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**Luxury Tourism in South Africa: Navigating opportunities and barriers to  
address sustainability challenges.**

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by

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## **Abstract**

The global luxury tourism industry is increasingly challenged to balance growth and sustainability, particularly in developing regions such as South Africa. This study explores the opportunities and challenges faced by luxury tourism businesses in integrating sustainability into their operations. Focusing on three luxury game lodges in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, this research analyses how these businesses navigate the tensions between environmental conservation, socio-cultural impact, and economic viability. Key research questions include: How do they navigate sustainability challenges within their unique contexts? What are they currently doing, and what more can they do? How can luxury tourism businesses improve their sustainability practices?

This study adopts an exploratory, qualitative research approach, using a multiple-case study design. Data was collected through nine semi-structured interviews with heads of environment and sustainability, lodge managers and game rangers, alongside document analysis, to examine sustainability strategies and their implementation across the selected lodges. Findings reveal that while lodges have implemented sustainability initiatives, they continue to face systemic barriers such as guest expectations, financial constraints, infrastructure limitations, and reliance on international tourism. However, innovative solutions, including community-driven conservation, local economic integration, and sustainable business models, demonstrate how luxury and sustainability can coexist.

This research contributes empirical insight to a limited body of literature on sustainability in South African luxury tourism. It provides practical recommendations for industry stakeholders and policymakers, such as addressing neocolonial ownership structures, developing standardised impact assessment models, aligning sustainability with guest expectations, and leveraging public-private partnerships to scale green technologies. Future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach to quantify long-term sustainability impacts, guest perceptions, and policy effectiveness, strengthening the evidence base for a more equitable and resilient luxury tourism sector.

**Key words: Luxury Tourism, Sustainability, Eco-Tourism, Intersectionality.**

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

The global luxury tourism industry faces growing pressure to align with sustainability principles, prompting a shift in how high-end travel businesses operate. In South Africa—a country rich in biodiversity, cultural heritage, and a maturing luxury tourism sector—this tension is especially evident. While luxury tourism contributes significantly to the national economy, its expansion raises concerns about environmental degradation, socio-cultural disruption, and deepening economic inequality (Carr et al., 2016). These concerns underscore the need for more sustainable and inclusive tourism models that reconcile exclusivity with environmental stewardship and community development.

Despite an expanding global discourse on sustainability in tourism, academic attention remains largely focused on eco-tourism and mass tourism. There is a critical gap in understanding how luxury tourism, traditionally associated with excess and exclusivity, can transition toward environmental and social responsibility. This research addresses this gap by exploring how luxury game lodges in South Africa navigate the complex terrain of sustainability.

### 1.1.1 Research Question and Sub-Questions

This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges luxury game lodges face in integrating sustainability into their operations. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question:

*What are the opportunities and challenges faced by luxury tourism businesses in South Africa when addressing sustainability?*

To gain a comprehensive understanding, the research is structured around three key sub-questions:

- How do luxury tourism businesses navigate sustainability challenges within their specific contexts?
- What sustainability initiatives are already in place, and what more can be done?
- How can luxury tourism businesses improve their sustainability practices?

These sub-questions are aligned with the study's overarching aim: to identify key sustainability challenges, evaluate existing practices, and explore opportunities for improvement.

### 1.1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

This study adopts an exploratory research approach, using a multiple-case study design to examine three luxury game lodges in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve. The aim is to identify key sustainability challenges, evaluate existing practices, and explore opportunities for improvement.

The research holds significant implications for multiple stakeholders:

- Luxury game lodges can gain practical insights into enhancing sustainability while maintaining their competitive positioning in the global tourism market.
- Local communities can benefit from a more inclusive approach, ensuring that tourism-driven economic benefits extend beyond lodge owners and investors.
- Tourists can make more informed, responsible choices, prioritizing sustainability-conscious travel experiences.
- Policymakers and industry stakeholders can leverage the findings to develop targeted sustainability frameworks for the luxury tourism sector.

Additionally, this study contributes to theoretical discourse by expanding existing literature on sustainable tourism. It examines the paradox of luxury and sustainability (Kapferer, 2010), engaging with critical perspectives on conservation, environmental and social responsibility in tourism development.

Given the limited academic focus on luxury tourism sustainability in South Africa, this research provides a foundation for further studies, ensuring that sustainability strategies are informed by local realities rather than global assumptions.

### 1.1.3 Limitations

This study is limited in scope to three luxury game lodges within the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, a private conservation area adjacent to the Kruger National Park. While these lodges provide qualitative insights, findings may not be directly generalizable to all luxury lodges in South Africa, given their unique setting and remote location. However, the selected lodges represent diverse ownership structures and sustainability approaches, offering valuable comparative insights into industry trends.

The study focuses exclusively on qualitative research, employing semi-structured interviews and document analysis. While this approach allows for in-depth exploration, it does not provide quantitative assessments of sustainability impact. Future research could expand upon this study by incorporating statistical analysis to measure the economic and environmental outcomes of sustainability initiatives.

Additionally, ethical considerations were carefully addressed. Given the commercial sensitivities of the luxury tourism industry, participant confidentiality was maintained, and all interviewees were fully informed of the research purpose and their right to anonymity.

#### 1.1.4 Expected contribution

The expected contribution of the work in this research paper is significant, particularly considering the identified gap in research, and does so by making two primary contributions. Theoretically, it expands existing literature on sustainable tourism by analysing how luxury lodges reconcile exclusivity with environmental and social imperatives. It explores whether sustainability can serve not as a constraint but as a new marker of luxury. Practically, it provides actionable recommendations to industry stakeholders on how to implement more inclusive and impactful sustainability strategies.

Key recommendations include:

- Reassessing ownership structures and addressing neocolonial dynamics in conservation and revenue distribution (Mbaiwa, 2017)
- Developing standardised models to evaluate the long-term impact of eco-tourism on biodiversity, employment, and local economies (Surmeier, 2020)
- Conducting guest surveys to better align sustainability initiatives with consumer expectations (Font & McCabe, 2017)
- Leveraging government incentives and public-private partnerships to overcome the high costs of green technology adoption.

These contributions lay the groundwork for a more politically feasible and evidence-based evolution of sustainable luxury tourism in South Africa.

## 1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to examine the interplay between luxury tourism and sustainability in South Africa. Using a multiple-case study of three luxury game lodges in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, the research seeks to identify the key sustainability challenges these businesses face, evaluate the effectiveness of existing sustainability practices, and explore innovative strategies for aligning luxury tourism with environmental and social responsibility. The study investigates how these lodges balance guest expectations, operational constraints, and community engagement in their pursuit of sustainable tourism models.

In doing so, the research contributes both theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, it extends current debates on the paradox of luxury and sustainability by assessing whether sustainability can be reframed as a form of exclusivity rather than a limitation. Practically, the study generates actionable recommendations for tourism operators, policymakers, and communities, supporting the development of inclusive and impact-driven sustainability strategies.

As luxury tourism in South Africa continues to grow, this study addresses an urgent need to better understand how the sector can evolve responsibly. By critically engaging with the tensions and synergies between exclusivity and equity, conservation and consumption, the research offers guidance for building more sustainable, resilient, and locally grounded luxury tourism models.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter explores the evolving relationship between luxury tourism and sustainability, presenting a structured review of the main themes, tensions, and gaps within existing academic literature. The review is organised into six sections: (2.1) the evolving definition of luxury tourism, (2.2) regional biases in current research, (2.3) the growth of luxury tourism in developing countries, (2.4) shifting consumer expectations around sustainability, (2.5) neocolonialism and conservation critiques, and (2.6) the paradox of luxury and sustainability. Each section builds toward the central objective of contextualising how South African luxury lodges navigate sustainability challenges, framing the literature around the study's three sub-questions.

### 2.1 Defining Luxury Tourism: A Shifting Paradigm

The work of Riina Iloranta (2022) explores the evolution of luxury consumption, with a specific focus on luxury tourism. Luxury tourism has, and is currently, undergoing a significant transformation, evolving from an elite and exclusive industry to a more experience-driven and personalized sector (Iloranta, 2022). Traditionally, Kapferer (2014) defines luxury as a symbol of status and exclusivity, where the rarity and craftsmanship of a product or experience determine its value. In tourism, this has translated into high-end accommodations, personalized service, and access to exclusive, pristine and rare environments. The concept of luxury is two dimensional: it is both a product and an experience (Iloranta, 2022). The product perspective emphasises the material features and aesthetics of luxury tourism, while the experience-based view places emphasis on personalization, unique and 'once-in-a-life-time' encounter (Iloranta, 2022). Importantly, Iloranta (2022) conducted a systematic literature review and found that scholarly attention to luxury tourism has significantly increased since 2010, highlighting a growing academic interest in the sector's transformation. In comparison, Kapferer's (2014) delves into the evolving landscape of luxury consumption, providing valuable insights into the dynamic forces shaping this industry.

Iloranta (2022) argues that luxury tourism has shifted from the material ownership of 'having' to the experiential value 'being', where guests seek intangible exclusivity and experiences, such as cultural immersion, adventure, and sustainability-conscious travel. Cristini et al. (2022) similarly note that luxury tourism is no longer solely about opulence and excess, instead, luxury travellers now prioritize meaningful experiences, a trend accelerated by the post-pandemic travel boom. Many critical questions have been raised as a result of this

shift, such as: How do luxury tourism businesses redefine exclusivity while integrating sustainability? Can sustainability enhance, rather than diminish, the prestige associated with luxury? And how do businesses avoid superficial sustainability, i.e., greenwashing, while meeting rising guest expectations? These guiding questions align directly with the research sub-questions explored in this study.

## 2.2 Regional Bias in Luxury Tourism Research

A major limitation in existing research is its Western, Eurocentric focus. Studies on luxury tourism sustainability predominantly analyse European, American, and Asian markets – which are considered to be more developed (Iloranta, 2022; Popescu & Olteanu, 2014), neglecting Africa’s unique economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dynamics. Furthermore, in the existing literature, luxury tourism is predominantly examined through the lens of luxury hotels and restaurants, shaping the perception of luxury tourism products (Iloranta, 2022). Consequently, research on emerging luxury experiences, like unconventional luxury, remains limited in the current discourse. Kapferer (2014) discusses luxury tourism broadly, yet fails to account for developing regions where issues of neocolonialism, conservation ethics, and local economic participation are crucial.

There is a notable absence of African case studies that capture the interplay between conservation, luxury, and inequality. South Africa, despite being one of the world’s leading luxury safari destinations, remains underrepresented in sustainability-focused luxury tourism research (Mbaiwa, 2017; Scheyvens, 2011). This review seeks to address this gap by drawing on African-based literature where available and by framing the current study as a contribution to regional inclusivity in sustainability debates.

## 2.3 The Growth of Luxury Tourism in Developing Countries

As noted in the above section, luxury tourism is on the rise as consumers behaviours and attitudes are shifting. Tourism, as a broad concept, has largely recovered from the shocks felt during the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Tourism, 2023). This is due to both the lifting of international travel bans, as well as an increase in consumer savings during the period where travel was prohibited (Department of Tourism, 2023). However, what is most important to note is the growth of the luxury tourism industry. According to report produced by Allied Market Research for their paper *Luxury Travel Market: Global Opportunity Analysis and the Industry Forecast, 2021 -2031*, the luxury travel market size is projected to be the fastest growing

segment of the travel industry worldwide (Anil & Roshan, 2023). In 2021, the global luxury travel market was valued at \$638.2 billion, and is projected to reach \$1650.5 billion by 2031 (Anil & Roshan, 2023). This growth is attributed to rising disposable income, particularly in Asia, and changing consumer motivations, which increasingly favour experience over materialism. However, the implications of this growth in developing regions remain underexplored. Thirumaran & Raghav (2017) emphasize the importance of understanding the unique socio-economic dynamics in emerging luxury destinations, noting how the coexistence of poverty and opulence raises new ethical and policy considerations. This is particularly relevant in the South African context, where luxury tourism often occurs adjacent to socio-economically marginalised communities.

### 2.3.1 Luxury Tourism in Developing Countries

It has been noted that due to the increased growth of luxury tourism in developing countries, it is vital to understand the stage and state of luxury tourism in emerging destinations (Thirumaran & Raghav, 2017) which has largely been overlooked in existing literature. Emerging literature focussing on luxury tourism in emerging economies has revealed the need to address the development and equity issues faced by developing countries in creating and maintaining luxury segments (Thirumaran & Raghav, 2017). Using empirical evidence from case studies conducted in India and Mexico, the paper offers a conceptual framework for understanding the intersection of luxury tourism and developing destinations, highlighting the unique challenges and characteristics of these contexts (Thirumaran & Raghav, 2017). Furthermore, the work of Thirumaran and Raghav (2017), emphasize the importance of considering the specificities of luxury travel in developing countries, such as the coexistence of poverty and luxury, and the impact on local communities.

This is an important contribution to the field of study as current literature lacks this, while also serving as a catalyst for further research on luxury tourism in developing regions to be conducted. However, a limitation of the is attributed to the limited existing literature on luxury tourism in developing destinations, which restricts the depth of analysis and understanding in certain areas. Overall, it should be noted that due to the increasing growth of luxury tourism in developing countries, there is an increasing need for literature and knowledge to be produced and shared on this subject.

### 2.3.2 South Africa's Luxury Tourism Boom

South Africa's luxury tourism market has recovered rapidly post-pandemic, with a 70.6% increase in international arrivals in 2023 (Department of Tourism, 2023). The Sabi Sands Game Reserve, a high-end safari destination, is witnessing record bookings, reflecting growing consumer demand for experiential, eco-conscious luxury travel. Despite this growth, developing economies face challenges in sustaining luxury tourism while ensuring environmental and economic equity (Thirumaran & Raghav, 2017). Legrand (2020) supports these concerns, emphasizing that in developing regions, luxury tourism is often exclusionary, benefitting foreign investors over local economies. This study examines whether South African lodges replicate these trends or successfully integrate local communities into their sustainability strategies.

## 2.4 Shifting Consumer Preferences and the Rise of Sustainable Luxury

### 2.4.1 Consumer Shift Toward Ethical Luxury

The luxury industry experienced a paradigm shift in the latter half of the 20th century, and has been evolving ever since (Cristini et al., 2022). A concept that was once exclusively associated with designer brands, was now more widely accessible through mass production and democratization (Cristini et al., 2022). This led to harmful consequences as a result of the shift in production, consumption, and post-consumption practices to supply this growing demand (Cristini et al., 2022). As early as 1997, Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist, raised warnings about the need for a transition in the luxury industry, urging a shift from conspicuous to considerate consumption (Cristini et al., 2022).

