

# Recreators' Perception of Participation and Satisfaction Towards Nature-based activities Around The Lake St Lucia Estuary, South Africa

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## Abstract

South Africa is presently witnessing an increase in participation in nature and water-based recreation activities; also there has been an influx of both domestic and international tourists to the coastal recreation areas especially during festive seasons. One of the coastal areas that is affected by the pressure of increased participation in outdoor recreation activities is the Lake St Lucia Estuary, located within the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. An assessment of these perceptions would introduce some important insights into the nature of tourist-recreator participation, over-crowding, recreator conflicts and inter-personal behaviour. Increased frequencies in participation combined with significant numbers of people crowding the nature and water-based recreation activities would result in greater pressure and more impacts on the natural environment. The impact of overcrowding was examined by finding out the perceptions of recreators and tourists towards recreation resources and people around the Lake St Lucia Estuary. Questionnaires were administered to respondents, using a five-point Likert scale, to assess respondents' perceptions towards various environmental elements, such as overcrowding, conflicts and participation satisfaction.

Results revealed that some tourists and recreators at Lake St Lucia Estuary prefer less crowded water-based resource destinations. Perceptions of recreators and tourists were also found to be gender and race biased. Local residents however are well disposed to overcrowding since they are used to it, and believe that crowds offer them more economic benefits. It is therefore suggested that the principle of carrying capacity be viewed differently, particularly when it influences recreators' participation in nature and water-based outdoor recreation activities.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Recreation, Outdoor Recreation, Water-based Activities recreation, Tourist Satisfaction, Perception.

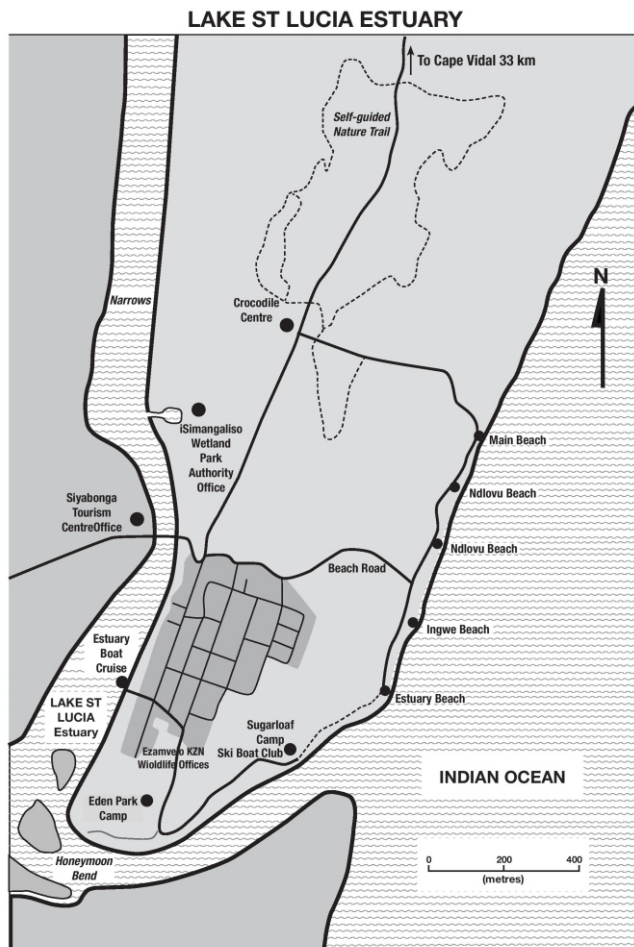
## 1. Introduction

St Lucia as an outdoor recreation town in South Africa is presently facing increasing ecological impacts which stem from an ever-increasing participation in nature and water-based recreation activities by local re-creators, domestic as well as international tourists. By their nature, recreation activities disturb the natural environment and they can potentially affect soil, water, air, flora, and fauna. The degradation of these resources therefore, reduces both present and future benefits that society can derive from these assets. To address the problem of the increasing impacts of recreation activities, the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT, 1999, 2006) has expressed an urgent need for research that will provide more information regarding the impacts of recreation and tourism activities on coastal fauna and flora and determine effective and realistic management strategies which will take into account the needs and expectations of all categories of resource users (Shackleton, 1993).

