



# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING: A CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION ON NOVEL OR NICHE TOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS

Andrew Blackmore

Email: andy.blackmore@kznwildlife.com

Manager: Conservation Planning, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa  
Research Fellow, School of Law, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

ORCID iD 0000-0003-3271-9645

## ABSTRACT

The character of tourism in protected areas has remained predominantly unchanged over time. Should a new approach to tourism and recreational zonation in protected areas accommodate a broader spectrum of nature-based tourism activities? Using naturism as a novel example, this form of tourism could be accommodated by applying spatial and temporal recreational zonation of protected areas and associated facilities. In the face of growing dependence on revenue from tourism, it is concluded that policies governing tourism in protected areas be revised. This revision should be transparent and uniform to generate predictable outcomes or decisions, irrespective of the personal biases, values or subjective judgements of decision-makers. The uncertainty associated with introducing a novel tourism activity into a protected area may be addressed through simultaneously applying the precautionary principle and adaptive management in a limited stepwise manner.

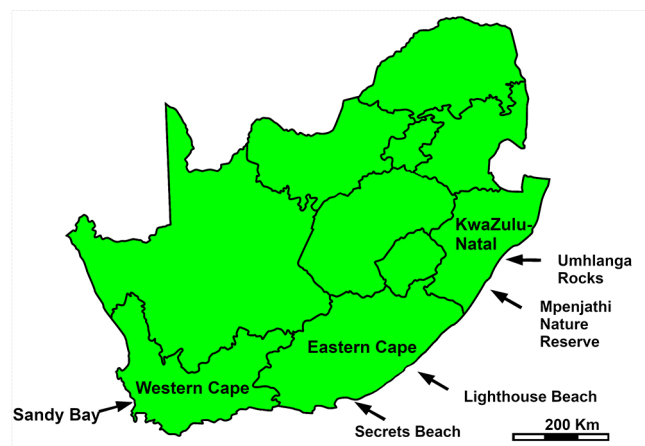
**Key words:** adaptive management, nature-based tourism, niche tourism; nudism; precautionary principle; protected area; zonation

## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Hibiscus Coast Municipality, currently known as the Ray Nkonyeni Municipality, located on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, decided to formalise a portion of beach as an area set aside for recreational activities undertaken in a naked state – “a nudist-friendly beach”. Naturists had been using the area informally for some years on account of its position on a secluded stretch of coastline within the Mpenjati Game Reserve and Trafalgar Marine Protected Area of KwaZulu-Natal (Figure 1) (News24, 2016). The decision taken by the Municipality was in response to a request by both the South African and KwaZulu-Natal Naturists Associations to formally establish a “nudist-friendly beach at the Mpenjati Estuary” (Mkhwebane, 2017).

The formalisation of a nudist beach by the Municipality was opposed by Reverend M. Effanga on behalf of the ‘Concerned Citizens of the Hibiscus Coast Municipality’, who, on 16 December 2015, lodged a complaint with the Public Protector (Box 1), within the context that public nudity was morally offensive, that the process followed by the Municipality in formalising the area as a nudist beach was, *inter alia*, maladministered, not based in

legality, and prejudicial towards the complainant community (Mngoma, 2017; Pretorius, 2017). In addition, Reverend Effanga stated that the decision was illegitimate (Mkhwebane, 2017). The relief requested of the Public Protector was to “remedy or right the wrong” – this being to set aside the decision taken by the Municipality (Mkhwebane, 2017). In 2017, the Public



**Figure 1. The location of informal nudist beaches along South Africa's coast**

**Box 1. The Public Protector in South Africa**

In the transition to a democratic country, the Public Protector replaced the ombudsman system that was in place during South Africa's apartheid era. The Public Protector is a constitutionally derived institution that monitors the duties performed by the public administration and enforces the accountability of the three tiers (national, provincial and local) of the South African government. Simply put, the Public Protector is obligated to function as an "independent and impartial upholder of the highest standards of efficient, effective, just and fair public administration" (Brynard, 2000), and can be called on by members of the public to investigate and where necessary initiate remedial action where an organ of state has acted outside the rule of law. At the time of drafting this paper, Advocate Busisiwe Mkhwebane has been appointed as South Africa's Public Protector.