Fast forward to the present and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the luxury industry is undergoing another transformation (Cristini et al., 2022; Guzzetti et al., 2021). Cristini et al. (2022) argue that today's high-end travelers prioritize environmental and social responsibility, demanding transparency and ethical business practices. This has now been characterized by the shift in attitudes towards consumption, with individuals questioning whether their consumption habits contribute to their overall happiness as well as a growing awareness of the consequences of these behaviours (Cristini et al., 2022). Some individuals are adopting a more holistic approach, and re-evaluating their consumption desires (Cristini et al., 2022).

This trend is reflected in Virtuoso's 2023 Report, which found that 74% of luxury travellers are willing to pay more for sustainable tourism (Rosenberger, 2023). It can also be noted in

Airbnb's internal survey (2022), which indicated that 69% of luxury travellers actively seek accommodations with clear sustainability commitments.

Popescu and Olteanu (2014), mirror these sentiments by explaining how the traditional concept of luxury tourism has evolved significantly over the years. Historically, luxury tourism has been associated with opulent accommodations and high-end services (Popescu & Olteanu, 2014), but luxury tourism extends beyond just these material aspects. The importance of intangible and experiential factors in satisfying the demands of high-end clientele is now considered more desirable than just a five-star resort (Popescu & Olteanu, 2014). However, while consumer awareness has grown, Legrand (2020) warns that the hospitality industry often engages in greenwashing, marketing sustainability without implementing genuine environmental reforms.

#### 2.4.2 Greenwashing in Luxury Tourism

While sustainability is becoming a major selling point, many luxury tourism businesses engage in greenwashing-marketing sustainability efforts without making substantive environmental or social commitments (Legrand, 2020). Kapferer (2010, 2014) warns that luxury brands often use sustainability rhetoric to enhance brand image, rather than implementing real changes.

Cristini et al. (2022) found that many so-called 'eco-friendly' resorts fail to meet actual sustainability benchmarks, relying on vague eco-labelling. Legrand (2020) highlights the lack of standardized sustainability metrics, making it difficult for travellers to distinguish between genuine sustainability efforts and greenwashing tactics. This raises the question of transparency in South African luxury lodges-are their sustainability initiatives truly impactful, or are they primarily marketing tools?

### 2.5 Neocolonialism in Luxury Tourism

#### 2.5.1 Land Ownership and Local Marginalisation

Mbaiwa (2017) and Scheyvens (2011) critique luxury tourism for its neocolonial tendencies, where foreign-owned businesses extract profits while local communities bear the environmental and social costs. Bianchi & Stephenson (2014) argue that luxury tourism often reinforces historical power imbalances, particularly in Africa, where conservation practices frequently exclude indigenous landowners. In Botswana's Okavango Delta, 80% of luxury

safari lodges are foreign-owned, with minimal revenue filtering into local communities (Mbaiwa, 2017). In Kenya's Maasai Mara, conservation tourism has led to forced displacements of indigenous communities under the guise of wildlife protection (Brockington et al., 2008). In South Africa, many luxury game lodges operate on historically contested land, raising ethical concerns about land rights, economic justice, and conservation policies (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). This study explores whether similar issues exist in South Africa's luxury safari sector, questioning who owns and controls luxury lodges, how the profits distributed and whether or not the conservation initiatives benefit local communities.

### 2.5.2 Conservation vs Commodification

While some scholars argue that high-end tourism can fund conservation, others warn that it commodifies nature, restricts access, and reinforces inequality. These debates form a critical backdrop for evaluating the ethics and effectiveness of sustainability practices in South African game lodges.

## 2.6 Luxury Tourism and Wildlife Conservation

Luxury tourism is often marketed as a force for conservation, but its environmental impact is highly debated (Karanth & Karanth, 2012). The intricate relationship between luxury tourism and wildlife conservation is discussed by Karanth and Karanth (2012), and is comprehensive exploration of the synergies and challenges associated with integrating luxury travel experiences with wildlife preservation efforts. One of the major contributions of this work, is that it is one of the few pieces of literature that sheds light on the dynamic of luxury tourism's impact on wildlife. Furthermore, it highlights the role that luxury tourism business play in creating conservation initiatives in conjunction with exclusive and high end experiences (Karanth & Karanth, 2012). Similar to the work of Mbaiwa (2017) and Scheyvens (2011), which necessitates the balance of economic benefits with the social and cultural impacts on the communities that sustain luxury tourism. However, the true impact of luxury tourism on conservation remains contested, with some scholars viewing it as a viable funding model for conservation while others critique its exclusivity, commodification of nature, and neocolonial tendencies (Gössling & Peeters, 2015; Mbaiwa, 2017; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

### 2.6.1 Positive Contributions of Luxury Tourism to Conservation

Supporters of high-end eco-tourism argue that luxury safari lodges, when managed ethically, can contribute substantially to conservation efforts by funding anti-poaching measures, wildlife rehabilitation programs, and sustainable land management (Scheyvens, 2011; Legrand, 2020). One of the most successful models of luxury tourism-driven conservation is Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) program, which integrates conservation efforts with indigenous economic empowerment (Scheyvens, 2011). Empirical studies show that this model has contributed to a significant increase in Namibia's wildlife populations, reversing declines seen in the 1970s and 1980s (Scheyvens, 2011). This model demonstrates a successful integration of conservation, economic equity, and luxury tourism, serving as a potential blueprint for South Africa and other African nations.

According to the Department of Environmental Affairs (2023), private reserves have played a key role in the rewilding and protection of wildlife, particularly in regions where state conservation efforts have been underfunded. Many reserves implement conservation levies; fees charged to guests that go directly toward anti-poaching units, ranger patrols, and habitat restoration (Legrand, 2020). Some luxury lodges reinvest part of their profits into habitat restoration projects, preventing land degradation caused by overgrazing or human settlement encroachment (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2023). These conservation claims align with global trends in 'high-value, low-impact' tourism, where fewer guests paying premium prices are considered a more sustainable alternative to mass tourism (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these initiatives remains questionable when placed under scrutiny.

### 2.6.2 Critiques of Conservation-Based Luxury Tourism

Despite its conservation branding, luxury tourism has been widely criticized for reinforcing economic inequalities, restricting land access for local communities, and over-commercializing nature (Mbaiwa, 2017; Gössling & Peeters, 2015). Luxury tourism's reliance on high-profile species like elephants and rhinos has led to concerns that wildlife is being commodified for elite travelers, potentially undermining conservation ethics. Gössling & Peeters (2015) argue that the intensification of luxury safari tourism can lead to habitat degradation, as lodges, roads, and infrastructure are often built in fragile ecosystems with minimal regulation. Some reserves prioritize tourist access over wildlife needs, creating artificially high densities of safari vehicles

in prime wildlife zones, which can disrupt natural animal behaviours (Karanth & Karanth, 2012). In some regions, wildlife breeding programs have been criticized for prioritizing tourism revenue over genetic diversity, raising concerns about inbreeding and ecological manipulation (Brockington et al., 2008). These critiques suggest that while luxury lodges claim to protect wildlife, their profit-driven motives may sometimes compromise ecological integrity.

In addition, a key critique of private conservation areas is their tendency to restrict local community access to traditional lands, reinforcing historical land dispossession under the guise of environmental protection (Mbaiwa, 2017; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). In Botswana's Okavango Delta, over 80% of luxury safari lodges are foreign-owned, with little economic benefit filtering down to local communities (Mbaiwa, 2017). In South Africa, large portions of land historically occupied by indigenous groups were converted into private game reserves, limiting community access while generating profit for elite tourism operators (Brockington et al., 2008). In Kenya's Maasai Mara, conservation tourism has led to the forced displacement of Maasai communities, with some being denied access to grazing lands they historically depended on (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014). This raises ethical concerns: Who truly benefits from conservation-focused luxury tourism?

## 2.7 The Gap in Literature

Despite the growing interest in luxury tourism and sustainability, several significant gaps remain in the existing literature, particularly in relation to the African context, transparency in sustainability efforts, and the political economy of conservation tourism. The majority of research in luxury tourism sustainability is Western-centric, often focusing on European and North American luxury travel trends or on mass tourism sustainability models. However, in regions like South Africa, where the intersection of conservation, socio-economic inequality, and high-end tourism is uniquely complex, there remains limited academic engagement with these critical themes.

### 2.7.1 Lack of African Context in Luxury Tourism Sustainability Studies

Most academic research on sustainable tourism tends to focus on global luxury brands, hotel chains, and eco-resorts in developed countries (Legrand, 2020; Cristini et al., 2022). These studies analyse how luxury hotels in cities like Paris, London, or New York implement eco-friendly operational strategies, carbon offset programs, and ethical sourcing. However, these frameworks often fail to consider the unique environmental, economic, and historical

complexities of African luxury tourism markets. Tourism in Africa is deeply intertwined with wildlife conservation and community engagement, making the sustainability challenges of luxury game lodges fundamentally different from those faced by urban luxury hotels (Mbaiwa, 2017). The majority of case studies on luxury and sustainability in the African context focus on mass eco-tourism models rather than high-end exclusive tourism, leaving a gap in understanding how premium lodges balance conservation, exclusivity, and community integration (Brockington et al., 2008; Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014). South Africa's history of racial and economic inequality also plays a crucial role in shaping who owns, operates, and benefits from luxury tourism, yet few studies critically examine how these historical legacies influence sustainability practices (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

### 2.7.2 Greenwashing and Transparency Issues in Luxury Eco-Tourism

A growing body of literature critiques the misuse of sustainability narratives in the luxury tourism sector, particularly through greenwashing, where businesses market themselves as 'eco-friendly' without making substantive environmental or social contributions (Gössling & Peeters, 2015; Legrand, 2020). Many luxury safari lodges promote their sustainability initiatives without independent verification, making it difficult to assess whether they genuinely reduce their ecological footprint or simply rebrand their offerings for ethical consumers (Cristini et al., 2022). There is limited research on how luxury game reserves track and report their sustainability impact which (Legrand, 2020), and no standardized sustainability framework exists for luxury safari lodges, unlike the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) certification for hotels, making it difficult to compare actual sustainability efforts across different African reserves (Gössling & Peeters, 2015).

### 2.7.3 Neocolonialism in Conservation Tourism: Who Controls the Profits?

The intersection of luxury tourism, land ownership, and conservation in Africa has been widely debated in political ecology and tourism studies. However, limited research critically examines how economic benefits from high-end conservation tourism are distributed. Many private game reserves in South Africa are owned and operated by foreign investors, raising questions about who truly profits from conservation-focused luxury tourism (Mbaiwa, 2017; Brockington et al., 2008). Foreign ownership of safari lodges is common in Botswana, Kenya, and South Africa, where international investors control the most lucrative eco-tourism ventures, while local communities remain economically marginalized (Mbaiwa, 2017; Büscher & Fletcher,

2020). Revenue generated from high-end lodges often flows back to investors in Europe or North America, with only a small fraction reinvested into local conservation and community initiatives (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014). Some scholars argue that luxury conservation tourism perpetuates neocolonial economic structures, where African landscapes are marketed as pristine wilderness for elite foreign travelers, while local populations are excluded from land access and decision-making (Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

## 2.8 The Paradox of Luxury and Sustainability: A Critical Examination

The debate over whether luxury and sustainability can truly coexist is a recurring theme in academic literature. Luxury has traditionally been associated with exclusivity, rarity, and indulgence, often in direct contradiction to sustainability principles, which prioritize resource efficiency, environmental conservation, and equitable economic benefits (Kapferer, 2010; Cristini et al., 2022). Kapferer's (2010) work on the paradox of luxury and sustainability provides an early critical framework for understanding the tensions between opulence and ecological responsibility. The research highlights the conflicting expectations of luxury consumers, who desire high-quality, rare, and prestigious products, while at the same time becoming increasingly eco-conscious. This paradox is particularly evident in luxury tourism, where high-end travel experiences promise untouched nature, lavish accommodations, and exclusivity, yet rely on resource-intensive operations that can contribute to environmental degradation. However, recent research suggests that sustainability and luxury are no longer mutually exclusive concepts, particularly as consumer values shift towards mindful consumption and experiential luxury (Cristini et al., 2022; Guzzetti et al., 2021).

### 2.8.1 Consumer Expectations and Sustainable Luxury

Cristini et al. (2022) argue that luxury consumption has shifted away from material excess toward meaningful, experience-driven luxury, where sustainability is increasingly seen as an added value rather than a limitation. Unlike Kapferer (2010), who positions sustainability as a constraint to the traditional luxury model, Cristini et al. (2022) and Guzzetti et al. (2021) suggest that eco-consciousness has become a key element of prestige, with affluent travellers and consumers actively seeking responsible tourism options.

### 2.8.2 Corporate Responsibility and Ethical Practices

Legrand (2020) expands on Kapferer's (2010) framework by assessing how luxury brands and tourism operators integrate sustainability into their business models. This research suggests that luxury tourism companies must develop long-term sustainability strategies that include carbon neutrality, ethical sourcing, and conservation initiatives, not just marketing claims. Gössling & Peeters (2015) provide a more critical stance, arguing that many luxury tourism businesses engage in greenwashing, branding their operations as 'eco-friendly' while continuing to operate in highly unsustainable ways. This aligns with Kapferer's (2010) initial concern that sustainability might be more of a marketing tool than an actual industry shift.

### 2.9 Luxury Safari Tourism and Sustainability Integration

Studies on African luxury tourism reveal that exclusive safari lodges and eco-resorts are increasingly incorporating sustainability into their branding and operations (Mbaiwa, 2017; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). However, unlike the European luxury brands examined by Kapferer (2010), African luxury lodges face additional sustainability challenges, including energy instability, resource scarcity, and community relations. Mbaiwa (2017) critiques how some luxury lodges in Botswana and South Africa claim to support conservation while reinforcing neocolonial power structures, ensuring that profits remain concentrated among elite foreign investors. These comparative insights show that while Kapferer (2010) provides a foundational understanding of the paradox of luxury and sustainability, more recent studies have expanded the discussion by highlighting evolving consumer attitudes, corporate strategies, and the role of sustainability in tourism industries across different regional contexts.