The main aim of this study is to assess the perceptions of recreators, tourists and local communities towards the participation of these groups in nature-based activities around the Lake St Lucia Estuary. The place of emphasis is where the Estuary curves around the

Town of St Lucia. As shown in Figure 1 and 2, the area of research is limited to Lake St Lucia Estuary and the local beach. Isimangaliso Wetland Park, which encompasses the entire St Lucia Lake and features, is one of the eight world heritage sites in South Africa which has become one of the prominent tourist attractions on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal (Nzama, 2008). St Lucia is situated between 27° 53 S and 28° 23 S within the iSimangaliso Wetland Park which is the third largest nature reserve in South Africa [[http://. \(2008\)](http://.)]. St Lucia which is the central feature of iSimangaliso Wetland Park is a 38,682 hectares natural lake with a surface area of 387 km<sup>2</sup>. It is connected to the largest estuary in Africa and is linked by 20 km of tidal channel to the sea. St Lucia Lake and Estuary gets 80 percent of its water from Nyalazi and Hluhluwe Rivers and from several small rivers. The Lake and Estuary offers a wide variety of water-based and water-related recreation activities, both at the lake and in the beach; with varieties of accommodation facilities for the tourists. Approximately two million tourists who mainly participate in water-based recreation activities visit the iSimangaliso Wetlands each year (EKZNW, 2004; **Isimangaliso-WP Authority; 2009**).

**Figure 1: Location of Lake St Lucia Estuary**



## **2. Lake St. Lucia Estuary Outdoor Recreation Features**

The Isimangaliso Wetland Park is South Africa's first World Heritage Site and received its status in July 1999. It is known for its unique ecological landscape, natural and scenic beauty, exceptional biodiversity and a large number of threatened and endangered species. The St Lucia Estuary is a leading land feature which attracts many recreators and tourists to its natural attractions, such as grasslands, forests, wetlands, mangroves, dune forests, massive stretches of white beaches and off-shore coral reefs. The recreation and tourism activities found in the study area include fishing, swimming at the beach, boating in the sea and estuary which is infested with crocodiles and hippos, canoeing, game watching, snokerling, scuba diving or watch migrating whales and dolphins. The leatherback and loggerhead turtles nestling along the beach in summer add to the natural attractions.

It is important to note that within the study area, water-based recreation features, like all other outdoor recreation activities occur in the natural environment. As such, it is the nature of this environment that can influence the rate of tourist-recreators' participation in outdoor recreation activities, their satisfaction with the experiences as well as put up with over-crowding, recreator conflicts and inter-personal behaviour among the tourist-recreators. It is therefore the physical environment, which seen to influence or to a lesser extent, determine the recreation behaviour of the tourist-recreators to the nature-based environment around the Lake St Lucia Estuary. This paper therefore, attempts at unravelling the tourist-recreators' behaviour patterns and local communities towards outdoor recreation or nature-based leisure activities around the Lake St Lucia Estuary. For purposes of this paper recreation behaviour is seen as a fusion of leisure, play and activities taking place in a particular environment (Kraus, 2001). Similarly, Torkildsen (2005:52) sees recreation as any activity pursued during leisure that is free and pleasurable with its own immediate appeal.

### **2.1 The Spatial Layout of Lake St Lucia Estuary**

In order to understand the influences of the environment on outdoor recreation behaviour, it is important to sketch the spatial layout of the Lake St Lucia Estuary. Furthermore, the role of this environment in facilitating the rate at which tourist-recreators participate, it is necessary to give a closer look at the nature of the resource. As shown in Figure 1, the highpoint of activity is around the Lake St Lucia Estuary which goes round the Town of St Lucia. The entire town is located on old weathered sand-dunes covered with mangroves or massive vegetation dunes on the eastern side of the town. Beyond the sand-dunes lies the beach environment which is favoured attraction for many tourists and recreators. The main well-kept beaches include the following: Estuary beach, Ingwe beach, Ndlovu beach, and Main beach, which is approximately 1200 metres on the eastern side of the Town of St Lucia. These sand-dunes rose to enclose a huge body of water, which is now is regarded as the Lake St Lucia and Estuary. The dunes have significant deposits of heavy minerals over which the government had to introduce legislation to block mineral mining companies from exploiting. Government intervened and announced that St Lucia should be protected because, among other reasons, it has a great tourism potential.