Protector found in favour of the Concerned Citizens of the Hibiscus Coast Municipality, which halted the formalisation of the nudist beach. This finding was based on procedural grounds and not on the legality of nudism. The lawfulness of nudism in South Africa appears to hinge on whether this activity is conducted in a 'public place' or not (Blackmore, forthcoming). Protected areas, even though accessible to the public, in this country, fall outside of what is considered (in law) a 'public place'. It, therefore, appears that nudism may be a legitimate activity that may take place in these areas (Blackmore, forthcoming).

Using South African protected areas as a point of reference, this paper undertakes a brief analysis of the current context of nature-based tourism. The objective of this analysis is to answer the generic question as to whether existing or scheduled protected area tourism may include markets not traditionally accommodated in these areas? For this, naturism, natourism, naturalism or nudism-based tourism serves as an example in determining whether this activity may be included as a recreational activity within terrestrial protected areas. In so doing, this paper ventures into the territory of novel or niche tourism in an attempt to stimulate a reconsideration of the kinds of tourism that may take place in protected areas.

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Although nudity or partial nudity has openly persisted as a social norm in many South African indigenous cultures and ceremonial events, the country has had a long history of outlawing public nudity, and it is generally seen as taboo (Cook & Hardin, 2013). Nonetheless, a number of popular, but unofficial, nudist beaches (i.e. Sandy Bay in Table Mountain National Park, Great Fish Point Lighthouse, Secrets Beach, north bank of the river mouth in the Mpenjathi Nature Reserve, and northern beach at Umhlanga Rocks: see Figure 1) arose informally during the 1980s in conservative apartheid South Africa (Bartlo, 2005). These areas have persisted or been tolerated as 'nude or nudist-friendly beaches', despite ad hoc arrests and

doubtless prosecution of offending naked bathers by the law enforcement agencies. Given the opinion of various sectors in society against public nudity, and notwithstanding the perceived illegality, together with a conservative approach to tourism in protected areas by conservation agencies, the concept of nature-based tourism that encompasses nudism, natourism, naturism or naturalism (hereafter referred to as 'nudism') in protected areas appears not to have been given due credence or consideration (see for example Dilsaver, 1999). As a consequence, activities such as 'nudism' have not been seriously considered as a tourism activity within protected areas in South Africa. In the absence of published information to the contrary, this observation appears to be globally relevant.

**Tourism in protected areas**

One of the key values of nature-based tourism is that it fosters visitors' connection with the natural



Warning sign, which may be purchased from novelty stores. Would the availability of this type of bric-a-brac reflect a growing awareness of nudist facilities?



Looking onto the informal nudist-friendly beach within the Mpenjathi Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. © Judi Davis

environment and the biodiversity therein (Bonet-García et al., 2015; Romagosa et al., 2015). This connection, amongst other things, promotes personal rejuvenation, growth and wellbeing as well as imparting a sense of guardianship and support for the protected area. Another key benefit of nature-based tourism is the positive economic impact it has on the protected area, its neighbouring areas and beyond (Leung et al., 2018). This benefit increases with the spending potential of the visitor, which is likely to be positively correlated to the visitor's length of stay and the price of the accommodation within the protected area (Sandbrook, 2010)

From a tourism management perspective, applying a tourism use zonation reduces or ameliorates the impact tourism has on the protected area as well as reduces or eliminates the conflict that may arise from conflicting use activities (Dilsaver, 1999; Llausàs et al., 2019; Manning et al., 2012). This may be achieved using either a spatial zonation – where the conflicting activities are geographically separated, or by temporal zonation – where the conflicting activities occur at different times (Dilsaver, 1999; Rotich, 2012). For instance, hunting may solely occur within a permanently designated area (i.e. a geographical or a specific hunting zone) from which all other forms of tourism are excluded; or hunting may occur in a

designated area for a specified period of the year. Outside this period, the designated hunting facilities may be used for other forms of nature-based tourism. Here, hunting is purposefully referred to in that, as with nudism, it has been actively opposed by a sector of society on both ethical and moral grounds and yet has persisted as an activity undertaken in many protected areas (de Vries, 2019; Feber et al., 2020).