However, more recent studies indicate that consumers are increasingly viewing sustainability as a sign of quality, ethical production, and superior craftsmanship (Cristini et al., 2022; Guzzetti et al., 2021). In addition, Kapferer's (2010) study does not address how sustainability plays out differently across global markets, particularly in developing countries where eco-tourism is a major industry. In contrast, Mbaiwa (2017) and Büscher & Fletcher (2020) show that luxury tourism's sustainability claims often mask deeper economic inequalities in Africa's conservation tourism sector.

## 2.10 Literature Summary and Theoretical Framing

The literature review has explored the evolving relationship between luxury tourism and sustainability, highlighting the tensions, opportunities, and structural challenges that define this sector. It is evident that while sustainability has become an increasingly important factor in luxury tourism, its implementation remains contested and inconsistent. The key theme of Redefining Luxury Tourism is highlighted by Iloranta (2022) and Kapferer (2014), as the shift from material-based luxury to experience-driven tourism, where exclusivity is linked to authenticity, privacy, and sustainability. Kapferer (2010) argues that luxury and sustainability exist in tension, as traditional notions of opulence and excess conflict with ethical consumption trends. However, Legrand (2020) and Cristini et al. (2022) suggest that sustainability can enhance exclusivity, making it a desirable feature rather than a limitation.

The majority of luxury tourism research focuses on European and North American markets, with limited exploration of African contexts (Iloranta, 2022; Popescu & Olteanu, 2014). This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining South African luxury lodges. Literature such as Gössling & Peeters (2015) and Legrand (2020) reveal that while consumers express interest in sustainable tourism, many businesses engage in greenwashing, using sustainability rhetoric for marketing without substantive ecological impact. Studies by Mbaiwa (2017) and Büscher & Fletcher (2020) highlight how foreign ownership of safari lodges limits local economic benefits, reinforcing historic inequalities under the guise of conservation efforts.

Existing research offers valuable insights into luxury tourism's sustainability challenges, however, it largely neglects the unique socio-economic and environmental complexities of African destinations. Much of the literature focuses on luxury hospitality in the Global North, failing to engage with African contexts where conservation, land rights, and economic inequality are deeply intertwined (Mbaiwa, 2017; Scheyvens, 2011). While sustainability is now a marketing staple in luxury tourism, few studies critically assess whether high-end eco-tourism delivers measurable environmental benefits (Cristini et al., 2022; Gössling & Peeters, 2015). There is also little research on who controls luxury conservation profits, raising questions about whether sustainability initiatives genuinely support local communities or primarily benefit international investors (Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020).

This study aims to fill these gaps by providing an in-depth analysis of South African luxury game lodges, exploring whether their sustainability strategies truly foster equitable and ethical

tourism practices. This literature review demonstrates that sustainable luxury tourism is both a growing trend and a contested concept. While the industry presents significant opportunities for conservation and economic growth, it also risks reinforcing pre-existing inequalities and exploiting sustainability narratives for commercial gain. Existing research underscores the need for a critical reassessment of how luxury tourism is structured, particularly in Africa, where the balance between economic development, environmental preservation, and community participation remains fragile.

To support the structure of the research, Table 1 below summarises key findings from the literature, organised by the study’s three sub-questions. This helps demonstrate how the review links directly to the research design, ensuring the literature is not treated as a standalone element.

**Table 1: Summary of Literature in Relation to Research Sub-Questions**

Sub-Question	Key Themes in Literature	Key References
<b>1. How do luxury tourism businesses navigate sustainability challenges within their specific contexts?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structural barriers: infrastructure, energy access, guest expectations</li> <li>• Neocolonial ownership and foreign profit flows</li> <li>• Community exclusion and land access issues</li> <li>• Tensions between conservation and commodification</li> </ul>	Mbaiwa (2017); Büscher & Fletcher (2020); Brockington et al. (2008); Karanth & Karanth (2012); Gössling & Peeters (2015)
<b>2. What sustainability initiatives are already in place, and what more can be done?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of eco-certification and conservation levies</li> <li>• Community-driven conservation models (e.g., Namibia's CBNRM)</li> <li>• Sustainability as a marketing strategy (greenwashing)</li> <li>• Lack of standardised impact metrics</li> </ul>	Legrand (2020); Scheyvens (2011); Gössling & Peeters (2015); Cristini et al. (2022); Department of Environmental Affairs (2023)
<b>3. How can luxury tourism businesses improve their sustainability practices?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positioning sustainability as a form of exclusivity</li> <li>• Developing measurable sustainability benchmarks</li> <li>• Aligning business strategy with ethical and long-term goals</li> <li>• Engaging communities equitably in tourism development</li> </ul>	Kapferer (2010); Cristini et al. (2022); Guzzetti et al. (2021); Thirumaran & Raghav (2017); Popescu & Olteanu (2014)



### 3. Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research strategy, design, and methods adopted to explore how luxury tourism businesses in South Africa navigate sustainability. The structure follows eight key sections: (3.1) Research Strategy and Approach, (3.2) Research Design, (3.3) Data Collection Methods, (3.4) Research Instruments, (3.5) Sampling, (3.6) Data Analysis Methods, (3.7) Research Criteria, and (3.8) Ethical Considerations. Each section aligns with the overall qualitative, inductive, and case-based methodology.

#### 3.1 Research Strategy and Approach

Inductive research strategies and a qualitative data approach play a pivotal role in uncovering patterns, themes, and insights in research (Liu, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019; Thomas, 2003). The inductive approach, as explained by Liu (2016), is a flexible research strategy, which allows researchers to derive general conclusions from specific observations. It is well-suited for exploratory studies where the objective is to generate new knowledge and insights (Liu, 2016), as in the case of the research conducted in this paper. Thus, inductive was chosen over a deductive strategy as deductive methods start with preconceived theories, while the inductive approach allows theories to emerge from the data itself (Thomas, 2003). To support this, the study employs thematic coding through a structured yet flexible analysis method (see Section 3.6). Inductive research encourages a holistic understanding of luxury tourism, enabling analysis of the interplay between environmental, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Thomas (2003) and Liu (2016) further explain the principles of using an inductive strategy, in particular how the qualitative data must be systematically coded to develop themes, and patterns. In qualitative data collection, researchers employ diverse methods such as interviews and document analysis to gather context-specific information (Liu, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019; Thomas, 2003). Both methods were be utilized in this study, which will be further discussed in the below section on *Data Collection*.

Luxury tourism is inherently context-dependent, shaped by the unique sociocultural and environmental factors. Inductive research acknowledges the importance of this context and enables my research to develop insights grounded in the specific realities of the South African luxury tourism industry. In addition to this, inductive research encourages a holistic understanding of the subject matter. In the case of luxury tourism, which involves a complex

interplay of various factors, and an inductive approach allows for the examination of the situation in its entirety. Lastly, inductive research is particularly conducive to theory building. By allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data, the study has the potential to contribute to the development of new theoretical frameworks or enhance existing ones. This is valuable in a field like luxury tourism which is evolving. In conclusion, the selection of an inductive research strategy for the study on luxury tourism in South Africa reflects the need for an open, contextually sensitive, and exploratory approach.

## 3.2 Research Design, Data Collection Methods, and Research Instruments

### 3.2.1 Research Design

In the design of the research strategy, a case study approach was adopted, as outlined by Yin (2018), to emphasise a holistic and multiple-case design. According to Yin (2018), the case study methodology is particularly suitable when the aim is to explore real-life circumstances within their natural context and gain a deep understanding of complex social phenomena. The case study method was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth examination of real-world sustainability practices within their natural context, capturing the complexity of operational and strategic decisions in each lodge (Yin, 2018). The study focused on three key aspects:

- Sustainability initiatives implemented
- Challenges faced in adopting sustainable practices
- Opportunities for improvement

The selection of the three luxury game lodges in this study was driven by their geographical significance, sustainability initiatives, and market positioning within South Africa's luxury tourism industry.

### 3.2.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Given that this research explores how luxury game lodges navigate sustainability challenges, it was essential to choose lodges that represent varied approaches to sustainability while maintaining a commitment to high-end tourism experiences. In the findings and analysis sections, these lodges will be referred to as 'Lodge 1,' 'Lodge 2,' and 'Lodge 3' to ensure confidentiality.

The chosen multiple-case design aligns with the study's objectives of exploring and explaining complex phenomena within a real-life context. Multiple-case designs offer the advantage of enhancing the external validity of the findings by allowing for comparisons and generalizations across cases (Yin, 2009). This approach ensures that the study goes beyond idiosyncratic insights from a single case and contributes to the development of more robust and transferable knowledge.

**Table 2: Summary of List of Interviewees**

	Interviewee Code	Interviewee Citation	Role
<b>Lodge 1</b>	L1, P1	Lodge 1 Interview, P1	Head of Sustainability
	L1, P2	Lodge 1 Interview, P2	Camp Manager
	L1, P3	Lodge 1 Interview, P3	Game Ranger
<b>Lodge 2</b>	L2, P1	Lodge 2 Interview, P1	Head of Community and Environment
	L2, P2	Lodge 2 Interview, P2	Camp Manager
	L2, P3	Lodge 2 Interview, P3	Professional Guide & Tracker
<b>Lodge 3</b>	L3, P1	Lodge 3 Interview, P1	Head of Sustainability
	L3, P2	Lodge 3 Interview, P2	Camp Manager
	L3, P3	Lodge 3 Interview, P3	Professional Guide & Tracker

### 3.2.3 Data Collection

The choice of a qualitative data collection method for this research topic is driven by several considerations that align with the nature and objectives of the study. The rationale for using qualitative methods is because a deeper understanding of the cases can be achieved by exploring the intricacies of human experiences and contextual factors. Luxury tourism in South Africa involves a complex interplay of environmental and social factors. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and document analysis, will allow me to capture the depth of these complex dynamics. The insights gained from qualitative data collection are crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of luxury tourism and the challenges it faces within the South African context.

Additionally, luxury tourism involves a diverse range of stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and policymakers. Using a qualitative data collection method, the research will directly engage with the various stakeholders, sharing their perspectives and experiences of the challenges of navigating sustainability within their organizations. Qualitative methods, particularly those associated with an inductive approach, allow themes to

emerge organically from the data collected. This flexibility is crucial for capturing the dynamic and evolving nature of luxury tourism and identifying unforeseen challenges and opportunities.

Lastly, this research aims to address societal challenges associated with luxury tourism, and qualitative data collection methods provide a platform for understanding not only the challenges but also potential solutions. Engaging with stakeholders allows for the exploration of actionable insights that can inform policies and strategies to mitigate negative impacts and enhance positive contributions of luxury tourism in South Africa.

#### 3.2.4 Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews are a widely employed research method that lies on the continuum between structured and unstructured interviews, according to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021). In semi-structured interviews, researchers design a set of open-ended questions while allowing flexibility for probing and exploring new avenues of inquiry during the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This will allow me, as the researcher to have a combination of pre-determined questions, while still allowing myself flexibility to adapt and improvise in each interview to delve deeper into certain topics based on the each different participant's responses. This flexibility allows for a dynamic and interactive exchange, fostering a richer understanding of the participant's experiences, perspectives, and insights (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

In the context of investigating, *Luxury Tourism in South Africa: Navigating opportunities and barriers to address sustainability challenges*, semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate as they provide flexibility and depth, are well suited for capturing qualitative rich data and can be tailored to each of the 3 participants that were interviewed per each game lodge.

Therefore semi-structured interviews offer the methodological versatility needed to navigate the complexities of luxury tourism in South Africa. This approach aligns with the qualitative nature of the study, allowing for a nuanced exploration of sustainability challenges and opportunities within the context of game lodges, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive and contextually relevant analysis. The templates used to guide these interviews can be found in the Appendix.

### 3.3 Sampling

It is vital when undergoing the sample selection process, to select a sample of the population that is going to represent the population in a meaningful way, to address the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, as the sample taken needs to accurately represent its population, it is important to first define the population that will be under review in this research paper. Given the fact that the overarching research question refers to luxury tourism in South Africa, the population relevant to this study would be all South African businesses offering luxury travel experience. However, it is not feasible to interview this population group as it is too large. A target population has, therefore, been defined as all South African businesses offering luxury wildlife or safari travel experiences. A sample of 3 South African luxury game lodges operating in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, will be selected. Once selected, a section will be added explaining the appropriateness of these game lodges.

These lodges were selected using a non-random (non-probability) method, using a purposive sampling approach (Saunders et al., 2019). Also referred to as judgemental sampling, purposive sampling is used when discernment is used to select cases that are believed to be the best fit for answering the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, it is also crucial to critically assess the impact of not including certain cases in the sample, and how this will affect the research (Saunders et al., 2019). When working with relatively small samples, like in case study research, or when you want to pick instances that are especially instructive, purposeful sampling is popular (Saunders et al., 2019). The lodges selected for sampling all have homogeneous characteristics which was a conscious decision, as it allows for a greater comparisons to be made (Saunders et al., 2019), exploring each in more depth in order to determine both minor and major differences between each lodges sustainability practices.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Methods

The Framework Analysis is a comprehensive qualitative data analysis method that involves a systematic and transparent approach to organizing data (Kiernan & Hill, 2018). It starts with a predefined framework, outlining key themes and concepts relevant to the research objectives (Kiernan & Hill, 2018). Researcher will then systematically code data according to the predetermined framework (Kiernan & Hill, 2018). According to Kiernan and Hill (2018), coding involves categorizing and indexing data into predefined themes or concepts, ensuring a structured approach to analysis. In addition to this, the framework analysis makes use of a

matrix display which represents the intersection of themes across the cases (Kiernan & Hill, 2018). This provides researchers with a visual representation of patterns or relationships (Kiernan & Hill, 2018). Given the complexity of the luxury tourism landscape and the need to address societal and environmental challenges, the matrix display in Framework Analysis becomes a valuable tool. It visually represents the relationships between themes and data points, facilitating a nuanced analysis and aiding in the identification of interconnected factors.

Lastly, the framework analysis is considered to be an iterative process – which allows researchers to refine the framework throughout the analysis (Kiernan & Hill, 2018). This makes this analysis method appropriate for the research question proposed in this paper, as the iterative nature is particularly valuable when dealing with complex research questions, such as those related to societal challenges and opportunities in luxury tourism.

While the grounded theory is a valuable alternative, the framework analysis offers a balance between structure and flexibility. The grounded theory, although strong in generating theory (Kiernan & Hill, 2018), too exploratory for this research, which aims to address specific challenges and opportunities in the luxury tourism sector.