### **2.2 Recreation Facilities and Activities at the Lake St Lucia Estuary**

The area around the Lake St Lucia Estuary which bends around the Town of St

Lucia is the most crowded area of outdoor recreation. The study area offers a wide variety of nature-based and water-related recreation activities both along the estuary and the beach. The Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife and the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority offer a variety of facilities and activities which allow tourists and recreators to enhance their recreation experiences. These organisations also make every effort to remind recreators about their responsibility in protecting the environment.

The Lake St Lucia Estuary with a variety of attractions has a variety of accommodation facilities for tourists and recreators. The Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife is in charge of these facilities and all reservations are made through the its head office in Pietermaritzburg. At the Estuary the St Lucia town provides holiday flats and apartments, hotels, cottages all of which are owned by private entrepreneurs and individuals who are mainly expanding their participation in ecotourism in the region and also for making tourist-recreators comfortable. Three camp grounds, namely Sugerloaf, Iphiva, and Eden Park are also under the control of the Ezemvelo Wildlife (EKZNW, 2009; Taylor, 1995; NPB 1996).

The main objective of this paper is to determine the recreators' and tourists' perceptions towards participation and satisfaction with the use resources by of other participants in the natural recreation environment around the Lake St Lucia Estuary. The study also specifically analyses how recreators and tourists feel about the presence of too many people at the resource, the conflicts that emerge among tourists related to recreation activities and the behaviour of tourists and recreators towards each other.

### **3. Literature Review**

George (2008) has noted that tourism overlaps with leisure and recreation. He stated that tourism, recreation and leisure are closely linked, leading to the supposition that tourism as an activity embraces leisure and recreation. If one accepts that leisure is all the time we have left after working, sleeping and attending to all our needs, and that recreation is the activity we engage in during our leisure time, then all tourism activities must be recreation based (Spencer & Zembani, 2011). Leisure, recreation and therefore tourism are so important that as Bennett (2000) emphasises, there are businesses that would not survive without these industries. Spencer & Zembani (2011) further emphasised that it is widely accepted that these free time activities are set to be a major economic driver of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the sector raised employment opportunities few can afford to ignore; and that most importantly tourism is increasingly becoming an industry that is making significant contribution to world economies and offering outlets for leisure and recreation.

According to Jenkins & Pigram (2003), nature-based activities may be defined as all forms of leisure that rely on the natural environment and includes many activities ranging from sitting under the tree to hiking in the wilderness. Nature-based tourism is frequently used synonymously with alternative tourism programmes, ecotourism, green travel, responsible travel, soft-tourism, cultural tourism and adventure travel, and it is a rapid growth sector compared to general tourism (Lee, 2009). Nature-based tourism is giving rise to economic benefits from the conservation of natural resources and directly assisting both local communities and nations in achieving sustainable environmental development; and such nature-based tourism has become popular worldwide (Mehmetoglu, 2007).

Millions of people travel to see and experience natural environments each year and the scale of such movements leads inevitably to some disturbance or damage to visited sites (Marzuki, *et al.*, 2011). They further explained that while such damage is attributable directly or indirectly to tourists and their activities, it is often unclear whether their actual behaviour is responsible for the major negative impacts or related activities such as construction and development of infrastructure and facilities. Nature-based tourists in their leisure may visit a particular site with preferred natural resources and attributes to achieve the desired nature-based tourism demand and management (Lee, 2009). Discussions on tourist satisfaction, community beneficitation, sustainability and related tourism policies and strategies are how ever very relevant to this study.

### **3.1 Recreator /Tourist Satisfaction**

Nature-based tourism is a multiphase paradigm comprising anticipation time, travel experience, on-site participation, return travel and recollection phases (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001). The tourism experience is also complex and temporal (Kane & Zink, 2004). If the attributes of tourism satisfy visitor needs, then tourists will have positive experiences (Lee, 2009). Overall tourist satisfaction positively correlates with the quality of on-site recreational tourist experiences (Lee, 2007). Tourist satisfaction is a positive perception or feeling that tourists develop or acquire by engaging in recreational activities and is expressed as the degree of pleasure derived from such experiences; this is important to tourism management because it influences destination choice (Cole & Crompton, 2003).