The concept of tourism activity zonation is stressed on at least two fronts. The first is to set aside a portion of the protected area (either geographically or temporally) for use by a particular tourism activity, and secondly as a means to diversify the types of tourism activities that may take place in the protected area. Furthermore, it is logical (and is a legal requirement in South Africa in terms of the Regulations to the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003, 2003) that each zoned area be managed for the purpose it was zoned and hence incompatible tourism activities would remain separated (Burns et al., 2010). Given that this zonation is founded on the dynamic equilibrium between nature-based tourism and the protection and conservation of biodiversity, it is logical that the zonation must not only be consistent with the purpose of the protected area but will also need to take into consideration: (1) the change in tourism needs as a result of evolving tourism markets, (2) changing values



and expectations of society, (3) evolving philosophies on protected area governance, and (4) an improved understanding of the tolerance of the protected area, and its biodiversity, to the impacts of various tourism activities (Jones et al., 2016; McCool, 2016).

This realisation requires the conservation authority to re-evaluate the appropriateness of current tourism activities in its protected areas and to adjust its mitigation actions to reduce adverse impacts on the protected area, habitat, wildlife and other visitor experiences to an acceptable level or above a predetermined threshold which is briefly discussed below (Blackmore, 2017; Leung et al., 2018). One such example would be the phasing out of the use of lead in fishing or hunting where these activities take place in the protected area (Cromie et al., 2019; Kanstrup et al., 2018). Where more effective mitigation is not possible, halting or phasing out the tourism activity would ideally be the remedial action to be taken (Collins, 2011; Leung et al., 2018). Where the termination of a tourism activity is impossible, the residual damage caused may be offset through, for example, the expansion of the protected area by the addition of appropriate land (Blackmore, 2019). In this instance, the addition of land would compensate for or offset the damage caused to the tourism activity land (Blackmore, 2019).

Furthermore, the growth in protected area numbers has brought into play a growing choice of destinations for nature-based tourists (Adams & Moon, 2013; Crouzeilles et al., 2013). In order to remain competitive in this environment and hence financially viable, conservation authorities need to re-evaluate their marketing strategies and protected area attractiveness at regular intervals. This re-evaluation creates an opportunity to consider new or previously unconsidered tourism activities, such as nudism, that have a low potential impact on the protected area, and which may offer high beneficial returns – i.e. increased revenue (Leung et al., 2018; Shultis & Way, 2006). With an understanding of the current and emerging needs of nature-based or unexplored niche or novel markets such as nudism, a sustained tourism demand for accessing and enjoying the protected area may be achieved, or a new or alternative tourism demand may be created for protected areas – particularly for those that traditionally have a low tourism patronage. Accessing these tourism markets may require the conservation authority to facilitate, if not incentivise, the recognition of the protected area by the emerging tourism markets as a viable and attractive destination (Hausmann et al., 2017).

Tourism does have, however, a concomitant adverse impact on the integrity of the protected area and on various species and habitats therein (Steven et al., 2011). The significance of the impact varies with, *inter alia*, the level of disturbance caused by and/or required for the activity to be undertaken (Steven et al., 2011). Thus, selection of a tourist market should ideally gravitate to those activities that have the least impact on the protected area and its biodiversity (*viz.* low-impact tourism), and that generates the greatest financial and other positive benefits (Leung et al., 2018).

