment data, and evidence on the distribution of economic benefits.
C15	5.12	Supporting local entrepreneurs	The destination encourages the retention of tourism spending in the local economy through supporting local enterprises, supply chains and sustainable investment.

C15	5.13	Promoting local products and services	The destination promotes the development and purchase of local sustainable products that reflect the area's nature and culture and that are based on fair trade principles. . These may include food and beverages, crafts, performance arts, agricultural products, etc.
	5.14	Promoting local tourism employment	The destination encourages and supports career opportunities and training in tourism.
Socio-Economic Impact			
	5.15	Avoiding Overtourism	The social impact of visitors to the local community and other visitors is appropriately monitored.
C30 N/A	5.16	Property exploitation	The destination has planning guidelines, regulations and/or policies to optimise the socio-economic effects of real estate development and operations, including property rental and concessions for tourism purposes.
Health & Safety			
C15	5.17	Health & safety	Crime, safety, and health hazards for visitors and residents are prevented, responded to, adequately monitored, and publicly reported
	5.18	Risk and crisis management	The destination has a risk reduction, crisis management and emergency response plan that is appropriate to the destination. Key elements are communicated to residents, visitors and enterprises. Procedures and resources are established for implementing the plan and it is regularly updated.
Theme 6: Business & Communication			
Business Involvement			
C15	6.1	Promoting sustainability among enterprises	The destination regularly informs tourism-related enterprises about sustainability issues and encourages and supports them in making their operations more sustainable.
C30	6.2	Sustainability standards	The destination promotes the adoption of sustainability standards, promoting the application of GSTC-Industry Recognized standards and GSTC-I Accredited certification schemes for tourism enterprises, where available.
	6.3	Publication of certified enterprises	A list of sustainability certified tourism enterprises or tourism products is maintained and publicly available.
	6.4	Water consumption (enterprises)	Enterprises are encouraged to measure, monitor, manage and publicly report on water usage.
	6.5	Solid waste (enterprises)	Enterprises are encouraged to avoid, reduce, reuse, and recycle solid waste, including food waste. Action is taken to eliminate or reduce single-use items, especially plastics. Any residual solid waste that is not reused or recycled is disposed of safely and sustainably.
	6.6	Energy consumption (enterprises)	Enterprises are encouraged to measure, monitor, reduce, and publicly report energy consumption.
	6.7	Greenhouse gas emissions (enterprises)	Enterprises are encouraged to measure, monitor, and minimise and report greenhouse gas emissions from all aspects of their operation (including from suppliers and service providers). Effective compensation of any remaining emissions is encouraged.
	6.8	Equal and fair employment (enterprises)	The destination's tourism enterprises commit to providing equality of opportunity for local employment, training and advancement, a safe and secure working environment, and living wages for all.

O	6.9	Activity providers code of practice	Activity providers and tour guides have to adhere to a relevant code of practice for responsible and sustainable excursions, in order to optimise the impact of the tour.
Information & Marketing			
N/A	6.10	Respectful & Accurate promotion	Destination promotion, marketing messages, visitor information material, and other communication reflects the destination's values and approach to sustainability. They are accurate in describing products, services and sustainability claims; authentic and treat local communities and natural and cultural assets with respect.
	6.11	Sustainability information to visitors	Visitors are adequately informed about relevant sustainability issues in the destination, including natural, environmental, cultural and social issues, and are encouraged to play a role in addressing them.
N/A	6.12	Interpretive information	Interpretive material is provided at the most important natural and cultural sites which informs visitors of the significance of the sites. The information is accurate, respectful to different cultural values, developed with host community collaboration, and clearly communicated in most relevant languages, including local languages.

Figure 11: Complete list of the GDC Standard, V2. Green Destinations (2021, 5-11).