Kozak & Rimmington (2000) have asserted that the researching of the main characteristics of the tourists' satisfaction is very important to successful organisation of the destination management. There are few reasons and the most important is the fact that the tourists' satisfaction has the great impact on the destination choice, the consumption of the tourism products and services and the repeat decision to return. Pavlic, *et al.*, (2011) gave the following behaviour model illustrations about tourists' satisfaction with the tourism products and services

- The tourist that had a positive experience in a specific destination deposited that experience in long-term memory.
- From that part of memory in collecting information, the tourist applies internal search to evoke memories which will have a big impact in making decisions for the next journey.
- The tourist is an important information channel to new potential tourists located in their home country.
- Dissatisfied tourists spread negative information about the tourist destination, and in that way contribute to the creation of negative attitudes of potential tourists

In relation to these behaviour model examples of tourists' satisfaction, it is evident that the more tourists are satisfied about a destination, the more will tourists use the word-of-mouth method of promoting the destination they have visited.

### **3.2 Community Beneficitation**

According to Stein & Wyman (2010), identifying and managing benefits effectively

in conservation is a difficult task. With little research addressing local residents' perception of the benefits of protected areas, one approach taken by him is to look at the benefits-based management (BBM) framework. He stated that although initially applied to recreation and leisure management, BBM is applicable to the broader context of amenity resources such as cultural resources, wildlife, wilderness and scenic values. Under the BBM framework, a benefit is defined as a desired condition, an improved condition or the prevention of an unwanted condition (Driver, 1996). This definition of benefit has often been used within human dimensions of natural resource management research. It can apply to all forms of businesses and leisure tourism (Anderson *et al.*, 2000). The appeal of tourism as a conservation and development tool is that it can, in theory, provide local residents the incentives (benefits) to protect the tourist attraction, and promote low-impact, non-consumptive use of local resources (Stem *et al.*, 2003). They explained that in some instances, direct economic benefits from ecotourism enterprises can even offset revenue loss from traditional extractive activities that may have reduced, in some situations, from ecotourism development itself. They further stressed that protected areas will not survive for long whenever local people remain impoverished and are denied access to needed resources inside.

Mbaiwa & Stronza (2010) stressed that local institutions where local people have a role to play in resource management and derive benefits from such resources around them are essential for Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) to achieve its goals. The underlying assumption of CBNRM they explained is that once rural communities participate in natural resource utilisation and derive economic benefits, this will cultivate the spirit of ownership and the development of positive attitudes towards resource use and ultimately lead communities to the use of natural resources found around them sustainably.

### **3.3 Sustainability**

Cooper *et al.*, (2008) explained that a sustainable approach to tourism aims to ensure that communities in destination countries are able to benefit from the business tourism brings, while minimising the negative impacts on local cultures, the environment and wildlife. It's about taking responsibility for travels and making sure your visit has a positive social, environmental and economic impact.

Sustainable tourism according to the UNWTO (2007) can be explained as tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and the host communities. It was further stressed that making tourism more sustainable means taking these impacts and needs into account in the planning, development and operation of tourism. It is a continual process of improvement and one which applies equally to tourism in cities, resorts, rural and coastal areas, mountains and protected areas. Sustainable tourism is based on certain principles: environmental, economic and social-cultural, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability (UNWTO, 2004).

According to Mehmetoglu (2010), sustainable tourism meets the need of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to the management of all resources in such a way that economic,

social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems. As seen in the above definition, sustainable tourism reflects three main principles of sustainable development, namely, ecological sustainability, social and cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability. Ayuso (2007) suggested that strategies for the development of sustainable tourism should be guided by an integrated planning process based on economic, socio-cultural and environmental goals, the use of carrying capacity or other techniques for quantifying the limitations of the tourist resources, and a transparent and participative decision making process.

### **3.4 Tourism Policies and Tourism Strategies**

Spencer & Zembani (2011) explained that the role of coordinating sport, leisure, recreation, tourism development and growth in order to maximise free time activities, foreign exchange earnings, job creation and continually expand visitor numbers at destination and recreation attractions, rests on the public sector (government). In South Africa, general economic programmes such as Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (ANC, 1994) has impacted specifically on the country's tourism policies (DEAT, 2006). The RDP was the strategy of South African government for the fundamental transformation of the country based on the notion that reconstruction and development are parts of an integrated process by incorporating growth, development, reconstruction, redistribution and reconciliation into a unified programme (ANC, 1994). Spencer & Zembani (2011) cited South Africa as one of the few African countries with emphasis on policy formulation that guides the development and growth of country's sport, recreation and tourism sectors. South Africa according to Steyn (2002) has a long history of strategic planning, including leisure sport, recreation and tourism.