It is not uncommon for certain tourism activities to be seen, however, by some as: (a) incompatible with conservation and protection of biodiversity and hence incompatible with the general purpose of protected area establishment, (b) not in keeping with what is seen to be contemporary or traditional tourism activities within protected areas, (c) considered offensive in some manner or another, or (d) possibly limiting or constraining the concession given to an existing tourism activity (Diaf, 2019). When such circumstances arise (e.g. as has been the case with hunting, tourism access to wilderness, and establishment of tourism or management facilities), the protected area authority ought to apply a principled and unbiased approach to distinguish between the interests of broader society without unfair discrimination – while ensuring, among other considerations, the integrity of the protected area, biodiversity and sense of place (Smith & Csurgó, 2018). This argument is entrenched in the principle of ‘consistency of policy and action’, where a uniform and predictable outcome or decision is derived irrespective of the personal biases, values or subjective judgement of the decision-maker (Addison et al., 2013). Thus, both novel and traditional tourism activities within a protected area (e.g. nudism) must be subjected to the same set of rules to determine their permissibility. The same applies to the *a priori* exclusion of an existing or novel tourist activity. The consequence of this approach would be a decision that is fair, reasonable, defensible and transparent (Dovers, 2017).

### **A precautionary and adaptive approach**

The inclusion of novel tourism activities in a protected area must be based on a reasonable understanding of the market and its requirements. Furthermore, an understanding is needed of the potential impacts of the novel tourism on the protected area and its existing tourism patronage and brand loyalty, and the feasibility of the mitigation that needs to be applied (Leung et al., 2018; Moscardo, 2008). It is, however, unlikely that the full extent of these potential impacts and the effectiveness of the required mitigation will be evident

or sufficiently researched at the outset. In such cases, the conservation authority is obliged to act in a cautious and risk-averse manner, in order to safeguard the integrity of the protected area and its existing tourism (Blackmore, 2017; Leung et al., 2018).

The application of the precautionary principle (Box 2) has increasingly been used as a tool for decision-makers to avoid serious or irreversible harm – particularly in circumstances where there is uncertainty as to the nature of the risk and the consequent harm that would manifest (Trouwborst et al., 2019). Evaluating the novel tourism market operating elsewhere is likely to provide valuable insights into the degree of potential harm and associated risk that may be experienced in a protected area context. This insight, therefore, should inform the conservation authority as to whether the potential impacts are reasonably reversible, particularly if only allowed on a limited scale. Should this be the case, the novel tourism activity may be accommodated in the protected area on a ‘test case’ basis.

The challenge remains in determining the various limits of acceptable change, particularly within the dynamic realm of conservation and the perceptions of people. In such circumstances, and in keeping with the precautionary principle, the conservation authority may

set a cautious and risk-averse ‘threshold of potential concern’ (TPC) prior to the introduction of a novel tourism activity such as nudism (Figure 2) (for instance, a 5 per cent reduction in traditional safari patronage).

#### Box 2. The Precautionary Principle

This Principle has been widely accepted since its formulation as Principle 15 of the 1992 Rio Declaration of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which states:

“[i]n order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”

Since then, the Precautionary Principle has evolved into many versions to suit individual circumstances (Applegate, 2002). Irrespective of the articulation of the Principle, its application remains unchanged, specifically to prevent harm to the environment (Bodansky, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, the wording of the Principle in the Rio Declaration is referred to.

