



ECO-TOURISM: A PILLAR FOR BIOECONOMY

G20 Initiative on Bioeconomy 2nd meeting

Ms Koena Cholo

Ministry: Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment

Republic of South Africa

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& the environment**
Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Eco-tourism in South Africa: An Overview

South Africa is a country renowned for its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and a deep commitment to sustainable development. South Africa views eco-tourism not only as a vital pillar of our conservation strategy but as an integral component of our bioeconomy and as such a development strategy—that is, the sustainable and inclusive use of biological resources to drive economic growth, create jobs, and improve livelihoods while preserving the environment.



South Africa is home to **nine biomes**, over **400 protected areas**, and world-famous destinations like the **Kruger National Park**, **Table Mountain**, and the **iSimangaliso Wetland Park**—a UNESCO World Heritage Site co-managed with local communities.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism contributed approximately 3% directly—and over 8% indirectly—to South Africa's GDP, employing over 700,000 people. Eco-tourism accounted for a significant share, particularly in rural and conservation-linked areas.



Policy Framework

Eco-tourism is not a peripheral niche *but* a strategic entry point into the bioeconomy that is based on an integrated framework.

South Africa has created an enabling policy environment for eco-tourism as part of the **biodiversity economy** framework. Key policy instruments include:

- The **White Paper on Conservation and Sustainable Use of South Africa's biodiversity**.
- The **National Biodiversity Economy Strategy (NBES)**.
- The **Tourism Sector Master Plan**, aligned with the **National Development Plan 2030** and **Sustainable Development Goals**, which envisions a sustainable and inclusive tourism sector.



National Biodiversity Economy Strategy

Eco-tourism stimulates research and innovation—ranging from conservation technologies to indigenous knowledge systems, which are key components of the broader biodiversity economy. Through initiatives like **biosphere reserves**, we integrate tourism, science, and local knowledge.

Eco-tourism places value on our natural heritage. Protected areas—like the **Kruger National Park** or **iSimangaliso Wetland Park**—are not only conservation hubs but also **economic engines**.

Innovation & Research

Community Participation & Ownership

South African eco-tourism

Biodiversity as a Productive Asset

Job Creation & Skills Development

Many of our eco-tourism initiatives are co-managed with local communities. The **Mdluli and Makuleka Community**, for example, is a model where **land reform beneficiaries** partnered with **private sector** and **conservation authorities** to protect **biodiversity** while deriving **economic benefits**.

Eco-tourism provides diverse employment opportunities including tour guides, hospitality, conservationists and community-based entrepreneurs. We are investing in **youth training programmes**, particularly in biodiversity management, green jobs, and community tourism services.