The government of South Africa clearly established its responsibility in the development and promotion of tourism at national level (DEAT, 1996) through another major policy statement underlined by the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa, published in May, 1996 (DEAT, 1996; Keyser, 2002). This was followed by an implementation strategy that contained a number of key actions in order to effectively implement the guidelines contained in the 1996 White Paper where government cited its responsibility as largely that of regulating, policy making, planning and facilitation and also implementing strategies and carrying out development programmes (DEAT, 1996).

## **4. Methodology**

The population of the study was drawn from domestic, international, transit tourists and local residents around Lake St Lucia Estuary. This study is part of an ongoing research project carried out by the Department of Recreation and Tourism, University of Zululand. The main survey commenced at the beginning of January (2010), when schools and industries were still closed and continued till June same year, and as such accommodating tourists who tend to avoid overcrowding of the festive season. Visits were made to the study site within the hours of 9am and 5pm on the days selected for interviews. Mainly closed ended questionnaires were administered while open ended questions were only asked where respondents were supposed to give reasons for their responses. People who had come for business and other reason as well as children under the age of 18 were excluded from the

sample. Questionnaires were administered to 520 respondents were selected through the random sampling technique. The questionnaires solicited information from respondents on feelings about the presence of too many tourists in the resource, conflicts among tourists on recreational activities they participate in and attitude towards presence of other tourists in the resource, among others.

A five-point Likert-scale technique ranging from 1= strongly agreed, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree and 5= strongly disagree, was used to analyse the data. Ritchie (1995) argues that Likert scales are appropriate for evaluating visitor experiences of attractions as they are effective in measuring customer attitudes and are easy to construct and manage. The analysis of data was further carried out through the use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences program (SPSS) and other offering statistical data representation techniques including cross-tabulations, chi-square and correlation, where appropriate. The analysis of the responses of subjects given in Table 1 is intended to address the main objectives of this paper, which were inter alia to determine the recreators and tourists' perceptions towards participation and satisfaction with the use of natural resources by other participants in the natural area at Lake St Lucia Estuary. In addition, the paper sought to specifically analyse how respondents feel about the presence of too many people or over-crowding at the resource, potential conflicts among tourists and recreators in terms of age, gender and race.

The main hypothesis which was postulated was that local, domestic and international tourists and recreators would display a satisfactory and positive behavioural attitude towards fellow participants at Lake St Lucia and Estuary.

## **5. Findings**

Based on the observations on the ground it became evident that tourists / recreators around Lake St Lucia and the Estuary were on the increase and as such their increase was expected to negatively affect the natural resources and inter-personal interaction. It is important to also state that a large majority of local people were depending on the tourists to purchase some of their products, which would reward them handsomely. In this regard, it was found necessary to establish the attitude of recreators and tourists say against other tourists, that is, local tourists in relations to international tourists or alternatively, international tourists versus local tourists. The responses of the two groups are shown in Table 1 below. The nine (9) Likert scale statements were assessed with a view of measuring the attitude of recreators and tourists towards the presence of other tourists with whom they share and compete for the use of the same natural resources.



**Table 1:** Respondents' Rating of Responses Towards the Presence of Other Tourists and Recreators

| <b>STATEMENTS ON PERCEPTIONS OF RECREATORS AND TOURISTS</b>                               | <b>SA</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|---|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 1. There are too many people than I would have liked                                      | 12        | 51       | 15       | 18       | 4         |
| 2. Too many people make it difficult for me to participate in the activity of my choice   | 12        | 68       | 10       | 8        | 2         |
| 3. Too many people make me feel like I do not have enough space to do what makes me happy | 4         | 66       | 2        | 24       | 4         |
| 4. The sight of too many people reduces my enjoyment                                      | 4         | 32       | 8        | 42       | 14        |
| 5. There is sometimes conflict among different racial groups                              | 3         | 37       | 7        | 45       | 8         |
| 6. There is sometimes conflict among recreators who participate in different activities   | 4         | 62       | 2        | 28       | 4         |
| 7. Sometimes recreators participate in a variety of activities without caring for others  | 6         | 51       | 24       | 17       | 2         |
| 8. Sometimes recreators do not treat each other with respect                              | 20        | 22       | 5        | 41       | 12        |
| 9. Sometimes recreators participating in different activities get into each other's way   | 12        | 14       | 8        | 38       | 28        |

**n = 520. Legend:** SA = Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Many of the respondents (68%) agree and 12 percent strongly agree that too many people make it difficult to participate in the activity of choice. Also 66 percent agree and 4 percent strongly agree that too many people disturb them from having enough space. These results indicate that respondents have difficulty in participating freely if there are many people and that tourists prefer a resource which is less crowded.