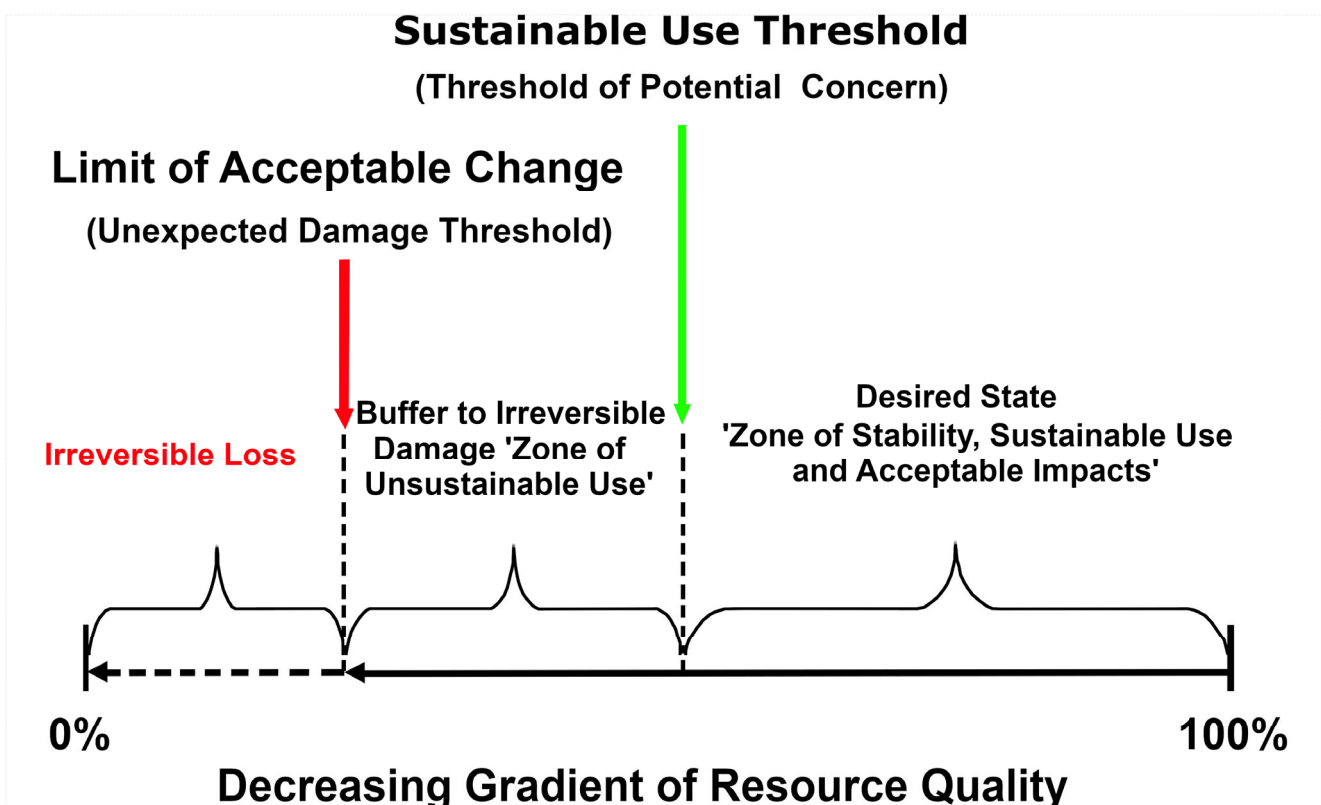


Figure 2. Diagrammatic representation of the sustainable use threshold on a diminishing resource gradient (after Blackmore, 2017)

Once the TPC has been reached, the conservation authority would be in a position to re-evaluate and adjust this threshold. The re-evaluation would be based on the monitoring of the impact of the activity on sensitive attributes or values of the protected area and management requirements. Should these impacts prove to be negligible, the TPC may be adjusted to a less cautious level, or to a stricter level should the impacts be deemed to be significant.

In this way, the precautionary principle and adaptive management would be simultaneously applied in a stepwise manner (Trouwborst et al., 2019). This approach also avoids delaying the decision until such time that there is certainty that the protected area, its biodiversity or its existing tourism patronage and brand loyalty would not be put at undue risk by a limited introduction of the novel tourism activity.