### 3.5 Research Criteria

In qualitative research, criteria such as transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity are essential for ensuring the quality of the study (Yadav, 2022). Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied or transferred to other contexts or settings (Yadav, 2022). This can be enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and methods, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar situations (Yadav, 2022). While the research conducted for this report is specific, by making use of the multiple case study approach and the in-depth analysis of the sustainability practices of each game lodge, it is also transferable. What is relevant to a reader can be adopted and adapted to their specific context given the themes found.

According to Yadav (2022), dependability is concerned with the consistency of the study's findings over time. To establish this, one should document all data collection processes and any changes made during the study (Yadav, 2022). This ensures that the study can be replicated, and decisions made during the research are traceable. This study is extremely dependable as

everything is being recorded and documented for grading purposes, and thus there is a high level of transparency in the report.

Relating to the objectivity of the study, confirmability ensures that the findings are not influenced by biases (Yadav, 2022). Therefore, the objective is to show that the findings are grounded in the data rather than influenced by the researchers' perspectives (Yadav, 2022). The research conducted in this report is objective, as I do not have an agenda or any preconceived biases regarding this study, I am just trying to gain a better understanding of how luxury tourism is navigating sustainability and the challenges they come across.

Lastly, authenticity refers to faithfulness of the findings to the experiences of the participants (Yadav, 2022). Participant feedback in the reporting can contribute to the authenticity of the study and help in avoiding misinterpretations, which this study will do.

### 3.6 Limitations

This research faces limitations associated with its inductive strategy, potentially reducing generalizability and transferability by focusing on specific cases. While acknowledging this, this particular study prioritizes rich, context-specific insights crucial to the research question (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Ellis and Levy (2009) suggest that a possible limitation of using a qualitative data approach is that it is subjective and context-dependent, which raises concerns about objectivity and replicability. Yet, this can be addressed through transparency in data collection and analysis processes. Another limitation of qualitative data collection methods is that interviews can be biased based on the participant, while document analysis may lack real-time insights depending on when they were created (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Holistic, multiple case studies as proposed by Yin (2018), may lead to information overload, but mitigation involves prioritizing key themes for analysis to balance depth and breadth (Yin, 2018; Ellis & Levy, 2009). Purposive sampling may introduce selection bias, countered by clearly defined criteria. Despite these limitations, the research outcome's impact is managed through discussed mitigation techniques.

### 3.7 Research Ethics

The chosen research methodology, characterized by inductive research strategies and a qualitative data approach, raises important ethical considerations that demand careful attention throughout the research process. Given the nature of qualitative data collection through

interviews, obtaining informed consent from participants is paramount. Before conducting interviews, clear communication on the purpose of the study will be provided, as well as ensuring that participants understand the voluntary nature of their involvement. Additionally, participants will be assured of the confidentiality of their responses. All interviews will be conducted anonymously, with only the job title of the participant being shared in the research. Furthermore, it is crucial that participant autonomy and creating a non-coercive environment during interviews is created to uphold ethical standards.

Luxury tourism is intricately connected to cultural and societal contexts. As the research of this study, I must approach the interviews with cultural sensitivity, acknowledging and respecting the diverse perspectives and practices of South African luxury game lodges. This includes being aware of potential cultural nuances in communication styles and ensuring that the research process does not inadvertently contribute to cultural misunderstandings or misrepresentations.

Maintaining transparency in reporting is an ethical imperative. I will be documenting a clear account of the research process, such as the selection criteria for game lodges, the sampling approach, and any changes made during the study. This will all be shared with my supervisor in order to ensure full transparency throughout the data collection process. Reflexivity is crucial in acknowledging the my potential biases, and any preconceptions that might influence the research. Transparent reporting and reflexivity contribute to the authenticity and trustworthiness of the study.

By acknowledging the limitations associated with qualitative research, as the researcher, I must actively work to mitigate potential risks. This includes addressing concerns related to subjectivity, context-dependency, and selection bias. Rigorous documentation of the research process, adherence to ethical guidelines, and supervisor scrutiny can help minimize these limitations and enhance the credibility of the study.

In conclusion, the ethical implications of the chosen research methodology underscore the need for a conscientious and reflexive approach. By prioritizing informed consent, confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, and societal impact, the research aims to uphold the highest ethical standards. Transparent reporting and mitigation of limitations further contribute to the ethical integrity of the study, ensuring that it aligns with the principles of responsible and respectful research conduct.

## 4. Research Findings

This section of the research study presents the key findings, focusing on how luxury lodges navigate the intersection of sustainability and creation of high-end experiences in their operations. The findings are derived from interviews, document analysis, lodge specific case studies, and observations. They provide insight into the strategies employed by the lodges interviewed, to address challenges such as energy management, guest education, conservation efforts, and community engagement.

As mentioned in the methodology, an inductive research strategy and qualitative data analysis approach was chosen for this study as both play pivotal roles in uncovering patterns, themes, and insights in research (Liu, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019; Thomas, 2003). In drawing from interviews with the various stakeholders across multiple lodges, analysing their sustainability documents and operational brochures, the discussion identifies recurring trends, current practices and critical challenges to implementing sustainable tourism practices within a South African context. It is important to note that while Luxury Eco-Tourism represents a niche segment within the broader tourism industry, its specialized nature does not preclude it from adopting sustainable practices observed in other sectors and segments. Its relatively small scale, innovative and dynamic ethos provide a unique opportunity to draw inspiration from successful case studies across industries. By adapting proven sustainability models and learning pre-existing, effective strategies, Luxury Eco-Tourism operators can accelerate their progress toward environmental and operational excellence, ensuring that their practices not only meet but exceed industry benchmarks.

The key themes presented in the below table reflect the central challenges and opportunities that emerged during the interviews with the three luxury lodges. These themes highlight the interconnected social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability within the context of luxury tourism in South Africa.

**Table 3: Key Themes identified in the interviews**

	<i>Enablers/Opportunities</i>	<i>Barriers/Challenges</i>
<b>Social Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Community engagement initiatives</i></li> <li>- <i>Local partnerships</i></li> <li>- <i>Training &amp; education programs</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Balancing the luxury offering with meaningful, sustainable practices</i></li> <li>- <i>Risk of cultural commodification</i></li> <li>- <i>Neocolonialism &amp; Greenwashing</i></li> <li>- <i>Lack of access to education</i></li> </ul>

<p><b>Economic Sustainability</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Attract eco-conscious tourists willing to pay a premium for an eco-friendly experience</i></li> <li>- <i>Long-term cost savings from investments in new technologies</i></li> <li>- <i>Local supply chain development</i></li> <li>- <i>Increasing competitiveness of global luxury eco-tourism market</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Dependency on international tourists</i></li> <li>- <i>Financial constraints due to high upfront costs OR Dependency on external funding</i></li> <li>- <i>Balancing expectation amenities luxury with sustainability</i></li> <li>-</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environmental Sustainability</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>New technology (eg Electric Safari Vehicle)</i></li> <li>- <i>Collaborations with conservation organizations</i></li> <li>- <i>Shifting global trends towards net-zero, experiential travel</i></li> <li>- <i>Greater awareness of sustainability (globally)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>High up-front costs &amp; logistical implications</i></li> <li>- <i>Lack of infrastructure in more rural regions</i></li> <li>- <i>Resistance / lack of co-operation from guests</i></li> <li>- <i>Lack of awareness of sustainability (locally)</i></li> <li>- <i>Wildlife poaching</i></li> </ul>

The following section will present the themes identified in the findings in more detail, drawing on information obtained from lodge interviews, sustainability reports, and observations. Firstly, the interviews revealed that social sustainability is a significant focus for the lodges, with opportunities such as community engagement initiatives, partnerships with local organizations, and training programs frequently discussed. However, challenges such as balancing luxury with meaningful sustainable practices, the risk of cultural commodification, and limited access to education were also recurring concerns. For example, interviewees noted the difficulty of integrating sustainability into guest experiences without compromising the high standards of luxury expected by travellers.

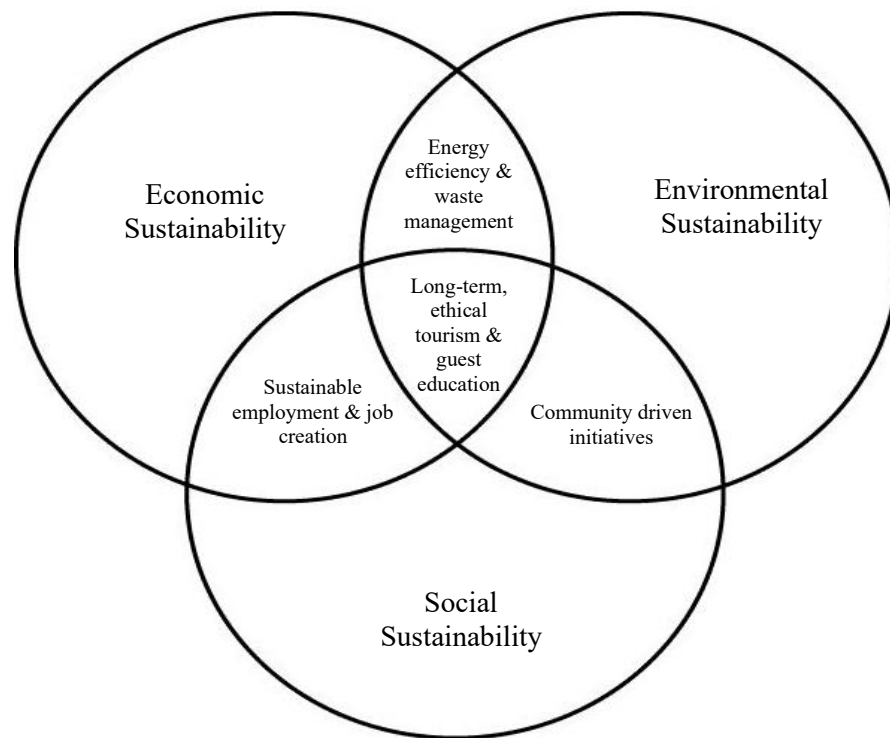
Secondly, economic sustainability was also a recurring theme, with the lodges identifying opportunities such as attracting eco-conscious travellers and developing local supply chains. However, challenges such as dependency on international tourists and financial constraints due to the high costs of sustainability initiatives were prevalent. The interviews underscored the vulnerability of lodges to global economic shifts, such as those experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need to diversify their offerings to create more resilient business models.

Lastly, in terms of environmental sustainability, the lodges highlighted innovations like renewable energy technologies and collaborations with conservation organizations. These are seen as critical enablers of their sustainability goals. At the same time, the interviews pointed

to logistical barriers, such as high upfront costs for renewable energy installations and the lack of infrastructure in rural areas, which hinder the implementation of these solutions. Wildlife poaching and the challenge of educating guests about sustainability without reducing their sense of indulgence also emerged as significant barriers.

While social, economic and environmental sustainability can stand alone, they are deeply connected, especially in the context of luxury eco-tourism, and the below Venn Diagram represents this. For example, a lodge might focus on social impact by creating jobs and supporting local businesses, but without financial stability, these efforts won't last. Similarly, investing in renewable energy and conservation is great for the environment, but without strong financial support, scaling these initiatives becomes difficult. A lodge that transitions to solar power is not just focusing on the environment, it also reduces long-term costs, making the business more financially sustainable. With these savings, the lodge can invest in staff training, community development, or conservation projects, strengthening its social impact. In addition, if a lodge sources food from local farmers instead of importing it, it cuts down on carbon emissions while also creating jobs and keeping money in the local economy. The reality is, no aspect of sustainability works in isolation. Conservation protects the wildlife and landscapes that attract tourists, while ethical labour practices ensure communities benefit from tourism's success. If any one of these pillars is ignored, the whole model becomes less stable. By recognizing how social, environmental, and economic sustainability feed into each other, luxury lodges can create a tourism model that benefits people, the planet, and business in the long run. Thus while the current practices of the luxury lodges have been separated in the below sections into the three main spheres, it is important to not overlook their interconnectedness.

*Figure 1: Venn Diagram illustrating the interconnectedness of the three sustainability dimensions*



## 4.1 Social Sustainability

### 4.1.1 Education and Skills Development

It was noted that these lodges recognize that their long-term success is intrinsically linked to the prosperity of their surrounding communities. To this end, all three lodges spoke about how they invest in comprehensive educational programs aimed at skill development, literacy improvement, and economic empowerment of their surrounding communities. Many lodges support literacy programs, particularly for women and children from nearby villages.

A learning centre established by Lodge 3 reported that 72% of their adult learners are woman and 50% of the children are girls (Interview Lodge 3, P2). By collaborating with local schools and NGOs, each lodge provides access to resources and qualified educators. For instance, a literacy centre established by Lodge 1 has increased the reading and writing proficiency of over 500 children within its first year. Lodge 1 has also partnered with Lobster Inc, a digital platform which contains a learning library of over 250 industry-accredited courses, developed by leading subject matter experts. The programmes cover a wide range of practical hospitality training courses that are accessible to staff 24/7. In addition to this, the Learning Centre also provides learning opportunities for English and digital literacy (Interview Lodge 1, P1). This enables

broader learning and allows for growth opportunity, which supports our staff and gives them the opportunity to pursue their own career development in various courses across hospitality and ICDL (digital skills). Beyond direct employment, this lodge enables community members to benefit from tourism by offering training in crafts, agriculture, and business management. This program has built resilience within the community, equipping them with the tools needed to participate actively in conservation and economic initiatives.

Despite these successes, several challenges hinder the full potential of these initiatives. Limited funding poses a significant barrier to scaling these programs, as sustaining long-term educational opportunities requires consistent financial and logistical support. The reliance on external digital platforms like Lobster Inc also highlights the issue of digital access in rural communities, where infrastructure such as stable internet connectivity and access to digital devices is often inadequate. Furthermore, the educational gap in rural areas means that some learners may lack foundational skills, requiring additional support and resources to ensure they can fully benefit from these programs. Additionally, cultural barriers may limit participation, particularly for women and girls, due to traditional gender roles or societal expectations amongst local villages. Encouraging community-wide buy-in and addressing these barriers requires ongoing engagement and awareness efforts, which can be resource-intensive, as well as causing tensions between the lodges and their surrounding communities.

On the flip side, however, these very same challenges also pose unique opportunities for the lodges to improve their social responsibility and sustainability initiatives. By addressing infrastructural gaps, such as improving internet connectivity and providing devices, lodges can create lasting access to education for staff and community members, creating a strong relationship and sense of community amongst the lodges and villages, despite the costs involved with this.