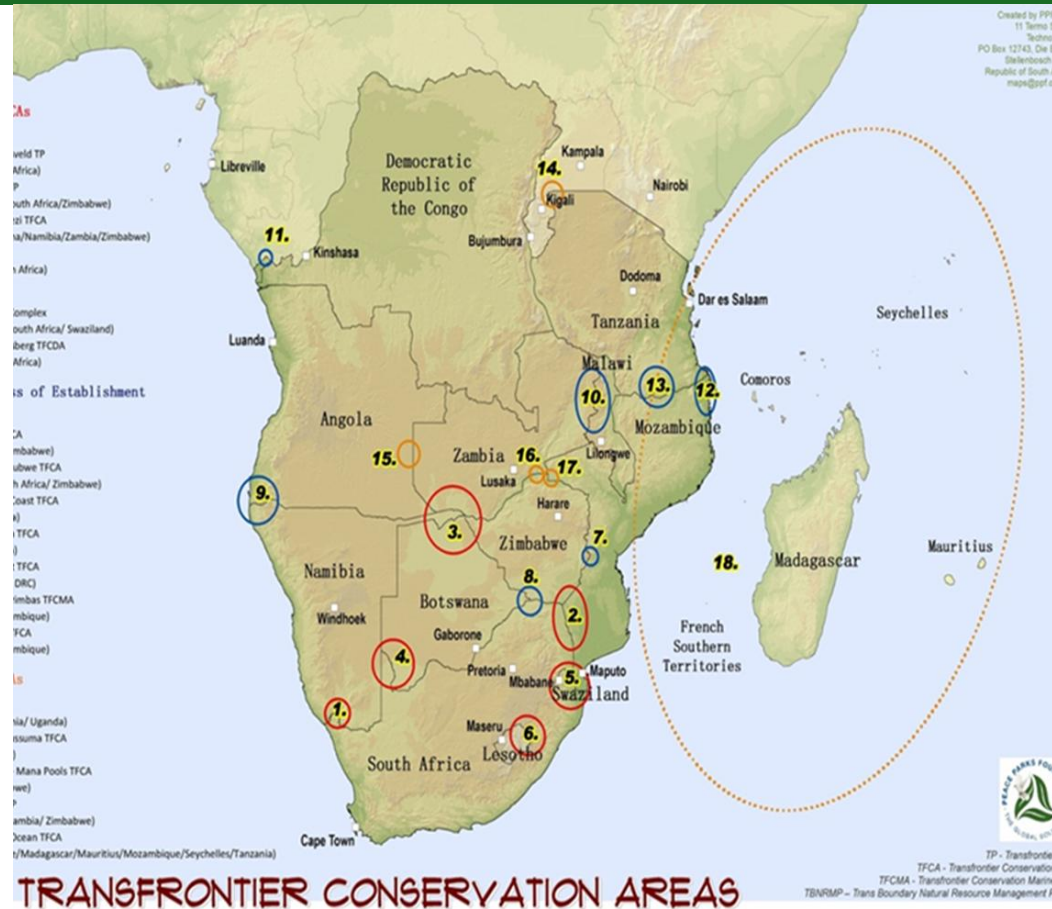
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SADC Perspective

- Within the SADC region, eco-tourism seen as a regional bioeconomic strategy. Our ecosystems transcend borders—i.e. KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area.
- Six TFCAs involving RSA links protected areas, promotes cross-border conservation, tourism, and enhances wildlife migration corridors. Crucially, this enables community-owned lodges, cultural tourism sites, and conservation-based employment.
- SADC's Tourism Programme (2020–2030) & TFCA protocols etc.



Challenges and Opportunities

While eco-tourism holds great promise, we must acknowledge key challenges:

- **Climate change** threatens ecosystems and tourism infrastructure.
- **Market access** and global competitiveness for small community-owned enterprises.
- **Inadequate funding** to support emerging entrepreneurs.
- **Post-pandemic recovery** is uneven and requires targeted support for rural tourism.



Yet, within these challenges lie opportunities:

- To **digitise eco-tourism** offerings and improve market access.
- To position eco-tourism as a **climate-adaptation strategy**, supporting both human and ecological resilience.
- **Green financing**—including biodiversity credits and climate adaptation funds to support tourism infrastructure.
- **Public-Private-Community Partnerships** to scale inclusive models.
- **Skills development** and **technology transfer** through regional training in biodiversity management, guiding, hospitality, and green entrepreneurship.



Conclusion



- Eco-tourism is a living example of what the bioeconomy can be: **inclusive and sustainable**. As we move forward, we need to:
 1. Mobilise a Global Bioeconomy Eco-tourism Fund
 2. Create a Knowledge Exchange Platform for sustainable tourism innovations
 3. Champion cooperation in scaling proven eco-tourism models
 4. Integrate eco-tourism metrics into bioeconomy reporting frameworks
 5. Champion eco-tourism as a vehicle for nature-positive economic growth.
 6. Support knowledge exchange and financing.
 7. Foster regional initiatives like KAZA, which can be scaled to other countries.
- South Africa stands ready to collaborate—bilaterally, regionally, and globally—to build an eco-tourism future that works for people and planet.



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THANK YOU!

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