### General visitor safety in protected areas

While the conservation authority has fiducial and other obligations to safeguard the protected area, it also has a duty to provide reasonable security to visiting tourists (Cervený & Miller, 2019; Gstaettner et al., 2019). Conservation authorities generally employ law enforcement officials or rangers to patrol within and around the protected area to safeguard the integrity of the protected area and the vulnerable species (Critchlow et al., 2017; Henson et al., 2016). These patrols are primarily focused on reducing and eliminating poaching, but also serve to deter theft or damage to the protected area's infrastructure. The corollary of this patrolling and law enforcement is a secure environment for tourists to enjoy the protected area's values. Furthermore, such security is consequently greater than can reasonably be expected outside the protected area, where no such dedicated law enforcement exists. It may, therefore, be argued that this security provides the protected area with a heightened advantage to retain existing and attract novel tourism activities, when compared to neighbouring and other areas. Therefore, tourists in a protected area, and particularly those exercising an activity that renders them vulnerable to crime and harassment, like nudism, would be able to enjoy and take advantage of the security the protected area supplies.

### What about nudism in protected areas?

It has been widely acknowledged that tourism, and in particular nature-based tourism in protected areas in developing countries, is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy (Canteiro et al., 2018; Twining-Ward et al., 2018). In the absence of evidence to the



View of the informal nudist beach within the Mpenjathi Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. © Judi Davis

contrary, it is assumed that this assessment of the tourism industry is predominantly limited to the 'textiled' tourism sector. As a consequence, unexplored niche or novel tourism markets would not have been considered when calculating the economic potential of nature-based tourism.

While there is little in the way of published research on the economic significance of nudism as a tourism activity, the International Naturist Federation (INF) have estimated their global membership (which is a collective of the national naturist societies) to be 1,450,000 members or member families (Ms Sieglinde Ivo – President of the INF, personal communication, 27 January 2020). Furthermore, an unpublished INF study estimated the global number of naturists (including INF members) to be in excess of 70 million. While this figure is small in relation to the tourism potential of Europe (i.e. 710 million international tourist arrivals in 2018), it does however represent, particularly from a protected area perspective, a significant economic market (Monterrubio & Jaurand, 2014).

In the absence of monitoring and assessment, it is difficult to determine with confidence whether nudism falls within the scope of nature-based tourism, and hence may be accommodated, at least in principle, within protected areas. The definition of nudism and activities undertaken by nudists, as popularised in the media, does, however, provide a degree of insight. Nudism is defined by the International Naturist Federation as tourists that are in "in harmony with nature", who are "characterised by the practice of communal nudity" and who have "respect for others and for the environment" (Deschenes, 2016). Others have argued that nudists are increasingly seeking the spiritual

fulfilment and renewal that the natural environment provides (Andriotis, 2016). At face value, this definition and characterisation does not appear to be incongruent with a contemporary understanding of 'nature-based tourism' in protected areas. This tourism sector is generally defined as "the non-material benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences" (Kim et al., 2019).

The novelty of nudism in protected areas renders unknown the full extent of the possible activities that nudists would like to undertake. It is known, however, that there is an active desire for safe beaches, and this may be extended to safari tours, and dedicated accommodation and hiking trails (Dilsaver, 1999; News24, 2013). Again, particularly, when read with the definition and characterisation of nudism, other than the absence of clothing, it is difficult to objectively differentiate between the activities undertaken by nudists and those of traditional protected area visitors. Thus, it can be reasonably assumed, therefore, that existing tourism facilities or those planned for a protected area could accommodate nudism with, other than signage, little or no modifications (Blackmore, forthcoming).

However, it is recognised that there is a degree of incompatibility between a nudist-centred enjoyment of the protected area and the traditional clothed wildlife tourist. The same is argued, as discussed above, when considering the incompatibility between hunting and safari tourism. Thus, if the same rules are applied by the conservation authority to nudism as have been applied to (or derived from) their traditional tourism, it is conceivable that nudism may be accommodated in protected areas. This may be achieved through either a spatial or temporal separation of the two types of activities in a similar manner to the management of hunting in protected areas (Leung et al., 2018).