The Tracker Academy was founded in 2010 by two lodge alumni with the support of a philanthropist and operates under the auspices of the Peace Parks Foundation.

*“The Tracker Academy stands as a remarkable initiative that not only restores indigenous knowledge but also addresses critical gaps in the conservation industry. Its mission transcends traditional education by empowering professional trackers to become ambassadors for conservation through a curriculum rooted in authenticity, ancient bushcraft, and modern application.”* (Interview Lodge 1, P2).

The Academy integrates traditional knowledge passed down from generation to generation, with modern conservation practices, training trackers to excel in eco-tourism, wildlife monitoring, anti-poaching, and research by providing students with full facilities, access to the Learning Centre, and medical support, ensuring an inclusive and enriching learning environment. With education costs of R130,000 per learner fully funded by donations, the program is accessible to students recruited from areas near Southern Africa's national parks (Lodge 1, Impact Report 2024). Since its inception, the Academy has trained over 250 trackers, with 94% securing employment in the conservation sector. 15 graduates have been employed by lodge itself, 120 employed in other safari lodges, 27 in anti-poaching organizations, 23 in research, 26 in animal monitoring, 7 in predator habituation and 5 in conservation management (Lodge 1, Impact Report 2024).

Furthermore, by tailoring training programs to the specific needs of local communities—such as agricultural practices adapted to climate change or small business management—lodges can amplify their impact, as seen in the seed initiate at Lodge 2. This can also contribute to a broader goal of creating a self-sufficient, skilled workforce capable of participating in conservation and eco-tourism initiatives, as noted with the Tracker Academy. Moreover, the focus on gender equity in educational efforts provides a foundation for broader societal transformation, fostering empowerment and leadership opportunities for women within the community.

#### 4.1.2 Guest Education and Cultural Preservation

A subsequent challenge that luxury lodges face is the education and awareness of conservation, both locally and internationally. Luxury tourism in contemporary contexts extends beyond the provision of five-star accommodations and exclusive experiences. Increasingly, it plays a pivotal role in addressing societal and environmental challenges, particularly in regions of high ecological and cultural significance. Education—encompassing guest awareness, staff training, community empowerment, and wildlife conservation—is at the core of this transformation. By fostering sustainable practices, luxury lodges act as platforms for meaningful change, engaging a variety of stakeholders to ensure holistic development.

Both Lodge 2 and 3 use an immersive approach to the education of their guests with respect to conservation. They offer nature walks, led by certified and trained Game Rangers and Trackers, who impart knowledge about the local flora and fauna of their respective reserves. These interactions not only enhance the guest experience but also cultivate a deeper appreciation for

the fragility of ecosystems. By incorporating local traditions, languages, and storytelling into guest interactions, lodges highlight the intrinsic link between communities and their environments. For example, Lodge 3 encourages their guides, chefs, and staff members to share personal narratives about their cultural heritage and the surrounding environment through guided tours (both of the property and of the surrounding community), dining experiences, and evening storytelling sessions hosted at an evening bonfire or sunset drinks stop by local members of staff. These interactions are carefully curated to connect guests with the cultural and ecological history of the region.

Lodge 2, P2, noted that the local community benefits as their traditions and languages are preserved and celebrated, fostering a sense of pride and cultural continuity. Simultaneously, guests gain a deeper appreciation of the intrinsic relationship between the community and their natural environment, enriching their overall experience. This approach also promotes mutual understanding and respect while creating economic opportunities for the community through employment and cultural exchange. These narratives often emphasize how conservation efforts directly benefit local populations. Lodge 2, P2, also stated that such initiatives align with the growing trend of transformative and experiential travel, where guests seek experiences that create a positive impact, both personally and environmentally.

#### 4.1.3 Social Sustainability in Food Sourcing

At Lodge 2, the culinary dining experience serves as another place to communicate their approach to sustainable food practices with a storytelling approach. The lodge adopts a ‘farm-to-table’ methodology, emphasizing the local sourcing and growing of produce. It was explained (Interview Lodge 2, P1) that during meals, a camp manager or chef will engage with guests by coming to the table to elaborate on the origin of their meal, highlighting how the vegetables and other produce are primarily grown in the lodge’s on-site organic garden or sourced from a local farmer. A challenge that Lodge faced was that it was becoming more and more reliant on their established supply chain from Johannesburg, which is over 450kms away. Thus, the introduction of the farm-to-table approach has reduced their reliance on this while simultaneously creating employment and up-skilling opportunities for staff and community members. In 2022, it was reported (Interview Lodge 2, P3), that from the purchasing of produce from the on-site garden, approximately R10 000 additional income was generated for the 32 staff members growing the produce. The seeds used for planting in Lodge 2’s on-site garden are procured from local suppliers in the surrounding community, a socially sustainable practice

whereby Lodge 2 supports regional agricultural ecosystems and reduces the carbon footprint associated with long-distance seed transportation. The cultivation of crops in the lodge's garden provides consistent employment opportunities for community members, integrating the social dimension of sustainability into their operations.

## 4.2 Economic Sustainability

### 4.2.1 Energy Efficiency

Beyond renewable energy and new innovations, each lodge independently spoke about how they have implemented 'smaller-scale' methods of achieving a more energy efficient operational model. The replacement of traditional incandescent bulbs with LED lights has drastically reduced energy consumption across all three lodges. LEDs require a fraction of the power of conventional bulbs while providing superior brightness and longevity. Lodge 2 has installed real-time energy monitoring tools that enables the lodge to track usage patterns, identify inefficiencies, and optimize consumption. Smart sensors installed throughout the property ensure that energy is not wasted on unoccupied spaces, such as guest rooms or conference areas when guest and staff are not making use of this space. These sensors are linked to a control system whereby management at the lodge is able to control the aircon functions in each room, from a remote (Interview Lodge 2, P2), and can thus turn off these appliances when the room is not in use.

However, it was noted amongst all three lodges that energy management extends beyond just operational efficiency, and part of their energy efficient model has to include carbon accounting and offset programs. By reducing energy consumption and transitioning to renewables, Lodge 1 has significantly lowered its carbon emissions, by 676 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 2015 to 2022, (Lodge 1, Impact Report 2024). It is noted the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on the data capturing for 2020 and 2021. However, 2022 was the first full year of operations since Covid19, and despite the increased use of the generator as a result of the increasing black outs across South Africa, the lodge still continued on its commitment to reducing their carbon footprint and improving their carbon efficiency.

As part of their carbon offsetting initiative, Lodge 1 has implemented a Spekboom Farm.

*“Spekboom is a hardy succulent that is native to South Africa, and due to its unique biological properties, it is highly effective at offsetting our carbon emissions, and although this is hard to measure, there is science to back this up.”* (Interview Lodge 1, P2)

P2 from Lodge 1 further went on to explain that Spekboom has an incredibly efficient photosynthesis process, using both C3 photosynthesis and CAM photosynthesis, depending on the conditions. Adding to this, the plant has a high carbon absorption rate and its ability to lock carbon in its biomass makes it a powerful tool for offsetting, as well as the fact that it is a low water use plant. They believe that sometimes too much of the focus is on creating new, more efficient ways of integrating sustainable practices into their business model, and sometimes natural approaches are overlooked – hence the introduction of the Spekboom farm (Interview Lodge 1, P2).

In addition to operational sustainability, all lodges invest heavily in conserving local wildlife and habitats, all collaborating with external organizations respectively. In Lodge 1, P3's words,

*“Wildlife is essentially the core of our business model. Without it, we would have nothing to offer. But protecting the land isn't just about animals. It's about making sure the entire ecosystem thrives. We therefore need to ensure our approach integrates ecological sustainability with community upliftment, creating a model that has inspires conservation initiatives across Africa.”*

#### 4.2.2 Sustainable Employment and Economic Empowerment

Despite these challenges, the lodges see sustainable employment and skills development as essential to their long-term sustainability. All the lodges noted that eco-tourism is only truly sustainable if local communities are active participants in its success. By investing in education, vocational training, and local entrepreneurship, the lodges are creating a self-reinforcing economic model, where employees are not just workers, but skilled professionals and business owners contributing to the local economy (Interview Lodge 1, P2).

As already mentioned, all three lodges have established learning centres and literacy programs to improve educational access and career readiness for local communities. Lodge 1's approach to long-term economic sustainability also includes providing staff with career progression opportunities (through the partnership with lobster Inc.), supporting local suppliers, and implementing carbon offset initiatives that involve community participation. For example, their Spekboom Farm initiative involves local community members in reforestation efforts, creating seasonal employment while enhancing conservation efforts (Interview Lodge 1, P3).

Similarly, Lodge 3's Conservation Development Model integrates economic empowerment with wildlife protection. By linking job creation to conservation success, they ensure that communities directly benefit from eco-tourism and have a vested interest in environmental preservation (Interview Lodge 3, P2).

Lodge 2 integrates sustainable food production training into its employment model. Employees involved in food preparation receive training in organic farming, soil health management, and water conservation techniques. This not only enhances on-site food production but also allows employees to apply these skills in personal or community agricultural projects. In 2022, Lodge 2's farm-to-table initiative generated R10,000 in additional income for 32 employees working in food production (Interview Lodge 2, P3).

A key initiative supporting career specialization is the Tracker Academy, which combines indigenous tracking knowledge with modern conservation training. Since its inception, the Academy has trained over 250 professional trackers, with 94% securing employment in safari lodges, wildlife monitoring, anti-poaching units, and conservation research (Lodge 1, Impact Report 2024). The program provides full financial support for students, ensuring that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds can access training without the barrier of tuition costs.

Agriculture is also an important component of economic empowerment efforts. The lodges have restructured their food supply chains to prioritize local farmers over large-scale urban suppliers. Previously, Lodge 2 relied on suppliers from Johannesburg, located over 450 km away. To reduce this dependency, the lodge implemented a farm-to-table approach, sourcing produce from local farmers and on-site gardens (Interview Lodge 2, P1). This shift has reduced transportation costs and emissions, improving sustainability created stable income for local farmers, integrating them into the tourism economy and enhanced food security for employees, as surplus produce from on-site gardens is redistributed among staff members (Interview Lodge 2, P2).

## 4.3 Environmental Sustainability

### 4.3.1 Plastic Reduction and Zero-Waste

Lodge 1 has implemented a zero-plastic policy as part of its sustainability efforts. This policy includes providing each guest with a personal hydro flask water bottle upon arrival. The initiative not only reduces the use of single-use plastic bottles but also aligns with the lodge's

larger environmental goals. There is also an on-site ‘bottling-plant’ where guests are provided with local produced still and sparkling water in glass bottles. Previously, the lodge was purchasing approximately 66 000 1L plastic bottles annual, and the creation of the on-site plant has completely eliminated this plastic use as well as the associated carbon emissions from their production and transportation. Guests are informed about the lodge’s water filtration system, which enables them to refill their bottles throughout their stay, eliminating the reliance on disposable plastic. The provision of a hydro flask to each guest represents more than a simple act of hospitality; it serves as a practical demonstration of the lodge’s commitment to sustainability, according to the Camp Manager, (Interview Lodge 1, P1). This initiative creates opportunities to integrate sustainability practices into guest interactions and addresses the environmental challenges posed by plastic waste, particularly in a region with limited recycling infrastructure. In addition to this, reusable and locally sources alternatives such as cotton beeswax wraps instead of plastic wrap for food storage. For outsourced products, the lodge exercises its buying power to influence their suppliers to change the way they package their products, reducing the amount of waste before the goods even enter the lodge. These initiatives are part of a broader zero-plastic strategy that underscores the lodge’s commitment to environmentally responsible practices (Interview Lodge 1, P2). However, in the instances where plastic cannot be avoided, it is collected by a local recycling business, *Shodulla Recycling and Waste Management*, and of the approximate 4.5tons of recycled waste being collected from Lodge 1 per month, plastic makes up 20% of that.

Another critical feature of the each lodge’s sustainable dining approach is its innovative waste management system, which reflects a commitment to circular economy principles. All edible and non-eaten food waste are offered to staff members to supplement the canteen menu at each Lodge. Furthermore, Lodge 2 goes one step further, and all non-edible food waste is collected weekly by a local pig farmer to be made use of by his farming operation. Also, crops or produce from the staff garden that fail to meet the high standards required for guest dining are not discarded as waste, but again sent to the pig farmer or depending on the quality, redistributed amongst the community.

Lodge 2’s waste management operations also extend into the education of staff and community members about sustainable agricultural practices, showing the interrelated nature of social, environmental and economic sustainability. Staff members involved in food production are trained in topics such as soil health management, crop rotation, and organic pest control,

ensuring the long-term viability of the garden and the organic integrity of their crops. This skill development not only ensures the sustainability of the Lodge 2's food production but also enhances the staff's ability to manage resources responsibly and reduces the environmental risks posed by synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Additionally, this knowledge transfer extends beyond the lodge itself, as workshops and training sessions for local community members encourage the broader adoption of these practices. As individuals implement sustainable techniques in their own agricultural endeavours, the benefits ripple outwards, fostering healthier ecosystems and promoting biodiversity. The adoption of sustainable farming methods ensures that soil fertility is preserved across a larger geographic area, reducing the degradation of natural resources. Furthermore, this interrelation strengthens the connection between environmental preservation and economic stability. By equipping individuals with sustainable farming skills, the lodge not only minimizes its own environmental impact but also supports community members in establishing resilient, eco-friendly livelihoods. This dual benefit highlights the reinforcing relationship between skills development and environmental work, where investment in people translates into tangible ecological and socio-economic gains.

#### 4.3.2 Renewable Energy and Carbon Reduction

The transition to renewable energy is a significant focus across lodges. A defining feature of the Lodge 1, 2 and 3's energy management strategy is the transition to renewable energy. Solar power forms the backbone of this approach. All lodges stated that they are actively converting to solar power, though stakeholders acknowledged the high upfront costs and logistical hurdles of this conversion.

*"We need more solar panels to power the entire lodge. It's a long-term investment but vital for reducing reliance on generators and the erratic supply of power in South Africa. I was once told that reducing a negative impact may cost more at first, but you end up saving later – and I couldn't think of a situation where this is more relevant, especially in our country."* (Interview Lodge 1, P1).