**5.1 Responses in terms of Gender**

What is worth noting is that even though tourists and recreators have negative feelings towards too many people, they are nonetheless not hostile towards each other. Tolerance among tourists is reflected by 41 percent of respondents who disagreed that sometimes tourists do not treat each other with respect. Conflict among tourists is indicated by 62 percent of the respondents who agree there is conflict among tourists who participate in different recreational activities and 37 percent who agreed there is conflict among different racial groups.

**Table 2:** Perception of Respondents Towards Overcrowding by Gender [%]

| <b>Gender</b>  | <b>Responses</b> |          |          |          |           | <b>Total</b> |
|----------------|------------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|--------------|
|                | <b>SA</b>        | <b>A</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>SD</b> |              |
| <b>Males</b>   | 8                | 49       | 3        | 2        | 1         | 63           |
| <b>Females</b> | 4                | 19       | 7        | 6        | 1         | 37           |
| <b>Total</b>   | 12               | 68       | 10       | 8        | 2         | 100          |

**n = 520**       $\chi^2 = 914.2$        $df = 4$       level of sig. = 0.05

**Legend:** SA = Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree









The results of the study indicated the study area is mostly visited by international tourists. Most of these tourists place importance on balancing the use the natural environment and its use. It also became apparent that although some tourists were not satisfied with the way other tourists behaved towards the environment they are committed to the protection of the natural environment from degradation. They are aware that there is a limit to the number of tourists that the natural environment can support before it suffers damage. Most of them are also prepared to make a contribution towards protection of the natural environment.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions that are presented here are based on the major findings as suggested by the analytical results of this study. The findings are discussed on the basis of the hypotheses of the study. The hypothesis was tested and translated on the basis of statistical measures and procedures. **Hypothesis One (1):** The domestic and international tourists around Lake St Lucia Estuary display satisfaction and positive attitudes towards each other.

The findings associated with this hypothesis are that respondents felt that Lake St Lucia Estuary had more tourists than what they expected and therefore the resource seemed overcrowded. The presence of other tourists in the resource has been found to directly or indirectly influence a person's perception of recreation experiences (Greer 1992). Regarding this hypothesis the findings of this study revealed that tourists generally have negative attitudes towards the presence of too many other tourists at the resource. The findings further revealed that demographic characteristics of tourists influence their perceptions towards interpersonal relationships with other tourists and also their satisfaction with their recreation experiences.

Further analysis indicates that more males have negative attitudes towards an increased number of tourists and also towards interpersonal behaviour than females. Conflict among racial groups and between contradictory recreation activities also came up as variables towards which tourists displayed negative attitudes. Also striking is that further analysis revealed that more domestic tourists than international or transit tourists have negative attitudes towards conflict. Other demographic characteristics that seemed to influence the responses of tourists were race, and age of the recreators. Most whites had negative attitude towards the presence of other tourists. It is, however, worth mentioning that even though tourists have a negative attitude towards the presence of increased number of other tourists at the resource, they were satisfied with their recreation experiences. That was displayed by their willingness to visit St Lucia again. On the basis of these findings hypothesis 1 of this study is rejected.

We can also draw an inference from the study that local residents have substantial economic benefits from recreation and tourism enterprise and as such are in support of large crowd coming to the park. A major recommendation from the study is that the government of South Africa through the appropriate regulatory bodies should enforce that the management of St Lucia Lake and Estuary employ the use of the principle of carrying capacity for visitor management. This is to ensure sustainable use of resources and maximum tourist satisfaction.

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- Recreators' perception of Participation And Satisfaction Towards nature-based activities Around The Lake St Lucia Estuary, South Africa...L.M. Magi, A.T. Nzama & B. Adeleke*  
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