Similarly, through monitoring and evaluation, the unintended negative impacts of nudism on the protected area and its existing tourism, the feasibility of any mitigation required and the viability of the niche market, may be cautiously determined by establishing one or a limited array of nudist facilities (i.e. a nudist lodge, nudist beach and a nudist trail), within the protected area. These may be increased in number or variety using an adaptive management approach as discussed above – to a point where a portion of the protected area reasonably accommodates this activity without significantly displacing current traditional forms of tourism (Leung et al., 2018).

## CONCLUSION

The objection to the formalisation of a limited nudist beach within the Mpenjathi Nature Reserve and Trafalgar Marine Protected Area, by the Concerned Citizens of the Hibiscus Coast Municipality, has provided an opportunity to consider whether nudism or partial nudism and other forms of niche tourism can be accommodated in protected areas.

With the increasing number of private, state and communal protected areas, together with the increasing dependence of these areas on the income generated from tourism, competition for tourists is likely to increase with time. Thus, in order for protected areas to remain competitive, and hence commercially viable in the long-term, it is concluded that there be greater cognisance of the sectors of the nature-based tourism market whose activities are traditionally not catered for within protected areas. This may require a revision of policies that serve to limit the types of tourism that may take place. While it is recognised that there may be significant uncertainty about what impacts a novel or previously unexplored tourism market may have on a protected area, this uncertainty may be overcome by applying a cautious and risk-averse adaptive management strategy to a limited and stepwise introduction of the tourist activity. In so doing, both indecision and serious or irreversible harm to the protected area may be avoided.

Finally, spatial or temporal zonation may be used to accommodate potentially incompatible nature-based tourism activities within a protected area, and, in so doing, broaden the tourism base the protected area is dependent upon. Consistent policy and action are, however, essential to avoid personal biases and values, subjective judgement or partisan perspectives adversely affecting the decision to move beyond traditional and existing protected area tourism.

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## DISCLAIMER

The ideas, arguments and opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife or the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Andy Blackmore** is an environmental lawyer and conservation scientist in Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, a



conservation agency in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and is a Research Fellow in the School of Law of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

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## RESUMEN

La naturaleza del turismo en las áreas protegidas ha permanecido predominantemente inalterada a lo largo del tiempo. ¿Debería un nuevo enfoque con respecto a la zonificación del turismo y la recreación en las áreas protegidas incorporar un espectro más amplio de actividades turísticas basadas en la naturaleza? Utilizando el naturismo como ejemplo novedoso, esta forma de turismo podría adaptarse mediante la aplicación de la zonificación espacial y temporal de las zonas protegidas para la recreación y la infraestructura asociada. Ante la creciente dependencia de los ingresos procedentes del turismo, se concluye que se deben revisar las políticas que rigen el turismo en las áreas protegidas. Esta revisión debería ser transparente y uniforme para generar resultados o decisiones predecibles, independientemente de los sesgos personales, los valores o los juicios subjetivos de los responsables de la toma de decisiones. La incertidumbre asociada a la introducción de una actividad turística novedosa en un área protegida puede abordarse mediante la aplicación simultánea del principio de precaución y la gestión adaptable de forma limitada y gradual.

## RÉSUMÉ

Le tourisme dans les aires protégées est resté essentiellement inchangé au fil du temps. Nous posons la question de savoir si une nouvelle approche du tourisme et du zonage récréatif dans les aires protégées devrait intégrer un plus large éventail d'activités touristiques axées sur la nature. En tant que nouveau genre de tourisme, le naturisme pourra s'adapter aux aires protégées et aux installations associées en y appliquant un zonage récréatif et temporel. Face à leur dépendance croissante à l'égard des recettes touristiques, nous concluons qu'une révision des politiques régissant le tourisme dans les aires protégées serait nécessaire. Cette révision doit être transparente et uniforme afin de générer des décisions et des résultats prévisibles, quels que soient les inclinaisons personnelles, les valeurs ou les jugements subjectifs des décideurs. L'incertitude associée à l'introduction d'une nouvelle activité touristique dans une aire protégée serait résorbée en appliquant simultanément le principe de précaution et la gestion adaptative d'une manière limitée et par étapes.