Lodge 1, alongside their competitors, has installed an extensive solar panel array, which provides a significant portion of its energy needs. Photovoltaic panels have been strategically placed to maximize sunlight capture. This is a two phase approach, where phase one included investing in a 291-kW solar farm, reducing their dependency on fossil-fuels by 40% (Interview Lodge 1 P2). The solar farm is two thirds of a soccer field in size, producing an average of

1.31kW of electricity per day – which is enough to power 43 average sized homes per day (Interview Lodge 1, P2). The second step of their approach is to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels by a further 40% by 2026, making solar generated power their primary source of energy. Battery storage systems complement the solar array, ensuring energy availability during cloudy days and nighttime, or when the dreaded governmental implemented ‘load shedding’ is underway. By investing in high-capacity batteries, the lodge mitigates fluctuations in energy availability and avoids the intermittent challenges often associated with renewable sources. In addition to this, one of the three lodges has explored additional renewable options such as wind energy and micro-hydropower. Although these options depend on site-specific conditions and does not make up a significant portion of their energy needs, their integration demonstrates the lodge’s commitment to a diversified energy portfolio.

Lodge 1 also spoke about their innovative approach to reduce their emissions, a zero-emissions safari vehicle. With an initial investment of approximately \$85,000 over a decade, this project aligns with their broader sustainability goals, such as reducing the lodge’s annual carbon emissions by 366 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2026 (Interview Lodge 1, P3). The experimentation began in 2009, with their first attempt to convert one of their traditional Land Rover Safari Vehicles into an electric game drive vehicle, in collaboration with a local electrical and mechanical engineer, underscored by the technological limitations of the time. Despite initial promise, the vehicle ultimately proved unreliable and ended up catching on fire – thus making it a non-viable option for the future of their fleet. In order to combat the challenge of limited local experience in this field, lodge 1 partnered with Land Rover UK in 2015, leveraging their advanced technological expertise to design an electric safari vehicle capable of enduring harsh conditions. This collaboration marked a significant improvement, resulting in a prototype that combined international innovation with practical feedback from on-the-ground testing in safari environments. While this was a step in the right direction, various stakeholders believed that it was important to localize their Research and Development, and in 2019 pivoted its focus toward local solutions, aligning with its commitment to community development and resource efficiency (Interview Lodge 1, P3). The suggestion was to retrofit existing diesel-powered game drive vehicles with electric transmissions using international technology, which they did and addressed three key sustainability objectives in the process: waste reduction, renewable energy integration and community development. Despite its successes, they have acknowledged the challenges that remain in achieving its goal of a fully electric fleet by 2026. Technological refinement remains an ongoing challenge, as the vehicles need to be reliable and

durable in rugged safari conditions. Another challenge is scaling the solar energy infrastructure to meet increased energy demands as the fleet transitions. Lastly, the financial investment for such an operation is huge, and so there comes the challenge of balancing the high upfront costs involved in all phases of such an operation.

When posed with the question of the adoption of a electric safari vehicles, Lodge 3, P3, noted that while the surface level concept was a good idea, they did not believe that enough research has been conducted on the overall sustainability of this project. They noted that, similar to the backlash of electric vehicles (EVs), the process of mining for lithium, cobalt and nickel (essential for the batteries of EVs) poses significant environmental and social costs (Interview Lodge 3, P3). Adding to this, they do not believe that Lodge 3 is currently equipped with enough solar infrastructure required for the charging of the vehicles. If they were to use their current electricity supply, this would only increase their emissions, rather than offset them.

#### 4.3.3 Conservation and Anti-Poaching

Since 2015, Lodge 1 has actively worked to reduce traffic within its reserve to minimize the impact on wildlife and preserve the ‘wildness’ of the ecosystem. Traffic within the reserve can disrupt animal behaviour, increase noise pollution, and pose security risks. Thus implementing innovative logistical measures, including consolidating deliveries from fresh produce suppliers and streamlining local supply chains. For example, the school bus now collects locally sourced vegetables, while the laundry vehicle picks up eggs and other supplies. These efforts reduced delivery traffic by 35% in 2022, mitigating environmental disturbance and enhancing guests’ immersive experiences (Interview Lodge 1, P2). With respect to the traffic of their own safari vehicles, one lodge has implemented a rule that stipulates only ten safari vehicles are allowed on the reserve at a time. This reduction in traffic not only protects biodiversity but also exemplifies their philosophy of harmonizing operational efficiency with ecological responsibility. By actively engaging suppliers and rethinking logistics, they have set a standard for eco-tourism operations committed to sustainability.

Lodge 3 introduced a Conservation Development Model in 1990, with the aim to demonstrate that wildlife and communities could coexist harmoniously, offering mutual benefits. It became the foundation for their eco-tourism operations, proving that ecological sustainability and economic profitability could coexist. The model has since been replicated across Africa, serving as a blueprint for other nature-based tourism ventures. The model emphasizes a long-term approach to conservation, wherein the economic and social interests of surrounding

communities are intrinsically tied to the well-being of the reserve. Lodge 1 speaks of an ‘*economy of wildlife*’ concept that creates local opportunities in areas such as security, logistics, and supply chain enterprises – which will be further discussed. By fostering economic interdependence, they have ensured that local stakeholders have a vested interest in the success of conservation efforts, creating a sustainable framework that benefits both people and wildlife.

One of the greatest environmental challenges that all wildlife lodges face, is the threat of poaching. In response to the increasing threat of rhino poaching, a statement taken from the 2024 Impact Report from Lodge 1 notes that,

*“[The lodge] We have invested heavily in anti-poaching measures. Contributing \$300,000 annually to these efforts, the reserve collaborates with technology providers Dimension Data and Cisco to implement cutting-edge surveillance systems. These technologies enable the detection of poachers before they strike, marking a significant shift from reactive to preventive strategies.”*

In addition to the above, Lodge 1 has increased its efforts to conservation by their support for the Rhino Guardians initiative, led by the Tracker Academy under the Peace Parks Foundation (Interview Lodge 1, P3). This program trains individuals in traditional animal tracking and military techniques, addressing skill gaps within existing anti-poaching units. They noted that with over 8,940 rhinos lost in the Kruger National Park since 2008, there is an undeniable need to increase anti-poaching efforts (Lodge 1, Impact Report 2024). The Rhino Guardians program combines rigorous psychometric and integrity testing with a year-long intensive training curriculum. Graduates are deployed to reserves with proven management reliability, creating a robust network of skilled anti-poaching personnel. By investing in this initiative alongside nine other donors, the lodge contributes to the broader fight against poaching and enhances wildlife protection efforts across Southern Africa.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis section of this research study examines the challenges and opportunities luxury eco-tourism lodges in South Africa face as they navigate the balance between integrating sustainable practices into their business models, and maintaining high standards of luxury in their offering. Using both the literature review of this study, and existing case studies, the discussion is focused on the critically analysing the findings above and is structured around four key themes: the tension between guest expectations and environmental impact, the barriers posed by limited access to education, infrastructure gaps and financial constraints, and the risks of over-reliance on international guests. This section also critically addresses the under-researched, yet pressing issues of neocolonialism and greenwashing, which threaten the credibility and equity of sustainable tourism practices. By exploring these themes, this section not only highlights the innovative approaches lodges have adopted to address these challenges but also underscores the systemic changes required to create a more inclusive and sustainable luxury tourism model. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide practical insights for the industry while contributing to broader academic conversations on sustainable tourism.

### 5.1 Guest Expectations vs. Environmental Impact

The tension between guest expectations of abundance and sustainability can be linked to Kapferer's (2010) discussion of the paradox between luxury and sustainability. It is argued that luxury and sustainability exist in an inherent paradox: luxury is historically associated with excess, rarity, and opulence, whereas sustainability is linked to restraint, longevity, and ethical responsibility (Kapferer, 2010). Kapferer (2010) thus highlights the challenges faced by luxury brands in balancing traditional notions of luxury with environmentally conscious practices. In the context of luxury game lodges, this paradox is evident in how guests demand both exclusivity and eco-consciousness. Thus, it is both a challenge and opportunity for these lodges to balance this tension by reshaping luxury as an expression of authenticity, exclusivity, rather than excess. This reflects a broader shift in consumer mindsets, which Kapferer (2010) hints at but does not fully explore, simply that the meaning of luxury itself is evolving.

Similarly, Cristini et al. (2022) note the evolving consumer demand for meaningful, sustainable experiences rather than purely material luxury. They expand on this paradox by emphasizing how modern luxury consumers are increasingly seek experiential value rather than material

possessions. This shift is crucial for game lodges, where luxury is no longer just about high-quality luxury offerings or imported foods but about deep, immersive experiences that align with sustainability. The farm-to-table initiative at the Lodge 2 align with this shift, as they frame sustainability as an enriching part of the luxury experience, echoing the point about the transition from ‘having’ to ‘being’ and from ownership to experiences (Cristini et al., 2022). This approach allows sustainability to enhance rather than detract from the luxury experience, resolving part of the paradox Kapferer highlights.

Lodge 2 has successfully integrated sustainability into the guest experience through its farm-to-table initiative. During meals, camp managers or chefs engage with guests, explaining how the vegetables and produce are grown in the lodge’s on-site organic garden or sourced from local farmers. This approach not only educates guests about sustainable practices but also enhances their overall experience by creating a narrative around the origin of their food. By involving guests in the story of how their meals are sourced, Lodge 2 has shown that sustainability can be framed as an enriching and exclusive element of the luxury offering, rather than a compromise. This initiative has also reduced the lodge’s reliance on long-distance supply chains, cutting down on carbon emissions while creating employment opportunities for local staff and farmers.

Similarly, Lodge 1 has addressed the challenge of balancing guest expectations with sustainability through its zero-plastic policy. Each guest is provided with a reusable hydro flask upon arrival, eliminating the need for single-use plastic bottles. The lodge also operates an on-site bottling plant, producing still and sparkling water in glass bottles, which has completely eliminated the use of 66,000 plastic bottles annually. This initiative not only reduces plastic waste but also serves as a practical demonstration of the lodge’s commitment to sustainability, as noted by the Camp Manager (Interview Lodge 1, P1). By integrating sustainability into guest interactions, Lodge 1 has successfully navigated the challenge of educating guests without compromising the luxury experience.

However, some sustainable practices require behavioural adjustments from guests, such as using reusable water bottles or conserving energy. These efforts can sometimes be perceived as inconveniences, detracting from the seamless and indulgent experience guests expect. Lodge 1’s introduction of hydro flasks demonstrates how small, innovative changes can align sustainability with guest comfort, showing that challenges like guest engagement and balancing sustainability with luxury can be overcome with creativity and commitment.

Both Kapferer (2010) and Cristini et al. (2022) suggest that resolving the tension between luxury and sustainability requires redefining luxury itself. Rather than viewing sustainability as a limitation, game lodges can position it as an added layer of exclusivity—a rare, thoughtful way of experiencing the natural world that appeals to those who value it. This reframing aligns with evolving eco-conscious consumer expectations, where luxury is not just about abundance but about an ethically curated, sensorially enriching experience.

However, implementing sustainability within luxury tourism remains challenging due to the inherently resource-intensive nature of its offerings. Luxury travel is often associated with indulgence and excess, making it difficult for lodges to meet high guest expectations while adhering to sustainable practices. For instance, spa facilities typically require significant energy, yet Lodge 1 has addressed this challenge by transitioning to renewable energy sources. The lodge has installed a 291-kW solar farm, reducing its reliance on fossil fuels by 40%, with plans to achieve a further 40% reduction by 2026 (Interview Lodge 1, P2). This shift not only advances sustainability goals but also reinforces the lodge's ability to offer a premium, eco-conscious experience without compromising the luxury that guests expect.

## 5.2 Limited Access to Education

The challenges of education gaps in rural areas align with Thirumaran and Raghav's (2017) findings, who highlight the coexistence of poverty and luxury in developing regions. They emphasize the need for equity in luxury tourism to ensure local communities benefit from tourism initiatives. The lodges' efforts to bridge educational gaps through learning centers and vocational training also resonate with Scheyvens (2011), who advocates for community engagement and empowerment as a sustainable tourism model. Furthermore, these initiatives address the socio-economic inequalities noted by Mbaiwa (2017), creating opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in and benefit from the tourism economy.

The three luxury lodges interviewed demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing these challenges through on-site learning centres, vocational training, and industry partnerships. By tailoring their educational programs to the hospitality and tourism industry, these lodges ensure that staff gain the necessary skills to participate meaningfully in the workforce. For example, Lodge 1 provides specialized training in food preparation, customer service, and wildlife conservation, equipping employees with practical, industry-relevant expertise, through their partnership with Lobster Inc., a platform offering over 250 industry-accredited courses covering essential topics such as digital literacy, hospitality management, and

leadership skills. This flexible, digital-first approach addresses barriers to education by allowing staff to upskill at their convenience, thereby bridging the gap between local educational limitations and the industry's evolving demands.

Moreover, all three lodges extend their efforts beyond employee training by collaborating with NGOs, and training programs to fund infrastructure, provide teaching materials, and train educators. These initiatives not only enhance local education but also reflect Scheyvens' (2011) model of community empowerment, reinforcing how tourism can foster sustainable development by investing in long-term human capital.

A crucial dimension of these educational efforts is their focus on addressing gender disparities and broader socio-economic inequalities relevant to their surrounding communities. Given that women and children face the greatest barriers to education in rural areas, the lodges prioritize programs that increase accessibility for female learners. Lodge 3 has established a learning centre where 72% of their adult learners are woman and 50% of the children are girls. This aligns with research by Mbaiwa (2017), which suggests that tourism-driven educational programs can be instrumental in breaking cycles of poverty and fostering greater economic participation among marginalized groups.

Additionally, these education programs are holistic, extending beyond literacy and vocational skills to emphasize conservation and sustainability. This is particularly evident at Lodge 2, where an on-site vegetable garden serves as a practical tool for teaching staff about sustainable agriculture, organic pest control, and water conservation techniques. By transferring this knowledge to employees, the lodge not only enhances eco-friendly practices within its operations but also enables staff to apply and share these sustainability principles within their communities, creating a ripple effect of environmental consciousness.

Both Lodge 1 and Lodge 3 exemplify how on-site education centres can reduce reliance on external expertise, fostering career progression within the lodge itself. This supports a more sustainable and inclusive business model, where employees are empowered to grow within the organization rather than being replaced by more qualified external hires. The investment in literacy programs, training partnerships, and upskilling initiatives directly contributes to a more skilled and self-sufficient workforce, reinforcing Scheyvens' (2011) and Mbaiwa's (2017) frameworks on tourism's role in reducing socio-economic disparities.

However, a critical analysis of these efforts reveals a key limitation: while private sector interventions are essential, they cannot fully compensate for systemic government shortcomings in education. In a country like South Africa, where educational access remains highly unequal, a long-term solution must also involve structural reforms at the governmental level. Lodges can play a catalytic role, but sustainable change requires policy interventions, increased public funding for rural education, and stronger state-private partnerships to ensure that tourism-driven educational efforts are complementary rather than compensatory.

### 5.3 Infrastructure Gaps and Financial Barriers

The integration of sustainable practices in luxury eco-tourism lodges is significantly hindered by infrastructure limitations and financial constraints, a challenge discussed by Legrand (2020). Legrand (202) highlights the difficulties faced by remote lodges in managing infrastructure development, waste management, and community engagement while ensuring environmental sustainability. These challenges are particularly relevant in South Africa, where load shedding and unreliable power sources further complicate efforts to implement green technologies.

The discontinuation of electric safari vehicle trials due to energy instability highlights the obstacles described in the literature, particularly regarding renewable energy dependency and technological scalability. Rosenberger (2023) argues that addressing these infrastructure barriers is essential for lodges to align with the increasing consumer demand for eco-conscious experiences. However, as the case study data from Lodge 1 suggests, even when lodges attempt to transition to sustainable alternatives, energy reliability issues force them to fall back on diesel generators, reinforcing dependence on fossil fuels and stalling progress toward carbon neutrality.

The energy demands of luxury lodges are substantial, particularly for facilities such as spas, high-end kitchens, and safari vehicles, all of which require stable power sources. In theory, solar and wind power offer a pathway to sustainability, but the realities of remote operations come with huge logistical and financial barriers that significantly slow these adoptions. The high capital costs of solar panel installations and battery storage systems present a major challenge, particularly for independent lodges with limited financial backing. While these systems promise long-term operational efficiency and cost savings, the immediate financial burden can strain budgets, forcing operators to prioritize short-term operational viability over long-term sustainability goals.

In addition, the geographical remoteness of these lodges amplifies these challenges. Access to specialized technical expertise, replacement parts, and maintenance services is often limited, leading to extended downtime and increased operational costs when renewable systems malfunction. This logistical complexity reduces the scalability of sustainability innovations, further reinforcing reliance on traditional, high-emission energy sources such as diesel generators.

Given these financial and infrastructure barriers, securing external funding has become a critical strategy for lodges committed to sustainability. Many operators seek grants, impact investment funds, and partnerships with conservation organizations to finance renewable energy and water management projects. Collaboration with environmental NGOs and corporate sponsors has facilitated investments in solar energy, water-saving technologies, and community-driven conservation efforts. However, reliance on government incentives and subsidies remains inconsistent. While such incentives can alleviate financial burdens, bureaucratic inefficiencies and policy delays often impede progress. Lodges that lack access to these financial resources are frequently forced to prioritize immediate operational needs over long-term sustainability investments, thereby perpetuating reliance on conventional energy sources and limiting innovation.

The case study data aligns with the literature in illustrating how sustainability efforts in luxury eco-tourism are constrained not by intent but by structural challenges. While lodges recognize the necessity of renewable energy, water conservation, and low-impact operations, financial limitations, infrastructure deficiencies, and policy barriers continue to obstruct meaningful progress. This underscores Legrand's (2020) argument that sustainability in tourism requires not just industry commitment but also systemic change, including improved energy policies, better financial support mechanisms, and stronger public-private partnerships to overcome these persistent challenges.

#### 5.4 Dependency on International Guests

The heavy dependence of luxury lodges on international tourists reflects a structural vulnerability within the luxury tourism sector, as described by Scheyvens (2011) and Mbaiwa (2017). Both critique the fragility of tourism economies, particularly in developing countries, where reliance on high-spending foreign visitors exposes businesses to external shocks such as global crises, economic downturns, and travel restrictions. The financial instability caused by this dependency became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to

drastic declines in occupancy rates and significant revenue losses for all the lodges interviewed. This aligns with Thirumaran and Raghav's (2017) argument that developing countries must actively diversify their tourism offerings to build resilience against such disruptions.

Luxury lodges primarily attract international tourists who can afford premium price points, but this reliance creates cyclical revenue challenges. Seasonal fluctuations further intensify financial instability. During off-peak seasons, many lodges struggle to cover operational costs, including staff wages, maintenance expenses, and conservation programs. This echoes Legrand's (2020) advocacy for year-round, inclusive tourism models, which aim to reduce reliance on foreign visitors by attracting more consistent revenue streams throughout the year.

In addition, international tourism has broader economic implications beyond the lodges themselves. Revenue from foreign guests often funds community upliftment projects, staff training programs, and conservation efforts. When global tourism slows, these initiatives are frequently scaled back or paused entirely, undermining the long-term social and environmental commitments of lodges. This reflects Mbaiwa's (2017) concern that tourism economies, if not diversified, can perpetuate cycles of economic instability rather than fostering sustainable development.

To combat these risks, luxury lodges have started implementing creative strategies to diversify their guest base without compromising luxury standards. For example, several lodges have introduced wellness retreats and exclusive cultural experiences targeted at domestic and regional markets during off-peak seasons. This strategy aligns with Legrand's (2020) call for adaptive, resilient tourism models, which encourage broadening the customer base and reducing over-reliance on volatile international markets.

While diversifying guest reliance is essential, it presents practical challenges. Domestic and regional tourists often have lower disposable income than international visitors, requiring lodges to adapt pricing strategies while maintaining exclusivity. Additionally, shifting toward new offerings, such as wellness tourism or conservation-driven experiences, requires significant marketing investments and brand repositioning.

However, this challenge also represents an opportunity for innovation. By redefining the luxury experience to include immersive, sustainability-focused, and wellness-oriented offerings, lodges can differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive global market. This approach reflects the broader shift in luxury consumer behaviour described by Cristini et al.

(2022), where exclusivity is no longer defined by material abundance but by meaningful, transformative experiences.

The reliance on international tourists remains a core vulnerability for luxury lodges, but it also presents an opportunity for business model transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the risks of an undiversified revenue stream, reinforcing the necessity of broadening guest demographics and adopting more adaptable tourism strategies. As Scheyvens (2011), Mbaiwa (2017), and Legrand (2020) suggest, the future of sustainable luxury tourism lies in year-round, locally integrated, and experience-driven models that balance financial stability with long-term sustainability goals.

#### 5.4 Neo-Colonialism and Greenwashing

After a critical analysis of the interviews and document analysis was conducted, it was evident that one of the greatest threats and barriers to sustainability within the luxury tourism industry in South Africa, was not mentioned; neocolonialism and greenwashing. It links to the main contribution of this research study as there is currently a lack of literature and awareness (or the possibility of ignorance) of the topics. There is a number of reasons this may have been overlooked in the interviews, however, this does not take away from the significance of addressing both topics. This omission aligns with findings in the literature that highlight the lack of critical inquiry into neocolonialism and greenwashing within luxury eco-tourism (John et al., 2023). Scheyvens (2011) and Mbaiwa (2017) note that while many operators implement surface-level sustainability initiatives, they often fail to engage with the deeper socio-political structures perpetuating inequality. Furthermore, Legrand (2020) emphasizes that the absence of accountability mechanisms allows greenwashing to persist as a widespread issue in the industry.

The persistence of neo-colonialism, particularly its subset of environmental colonialism, presents a significant barrier to achieving meaningful sustainability in the luxury eco-tourism sector in Africa. Neocolonialism, as defined by John et al. (2023), involves the exploitation of developing countries by developed nations, often through economic dependency and inequitable practices. In the context of luxury eco-tourism, environmental colonialism refers to conservation and sustainability initiatives that prioritize global environmental goals while marginalizing local populations and their needs. This phenomenon is deeply intertwined with

the historical legacies of colonial exploitation, perpetuating inequalities and undermining local autonomy.

Foreign ownership and investment dominate the financial and operational aspects of many luxury game lodges. While these ventures generate substantial revenue, much of the profit flows back to developed countries, leaving local communities with limited economic benefits. As noted by Scheyvens (2011), this inequitable distribution of wealth entrenches dependency, preventing local populations from achieving financial independence and limiting their ability to invest in sustainable development. One lodge in this study, part of a small luxury franchise, highlighted this as a challenge. It emphasized the need for inclusive decision-making processes, which are often absent when conservation and tourism initiatives are designed and implemented by external stakeholders.

The marginalization of local communities in governance further exacerbates this challenge. For instance, stringent conservation policies can restrict access to ancestral lands and traditional resources, displacing communities and undermining their livelihoods. This exclusion not only creates social tensions but also disregards traditional ecological knowledge, which could enhance the effectiveness of conservation strategies. These findings align with Mbaiwa (2017), who emphasizes that the inclusion of local voices is essential for equitable and sustainable tourism development.

Another critical challenge identified by interviewees across various lodges is greenwashing, the practice of exaggerating or falsifying environmental benefits to appeal to eco-conscious consumers. Greenwashing poses a significant threat to the credibility and integrity of the luxury eco-tourism industry. According to Cristini et al. (2022), consumers today are increasingly skeptical of sustainability claims, and when these claims are revealed to be misleading, the entire sector risks losing trust. This challenge is particularly detrimental in the luxury eco-tourism market, where transparency and authenticity are paramount to maintaining the confidence of high-paying clientele.

Greenwashing undermines genuine sustainability efforts by redirecting resources into marketing rather than substantive change. For instance, a lodge might heavily advertise its use of biodegradable products while neglecting systemic issues such as resource depletion, over-tourism, or inadequate community engagement. This misallocation of resources hinders progress toward addressing the root causes of environmental and social challenges, echoing

Legrand's (2020) findings that sustainability in tourism requires systemic, not superficial, solutions.

Moreover, greenwashing often comes at the expense of local communities and ecosystems. Lodges may market themselves as community-driven or conservation-focused while providing only superficial benefits, such as low-wage employment, rather than investing in education, infrastructure, or long-term economic empowerment. This mirrors Thirumaran and Raghav's (2017) critique of luxury tourism in developing countries, where socio-economic inequalities are perpetuated under the guise of sustainability. Additionally, some operators promote themselves as eco-friendly while engaging in environmentally harmful practices, such as over-tourism or the construction of infrastructure that disrupts fragile ecosystems.

Greenwashing not only damages the reputation of individual lodges but also affects the broader perception of eco-tourism, making it more challenging for genuinely sustainable operators to attract conscious travelers. As Cristini et al. (2022) highlight, the future of luxury eco-tourism depends on embedding authentic sustainability into operations, which requires a shift from marketing-driven strategies to meaningful, measurable initiatives.

The issues of neocolonialism and greenwashing are interrelated and represent systemic barriers to achieving sustainability in luxury eco-tourism. Both challenges highlight the need for an equitable and inclusive approach to conservation and sustainability, as advocated by Scheyvens (2011) and Mbaiwa (2017). Neocolonialism undermines the potential for local communities to benefit equitably from tourism, while greenwashing distracts from addressing these systemic inequities. As John et al. (2023) note, the lack of critical research on these issues further exacerbates the problem, preventing the industry from fully understanding and addressing these challenges.

## 6. Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

### 6.2 Research Summary

This study set out to examine the intersection of luxury tourism and sustainability within the South African context, addressing both the opportunities and barriers that luxury game lodges face when integrating sustainable practices. By exploring case studies of three Luxury Lodges in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of how luxury tourism businesses navigate sustainability challenges while maintaining their market positioning. The research aimed to answer how luxury game lodges integrate sustainability, manage guest expectations, and contribute to community development while maintaining their exclusive appeal. The findings confirm that sustainability has become a core aspect of luxury tourism, but significant challenges remain in balancing environmental responsibility, social impact, and economic viability.

The study identified four primary themes influencing current sustainability efforts:

1. The tension between guest expectations and environmental impact. While eco-conscious practices are becoming more common, many guests still expect traditional luxury experiences that can contradict sustainability efforts.
2. Limited access to education. Community development initiatives have made progress in skills training, but systemic educational gaps remain a barrier to equitable participation in eco-tourism.
3. Infrastructure gaps and financial barriers. Renewable energy adoption, water conservation, and sustainable resource management are constrained by high capital costs and logistical challenges in remote locations.
4. Dependency on international guests. Lodges rely heavily on foreign tourism, which makes them vulnerable to global economic shifts and crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

These findings reinforce Kapferer's (2010) and Cristini et al.'s (2022) discussion of the paradox between luxury and sustainability, while also expanding on Scheyvens (2011) and

Mbaiwa's (2017) frameworks by highlighting the influence of neocolonialism and greenwashing in African eco-tourism.

A key insight from the case studies was that while all three lodges share a commitment to sustainability, their strategies vary based on ownership structures, financial resources, and external partnerships. Lodge 1 leveraged long-term conservation investments, Lodge 2 benefited from economies of scale within a multi-lodge portfolio, and Lodge 3 utilized global conservation partnerships. However, all lodges faced common barriers in guest resistance to the introduction of sustainable, the financial burden of renewable energy, and challenges in local community integration.

While significant barriers persist, the study also identified opportunities for innovation. By reframing sustainability as an exclusive part of the luxury experience, developing and leveraging local supply chains, and using digital platforms for staff training, lodges can enhance both environmental and economic outcomes. However, the under-researched role of greenwashing and environmental colonialism show that these remain critical areas for further research and industry scrutiny.

## 6.2 Practical Implications of the Findings

The findings of this research carry significant implications for the luxury eco-tourism industry and policymakers, as well as the guests of these lodges. These insights extend beyond the case studies, offering broader lessons on integrating sustainability in high-end tourism while addressing systemic challenges.

### 6.2.1 Luxury redefined

Firstly, research confirms that consumer expectations around luxury are evolving, with growing demand for meaningful, sustainability-driven experiences (Cristini et al., 2022). The lodges demonstrated that incorporating sustainability, through farm-to-table dining, renewable energy accommodations, and conservation initiatives, enhances exclusivity rather than detracts from it. This aligns with Kapferer's (2010) argument that luxury brands must adapt to shifting consumer values without losing their prestige.

### 6.2.2 Guest Collaboration

Secondly, however, guest resistance to certain sustainable initiatives (e.g., restrictions on water usage in spa facilities) suggests that luxury lodges must carefully position eco-conscious

practices as an enhancement rather than a limitation. This supports Legrand's (2020) argument that sustainability must be seamlessly integrated into the luxury experience to gain consumer acceptance.

### 6.2.3 Policy and Investment Needed

Another finding was the financial barrier of implementing sustainability initiatives, particularly for independent lodges with fewer financial resources. While renewable energy and water management systems offer long-term cost savings, the high initial capital investment remains a major barrier. Scheyvens (2011) argues that luxury tourism can drive sustainability, but only when policy support and investment structures align with environmental objectives. Therefore, the third implication of the findings suggest that government incentives, subsidies, and impact investment funds should be expanded to support eco-lodges transitioning to renewable energy, water conservation systems, and sustainable supply chains. In addition, public-private partnerships could help improve infrastructure in remote areas, reducing logistical constraints that hinder sustainability efforts (Meyer, 2021).

### 6.2.4 Combat Greenwashing

Greenwashing emerged as a critical issue in luxury eco-tourism, with some lodges acknowledging the risk of misleading sustainability claims undermining consumer trust. As Cristini et al. (2022) note, sustainability is increasingly used as a marketing tool rather than a substantive operational principle. This study emphasizes the need for greater transparency in sustainability efforts. Lodges should adopt third-party certifications, independent audits, and measurable impact assessments to validate their eco-tourism claims. This aligns with Legrand's (2020) recommendation that authentic sustainability, rather than branding gimmicks, will be key to maintaining long-term consumer trust.

### 6.2.5 Diversifying tourism markets

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the financial vulnerability of luxury lodges that rely heavily on international travellers. The research found that lodges experimenting with off-season domestic tourism packages experienced greater financial stability during global disruptions. This supports Gössling et al. (2020), who argue that the tourism industry must diversify its guest base to build resilience against future crises. Expanding regional tourism strategies, such as exclusive local retreats and conservation-based membership models, could help reduce reliance on international markets while sustaining luxury standards.

### 6.3 Academic Contributions

This research makes several contributions to the academic discourse on luxury tourism and sustainability:

- **Empirical grounding in Africa:** Addresses a significant literature gap by focusing on South African luxury tourism—often underrepresented in sustainability research.
- **Application of paradox theory:** Extends Kapferer (2010) and Cristini et al. (2022) by exploring how exclusivity and eco-consciousness co-exist in real-world operations.
- **Interrogation of greenwashing and neocolonialism:** Builds on Scheyvens (2011) and Mbaiwa (2017) by showing how ownership models and marketing rhetoric shape local inclusion and authenticity.
- **Comparative case insights:** Demonstrates how internal (resources, ownership) and external (tourist expectations, infrastructure) conditions affect sustainability strategies.

### 6.4 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

#### 6.4.1 Limitations

One of the key limitations of this study is its micro-level focus on the sustainability practices of individual luxury lodges, without fully interrogating the institutional and structural context that shapes these practices. This includes government policies, land tenure systems, conservation regulations, and foreign investment dynamics that influence how sustainability is implemented at the lodge level. Behuria and Goodfellow (2019) highlight how the state plays a crucial role in shaping tourism industries, particularly in developing economies where regulatory frameworks, taxation policies, and land-use laws determine the feasibility and sustainability of eco-tourism ventures. Future research should explore how national tourism policies, conservation frameworks, and international sustainability standards affect the operations and long-term sustainability of luxury eco-tourism lodges in South Africa and beyond.

Another limitation is the absence of longitudinal data assessing the long-term effectiveness of sustainability initiatives. This study captured current sustainability efforts but did not have the opportunity to examine whether these initiatives are sustained over time or how they evolve in response to changing market trends, financial pressures, and policy shifts. Future studies should adopt longitudinal case study approaches, tracking carbon reduction progress, biodiversity conservation outcomes, and community engagement metrics over several years. This would

provide more robust insights into whether sustainability programs deliver lasting impact or merely serve as short-term marketing strategies.

#### 6.4.2 Future Recommendations

To make sustainability in luxury tourism both impactful and achievable, future interventions must be grounded in political and economic realities. One of the most pressing gaps identified in this study is the lack of industry awareness regarding neocolonial dynamics in conservation. Ownership structures, profit distribution, and exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes continue to reproduce patterns of inequality in high-end eco-tourism. Although addressing this issue may appear politically sensitive, it is increasingly being recognised by global sustainability frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8 and 10). Real progress could be made by integrating mandatory equity and ownership audits into tourism licensing processes, and by conditioning access to certain tax incentives or subsidies on demonstrable community participation. While such reforms have not yet been widely adopted in South Africa, their implementation could be politically feasible if framed as tools to improve local economic empowerment and national brand reputation.

Secondly, while many luxury lodges have introduced sustainability programs, their long-term effectiveness remains uncertain. It is often unclear whether such initiatives are sustained beyond marketing campaigns or donor funding cycles. A practical solution would be to develop and adopt standardized impact assessment models, tools already in use in sectors like agriculture and renewable energy. Encouraging lodges to publish key indicators, such as carbon emission reductions, local employment rates, or water savings, could become a licensing or certification requirement. These measures are politically feasible as they do not require entirely new infrastructure but rather adapt and enforce existing ESG (environmental, social, and governance) principles already popular among international investors and global travel bodies.

A third area of recommendation concerns guest expectations, which remain a key determinant in whether sustainability practices are accepted or resisted. Many lodges fear that sustainability measures, such as reduced energy use or dietary changes, may compromise the high-end experience. However, this study and supporting literature suggest that many travellers are open to, and even expect, responsible tourism. A nationally supported guest insights initiative, perhaps through a collaboration between the Department of Tourism and private lodges, could generate large-scale, anonymised data to guide marketing and service design. The political

feasibility of such an initiative is strong, as it aligns with both national tourism development goals and private sector interest in meeting consumer demand more effectively.

The financial barriers associated with renewable energy and water infrastructure upgrades remain a major challenge, particularly for independently owned lodges. While incentives such as tax write-offs or capital grants for green investments exist in other sectors, they are not widely utilised in the tourism space. Making sustainability-linked financing more accessible and tourism-specific would support adoption at scale. Public-private partnerships, such as those between municipalities and lodges, could also be developed to co-finance infrastructure improvements in ecologically sensitive areas. These models have precedent in other emerging economies and could be adapted in South Africa with support from international development finance institutions or regional tourism boards.

Finally, transparency and credibility remain under-addressed in the context of greenwashing. Many lodges make broad claims about sustainability, but without external verification or public accountability, these risk undermining consumer trust. While third-party certifications (such as Fair Trade Tourism or GSTC) do exist, uptake remains limited due to perceived administrative burdens. To improve feasibility, a tiered certification model could be introduced, where lodges can progress through levels of verification at their own pace. Government tourism agencies could further encourage adoption by integrating such schemes into national tourism rankings or promotion platforms.

In summary, future efforts should focus on bridging the gap between good intentions and practical execution by designing interventions that align with the operational realities of luxury lodges and the broader policy landscape. These recommendations are not utopian—they build on existing programs, leverage stakeholder incentives, and can be made politically feasible if positioned as value-generating rather than compliance-heavy.

#### 6.4.3 Future Research Areas

To build on the findings of this study, future research should broaden its analytical lens to include the structural and institutional dynamics that shape sustainability outcomes in the luxury tourism sector. In particular, there is a pressing need to investigate how national and regional policies, land-use regulations, zoning laws, and tax incentives influence the sustainability practices of luxury lodges. These institutional frameworks play a pivotal role in determining the viability and scalability of environmental investments, yet they remain

underexplored in the existing literature. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable, tracking the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives over time. By examining long-term trends in carbon emissions, biodiversity protection, and socio-economic development, researchers can move beyond short-term evaluations to assess whether sustainability initiatives are achieving lasting impact or functioning primarily as marketing tools.

In addition, future research should incorporate quantitative guest preference studies to better understand how sustainability influences consumer behaviour and perceptions of luxury. Such studies could provide empirical evidence on whether eco-conscious practices enhance or detract from guests' willingness to engage with high-end tourism offerings. A related research gap lies in the area of greenwashing, where further work is needed to develop credible typologies, indicators, or scoring systems that help distinguish between genuine sustainability efforts and superficial branding strategies in the tourism sector.

From an economic perspective, policy modelling could help evaluate the role of financial instruments, such as green bonds, conservation levies, or public-private partnerships, in accelerating the adoption of sustainable practices. Understanding the economic levers that can shift behaviour at the lodge and investor level is critical to fostering systemic change. Finally, future studies would benefit from a mixed-methods approach that integrates rich qualitative insights with robust quantitative data. This could include large-scale benchmarking across lodges, regression modelling to assess correlations between sustainability investment and return on investment (ROI) or guest satisfaction, and the measurement of hard sustainability metrics such as waste reduction, water use, and energy efficiency.

By expanding both the empirical base and methodological diversity of research in this field, scholars can contribute to more accountable, equitable, and effective transitions toward sustainability in luxury tourism—particularly in developing regions where these tensions are most acute.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This study primarily used a qualitative approach, focusing on case studies and in-depth interviews. While this provided rich, contextual insights, future research would benefit from incorporating quantitative methods to achieve greater generalizability and comparative analysis. A mixed-methods approach could provide a more comprehensive perspective by:

- Conducting large-scale surveys across multiple lodges to identify industry-wide trends in sustainability challenges and guest behaviour.
- Using statistical models to assess whether higher sustainability investments correlate with stronger financial performance or guest satisfaction.
- Analysing quantifiable sustainability metrics (e.g., energy savings from solar installations, reductions in single-use plastics, waste management efficiency).

By combining qualitative insights with quantitative data, future studies could strengthen the empirical evidence on the financial and environmental impact of sustainable luxury tourism, making findings more actionable for industry stakeholders and policymakers.

## A Note from the Researcher

My final thanks go to my examiner for taking the time to read my research study. While it consists of literature reviews, interview analyses, and a whole range of other writing, it also represents countless hours of blood, sweat and tears. There were definitely times when I was not sure if I would be able to complete this research and do it justice. That's why I am proud of myself for accomplishing this. I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to research something I am so passionate about, in a field I one day hope to pursue a career in: Luxury Sustainability Consulting.

In sports, there is a saying, "*Leave the jersey better than you found it.*" This phrase speaks to legacy, leadership, and responsibility and emphasizes the idea that wearing the jersey is not just about personal achievement, but also about making a lasting impact. It is about honouring those who came before, raising the bar, and setting up those who follow for even greater success.

Applying this to the context of my dissertation, I hope this research makes a meaningful impact. My aim has been to honour the work that came before, challenge existing paradigms, and provide insights that will support those who continue this conversation in the future. Sustainability in luxury tourism is not just about preserving the present—it is about creating a legacy that ensures future generations can experience and benefit from these landscapes and communities.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Interview Template, Person 1

#### Questions for Various Stakeholders on Luxury Tourism in South Africa

*How can luxury tourism businesses do better?*

- What are the key sustainability practices that are currently lacking in luxury tourism businesses?
- Who (individuals / other lodges) are the key influencers in driving sustainability initiatives within the luxury tourism sector?
- Why do you think some luxury tourism businesses resist adopting more sustainable practices?

*What are they already doing and what more can they do?*

- What sustainability measures are currently implemented by your organization?
- Who in your organization is responsible for ensuring these sustainability measures are followed (top down or bottom up approach)?
- Why did your organization choose to implement these specific sustainability practices?
- What additional sustainability initiatives could be realistically implemented in the near future?

*How do they navigate sustainability challenges in their contexts?*

- What are the biggest sustainability challenges your organization faces?
- Who are the key partners or stakeholders you work with to overcome these challenges?
- Why are these challenges particularly difficult to address in the context of luxury tourism?

### Appendix 2: Interview Template, Person 2

*How can luxury tourism businesses do better?*

- What improvements can be made to the infrastructure of luxury camps to enhance sustainability?
- Who within the camp management team can lead sustainability initiatives effectively?
- Why is it crucial for camps to prioritize sustainability in their operations?

*What are they already doing and what more can they do?*

- What sustainable practices are currently in place at your camp?
- Who ensures that these practices are maintained?
- Why were these particular practices chosen over others?
- What additional sustainable practices could be introduced to further enhance sustainability?

*How do they navigate sustainability challenges in their contexts?*

- What are the primary sustainability challenges you face in managing the camp?
- Who do you work with to address and overcome these challenges?
- Why do you think these challenges are unique to your camp's context?

### Appendix 3: Interview Template, Person 3

*How can luxury tourism businesses do better?*

- What impact do luxury tourism businesses have on the local wildlife and environment?
- Who do you think should be responsible for mitigating negative impacts on the environment?

- Why is it important for luxury tourism businesses to adopt sustainable practices from your perspective?

*What are they already doing and what more can they do?*

- What sustainable practices have you observed being implemented by luxury tourism businesses?
- Who have you seen playing a significant role in promoting these practices?
- Why do you believe certain sustainable practices are more effective than others in your area?

*How do they navigate sustainability challenges in their contexts?*

- What are the most common environmental challenges you face as a game ranger?
- Who do you collaborate with to address these challenges?
- Why do you think these challenges persist despite ongoing efforts?

## Appendix 4: Interview Consent Form

### Interview Consent Form

for the **CEMS Master in International Management** student research proposal at the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business

Participant name:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ volunteer to participate in this research study conducted by **Daniella Chasenski** as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the CEMS MIM Degree at the Graduate School of Business. I understand that the purpose of this research study is to gather information about *“Navigating Sustainability Challenges and Opportunities in Luxury Tourism in South Africa.”* I am aware of the context and background to this study, having read the abstract document.

#### **Participation**

- I understand that this research does not discriminate against participation of individuals on the grounds of gender, race or ethnic group, age ranges, religion, income, handicap or illness.
- I understand that this research does not require the participation of socially or physically vulnerable people.
- I understand there is no foreseen risk of physical, psychological or social harm to me, as a participant, that may occur in the course of this research.

#### **Consent**

- I understand that my identity will remain confidential, and my name nor employer will be used in this report or findings derived from this research.
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I will not be compensated by any means.
- I understand that may withdraw from this study at anytime.

### **Ethics approval**

Ethical consent for the study has been approved by the *UCT Commerce Faculty Ethics in Research Committee* which was submitted on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, before the commencement of interviews.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact myself, my Supervisor or Programme Manager;

**Researcher:** Daniella Chasenski ([chsdan004@myuct.ac.za](mailto:chsdan004@myuct.ac.za))

**Supervisor:** Annika Surmeier ([annika.surmeier@uct.ac.za](mailto:annika.surmeier@uct.ac.za))

**Programme Manager:** Gadija Allison ([gadija.allison@uct.ac.za](mailto:gadija.allison@uct.ac.za))

Researcher Signature:

Signed by candidate

Participant Signature:

Date: