




# Assessing the Extent to which Sustainable Coastal Tourism affects Economic Development within the Mthunzini Area, South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of tourism as a key driver of economic development, emphasizing its ability to generate revenue, employment, investment, and exports, along with valuable spin-off benefits, such as cultural heritage preservation and improved infrastructure. However, it also highlights the need to consider the long-term ecological impacts of tourism. Grounded in Ecological Economics, the paper addresses two themes: the effect of coastal tourism on economic development and the interventions undertaken to promote sustainable coastal tourism. A qualitative study was conducted, utilizing semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations to gain insights into the ecological development status in Mthunzini. The findings indicate that the uMlalazi Local Municipality has identified development zones conducive to new tourism initiatives, the growth of Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs), and job creation, in alignment with the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act. The paper concludes that marketing and advertising efforts strengthen Public-Private Partnerships for economic development, and improve institutional support to explore innovative funding solutions for tourism projects. The contribution of this study to scholarship is the attempt to balance ecological sustainability and tourism. Ecological economics is grounded in striking this balance. The study is also contributing to the growing literature on sustainable coastal tourism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study is to assess the extent to which sustainable coastal tourism affects economic development in the Mthunzini Area. Coastal tourism is a "process involving tourists and the people and places they visit, particularly the coastal environment and its natural, economic and socio-cultural resources."<sup>1</sup> Within the global tourism industry, coastal tourism is a growing sector.<sup>2</sup> Coastal areas account for a large portion of this expansion, attracting millions of visitors annually, and coastal tourism

<sup>1</sup> Marc L Miller, Jan Auyong, and Nina P Hadley, "Sustainable Coastal Tourism: Challenges for Management, Planning, and Education," in *Proceedings of the 1999 International Symposium on Coastal and Marine Tourism: Balancing Tourism and Conservation*, University of Washington, Oregon State University and Oceans Blue Foundation, Seattle, WA, 2002, 3–20.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Tipu Sultan et al., "Travelers' Responsible Environmental Behavior towards Sustainable Coastal Tourism: An Empirical Investigation on Social Media User-Generated Content," *Sustainability* 13, no. 1 (2020): 56.

is one of the most profitable forms of tourism.<sup>3</sup> Mthiyane, et.al., indicated that awarding a Blue Flag Status contributes to revenue increase in coastal tourism destinations such as Mthunzini Beach and thus promotes sustainable coastal tourism.<sup>4</sup> The current study contributes to knowledge of sustainable coastal tourism as a driver of economic growth and development.

The interest in growing coastal tourism raises concerns about the environment and the sustainability of the host communities. Natural resource overexploitation damages and depletes coastal habitats, creating negative feedback consequences on all human activity.<sup>5</sup> (According to e Silva, et.al., coastal countries are the most visited, and while they benefit economically, they are also subjected to tremendous tourism pressure.<sup>6</sup> Sustainable coastal tourism contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs include three major goals to improve coastal resources for tourism. According to the United Nations (UN), SDG 14 aims “to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development has strengthened blue growth for small states.” This paper integrates SDG 14 with uMlalazi Local Municipality strategies to promote sustainable development and marine biodiversity protection in a member of the BRICS bloc member country, South Africa. The paper is divided into seven subsections, i.e, introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, findings and discussions, recommendations, and conclusion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Potential of Coastal Tourism in Developing Countries

Coastal tourism is recognized as a priority within the blue growth strategy, and it is a significant economic driver globally, contributing approximately 10.3% to global GDP and employing around 300 million people.<sup>7</sup> Tourism accounts for about 7.1% of Africa’s GDP and supports 24.6 million jobs.<sup>8</sup> Coastal and marine tourism is seen as a critical frontier for economic diversification, with its value projected to rise from US \$80 billion in 2018 to US \$140 billion by 2030 and US \$180 billion by 2063.<sup>9</sup>

In the Western Indian Ocean, coastal and marine tourism contributes over 69% (US \$14.3 billion) of total ocean output annually. The developing countries of South Africa, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Comoros, Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, and France’s Reunion Island are also key players.<sup>10</sup> The blue economy in Africa has created approximately 350 million jobs linked to ocean-related activities.<sup>11</sup> In South Africa, the National Department of Tourism (NDT) aims to double tourism-related employment by 2030 and contribute R43.3 billion to the GDP. Coastal tourism in Mthunzini is seen as a promising economic activity that could provide jobs and support local communities.

Coastal tourism in South Africa is concentrated in four provinces, Northern Cape, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Western Cape, and Eastern Cape, with leading destinations including Cape Town, eThekweni, Buffalo City, and Gqebera. These areas accounted for 28% of total tourism trips, 33% of bed nights,

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Vernet and Anne Coste, “Garden Cities of the 21st Century: A Sustainable Path to Suburban Reform,” *Urban Planning* 2, no. 4 (December 29, 2017): 181–96, <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v2i4.1104>.

<sup>4</sup> Precious Khonzile Mthiyane, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza, and Neo Refiloe Mofokeng, “The Potential Role Blue Flag Status Plays in Promoting Sustainable Coastal Tourism, Mthunzini Beach, Umlalazi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa,” *African Journal of Public Administration and Environmental Studies (AJOPAES)* 3, no. 2 (2024): 303.

<sup>5</sup> Mita Drius et al., “Tackling Challenges for Mediterranean Sustainable Coastal Tourism: An Ecosystem Service Perspective,” *Science of the Total Environment* 652 (2019): 1302–17.

<sup>6</sup> Filipe Batista e Silva et al., “Analysing Spatiotemporal Patterns of Tourism in Europe at High-Resolution with Conventional and Big Data Sources,” *Tourism Management* 68 (2018): 101–15.

<sup>7</sup> Manfred Lenzen et al., “The Carbon Footprint of Global Tourism,” *Nature Climate Change* 8, no. 6 (2018): 522–28.

<sup>8</sup> World Travel and Tourism Council, *Travel & Tourism-Economic Impact 2020* (London: World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Philip Olale, Collins Odote, and Robert Kibugi, “Leveraging Integrated Spatial Planning for Sustainable Regulation of Coastal Tourism Activities in Malindi Town, Kenya,” *Western Indian Ocean Journal of Marine Science* 19, no. 1 (2020): 63–76.

<sup>10</sup> David O Obura, *Reviving the Western Indian Ocean Economy: Actions for a Sustainable Future* (WWF, World Wide Fund for Nature, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Jo-Ansie Van Wyk, “Defining the Blue Economy as a South African Strategic Priority: Toward a Sustainable 10th Province?,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 11, no. 2 (2015): 153–69.

and 40% of total tourism expenditure in 2015, with Cape Town and eThekweni responsible for 75% of overall tourism spending.<sup>12</sup>

However, many coastal areas lack essential tourism infrastructure, and South Africa has not developed mass tourism resorts comparable to those in other countries. Tourists are attracted by various factors, including natural activities, cultural experiences, and environmental quality.<sup>13</sup> Despite the potential of the ocean's economy, it has not yet achieved its intended best practices, and implementation has been slow. Pretorius suggests that integrating Operation Phakisa into broader planning and evaluation processes could help achieve its objectives.<sup>14</sup> The Malaysian model indicates that dedicated funding for specific projects can enhance success, and it is recommended that the National Treasury and the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation actively participate in this process.

### Land Ownership Analysis of Mthunzini

As discussed above, sustainable coastal tourism is linked to economic development. The current land ownership status has been provided below using a map sourced from the Spatial Development Framework.



Figure 1: Mthunzini Land Ownership Map  
Source: uMlalazi Spatial Development Framework (2019)

According to the Spatial Development Framework (SDF), the uMlalazi Local Municipality owns most of the land in Mthunzini, extending from the rail tracks to the national route.<sup>15</sup> Much of this land remains vacant for mixed-use developments; however, limited development has occurred in the area. State-owned land is minimal, comprising facilities such as a police station, a sports field, tourist accommodation, and law courts, while privately owned land occupies a larger portion of Mthunzini. Van der Elst and Richards-Rissetto note that government management policies have influenced land cover distribution, suggesting that the available vacant land should be optimized for development.<sup>16</sup>

It is essential to assess whether Mthunzini adheres to the provisions outlined in the SDF, particularly since environmentally sensitive areas are designated as tourist attractions. The SDF is a legislative requirement that guides municipalities in land development processes and planning

<sup>12</sup> Christian M Rogerson and Jayne M Rogerson, "Tourism, Local Economic Development and Inclusion: Evidence from Overstrand Local Municipality, South Africa," *Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites* 25, no. 2 (2019): 293–308.

<sup>13</sup> Marilena Papageorgiou, "Coastal and Marine Tourism: A Challenging Factor in Marine Spatial Planning," *Ocean & Coastal Management* 129 (2016): 44–48.

<sup>14</sup> Pieter Pretorius, "The Implications of Comprehensive and Incremental Approaches to Public Sector Reform for the Creation of a Developmental State in South Africa: Case Study of the Oceans Economy Operation Phakisa," 2018.

<sup>15</sup> uMlalazi Local Municipality, "Spatial Development Framework (SDF)," 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Judith van der Elst and Heather Richards-Rissetto, "Designing Geospatial Applications in Support of Traditional Agricultural Practices in Urban Settings," *Urban Agriculture: A Growing Field Of Research* 8120 (2013): 38.

instruments, detailing land use patterns, growth directions, urban boundaries, special development zones, and conservation areas, as mandated by Chapter 5 of the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000). The SDF is a key component of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and is built on various sustainability pillars, identifying nodes and corridors for development.

Current literature has not adequately addressed how the uMlalazi Local Municipality aligns its tourism initiatives with the SDF. Observations indicate that the municipality has not effectively integrated SDF provisions into its planning, management, and execution of tourism activities. This misalignment has hindered the expected development of coastal tourism, negatively impacting the economic growth of Mthunzini. Failure to follow these provisions may slow or prevent the achievement of sustainable coastal tourism in the area. Consequently, interventions and strategies seeking to improve coastal tourism should consider the adherence to SDF guidelines.

### Poverty Reduction through Coastal Tourism

According to the Sofronov tourism is recognized globally as a key driver of economic growth and job creation, employing approximately 292 million people worldwide.<sup>17</sup> In Africa, the tourism sector accounted for 8.1% of employment created between 2000 and 2014, reinforcing its status as a powerful sector for job creation.<sup>18</sup> The WTTC highlights that the economic benefits of tourism encompass various areas, including accommodation, transport, entertainment, and attractions, as well as capital investments in new accommodations and government services that support the tourism industry.<sup>19</sup>

However, Oviedo-García, et.al., argue that growth in the tourism sector does not automatically lead to poverty reduction.<sup>20</sup> They emphasize the need for the sector to provide inclusive and equal opportunities. A recent study conducted in five rural communities near the Isimangaliso Wetland Park indicates that many communities remain in poverty due to a lack of access to information. The study suggests that training and educating these communities is essential for economic mobilization and local tourism development.<sup>21</sup> Miller, et.al., identify three key mechanisms in coastal tourism: tourism management, tourism planning, and tourism education.<sup>22</sup> These mechanisms are crucial for the sustainable development of tourist destinations and must be implemented effectively to address the social and economic needs of communities while protecting environmentally sensitive areas. They are also necessary to protect long-term investments in tourism infrastructure, attractions, facilities, services, and marketing programs.

### Tourism and Economic Development

Tourism is a rapidly growing service sector in developing countries, significantly contributing to local economic gains compared to less touristic regions, partly due to positive spillovers on manufacturing.<sup>23</sup> In South Africa, tourism development is recognized as a vital economic driver in various small towns.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bogdan Sofronov, "The Economic Impact on Global Tourism," *Annals of Spiru Haret University. Economic Series* 17, no. 2 (2017): 127–39.

<sup>18</sup> Bineswaree Bolaky, "Tourism for Economic Development in Africa," *Journal of Research in Business, Economics and Research* 7, no. 4 (2016): 1222–48.

<sup>19</sup> World Travel and Tourism Council, *Travel & Tourism-Economic Impact 2020*.

<sup>20</sup> M Ángeles Oviedo-García, M Rosario González-Rodríguez, and Manuela Vega-Vázquez, "Does Sun-and-Sea All-Inclusive Tourism Contribute to Poverty Alleviation and/or Income Inequality Reduction? The Case of the Dominican Republic," *Journal of Travel Research* 58, no. 6 (2019): 995–1013.

<sup>21</sup> Felicite A Fairer-Wessels, "Determining the Impact of Information on Rural Livelihoods and Sustainable Tourism Development near Protected Areas in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 25, no. 1 (2017): 10–25.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, Auyong, and Hadley, "Sustainable Coastal Tourism: Challenges for Management, Planning, and Education."

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Faber and Cecile Gaubert, "Tourism and Economic Development: Evidence from Mexico's Coastline," *American Economic Review* 109, no. 6 (2019): 2245–93.

<sup>24</sup> Christian M Rogerson and Jayne M Rogerson, "Urban Tourism Destinations in South Africa: Divergent Trajectories 2001–2012," *Urbani Izziv* 25 (2014): S189–203; Christian M Rogerson and Jayne M Rogerson, "Emergent Planning for South Africa's Blue Economy: Evidence from Coastal and Marine Tourism," *Urbani Izziv* 30 (2019): 24–36. R. Donaldson, *Small Town Tourism in South Africa* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018); Nolitha Kotsiwe and Gustav Visser, "Tourism as a Vehicle for Local Economic Development in Small Towns? When Things Go Wrong: The Case of Aliwal North, South Africa," *Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites* 27, no. 4 (2019): 1334–46.

It has been identified as a key source of economic development in some developing nations.<sup>25</sup> By improving local service production, tourism can generate long-term positive spillovers on traded goods and improve access to business services for local enterprises.<sup>26</sup>

Scheyvens and Biddulph highlight the economic benefits of tourism development but caution that long-term impacts must be carefully considered, especially when the industry relies on ecological health.<sup>27</sup> Coastal development is seen as a critical change driver, but Patterson and Hardy warn that overexploitation of natural resources can exert significant pressure on the environment.<sup>28</sup> The White Paper for Sustainable Coastal Development in South Africa (2000) underscores the importance of economic and social development linked to coastal resources while prioritizing the health of coastal ecosystems.

Ecological Economics advocates for the integrated management of resilient and sustainable socio-ecological systems.<sup>29</sup> From a societal perspective, tourism development enhances the quality of life, creating jobs<sup>30</sup> and stimulating economic growth through income generation, employment, investment, and cultural heritage preservation.<sup>31</sup> Mdlalose and Taylor note that South African coastal towns have not fully leveraged their geographical advantages, suggesting that smaller towns near markets should receive more attention to attract domestic and foreign investment.<sup>32</sup> However, the contribution of coastal areas to South Africa's tourism sector is declining (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020). Ecological Economics provides tools and insights to facilitate the transition from unsustainable growth models to more sustainable futures.<sup>33</sup>

### Coastal and Ecotourism Development

Coastal tourism is recognized globally as a priority within the blue growth strategy, serving as a major economic driver and employment producer.<sup>34</sup> The SDGs, particularly SDG 14, emphasize the need for comprehensive conservation strategies for coastal and marine environments. Islam and Shamsuddoha argue that implementing these strategies is crucial to improve blue growth and achieve sustainable development.<sup>35</sup> While the most visited countries often have coastal areas that benefit economically, they also face intense tourism pressure.<sup>36</sup>

Hermon stresses that eco-tourism development should focus on local ecosystems and culture, warning that poor management can severely damage coastal ecosystems.<sup>37</sup> Writers highlight the importance of ecotourism conservation for several reasons.<sup>38</sup> It provides economic value to coastal areas, generates financial resources for conservation programs, and increases revenue for coastal

<sup>25</sup> Kgosietsile Velepini and Bruce Martin, "Place-Based Education as a Framework for Tourism Education in Secondary Schools: A Case Study from the Okavango Delta in Southern Africa," *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education* 25 (2019): 100197.

<sup>26</sup> Faber and Gaubert, "Tourism and Economic Development: Evidence from Mexico's Coastline."

<sup>27</sup> Regina Scheyvens and Robin Biddulph, "Inclusive Tourism Development," *Tourism Geographies* 20, no. 4 (2018): 589–609.

<sup>28</sup> Murray Patterson and Derrylea Hardy, "Economic Drivers of Change and Their Oceanic-Coastal Ecological Impacts," *Ecological Economics of the Oceans and Coasts*. Edward Elgar Publishing 15 (2008): 187–209.

<sup>29</sup> James E Côté and Seth J Schwartz, "Comparing Psychological and Sociological Approaches to Identity: Identity Status, Identity Capital, and the Individualization Process," *Journal of Adolescence* 25, no. 6 (2002): 571–86.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, Auyong, and Hadley, "Sustainable Coastal Tourism: Challenges for Management, Planning, and Education."

<sup>31</sup> World Travel and Tourism Council, *Travel & Tourism-Economic Impact 2020*.

<sup>32</sup> Methembe Mdlalose and Simon Taylor, "Coastal Regional Development in South Africa through Special Economic Zones," *WIT Transactions on The Built Environment* 188 (2019): 177–89.

<sup>33</sup> R., Costanza et al., *Sustainable Wellbeing Futures: A Research and Action Agenda for Ecological Economics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A New Approach to the Atlantic Maritime Strategy – Atlantic Action Plan 2.0, An Updated Action Plan for a Sustainable, Resilient and Competitive Blue Economy in the European Union Atlantic Area," July 23, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0329&from=EN>.

<sup>35</sup> Mohammad Mahmudul Islam and M D Shamsuddoha, "Coastal and Marine Conservation Strategy for Bangladesh in the Context of Achieving Blue Growth and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," *Environmental Science & Policy* 87 (2018): 45–54.

<sup>36</sup> e Silva et al., "Analysing Spatiotemporal Patterns of Tourism in Europe at High-Resolution with Conventional and Big Data Sources."

<sup>37</sup> Clare A Gunn and Turgut Var, *Tourism Planning: Basics, Concepts, Cases* (Psychology Press, 2002).; Dedi Hermon, "The Strategic Model of Tsunami Based in Coastal Ecotourism Development at Mandeh Regions, West Sumatera, Indonesia," *Journal of Environment and Earth Science* 6, no. 4 (2016): 40–45.

<sup>38</sup> Chafid Fandeli and Muhammad Nurdin, "Development of Conservation-Based Ecotourism in National Parks," *Faculty of Forestry and Center for Tourism Studies. Gadjah Mada University. Yogyakarta*, 2005.

communities. Additionally, ecotourism promotes sustainable resource use and helps mitigate biodiversity threats.

A study by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) developed a framework to assess the economic impact of coastal and marine tourism in South Africa, identifying key challenges and lessons, including the importance of community and private sector involvement, ecosystem education, accommodation services as income multipliers, and effective conservation management techniques.<sup>39</sup> Castro-Nuno, et.al., emphasize that tourism is a key economic sector that generates income, employment, and tax revenue, with significant growth potential in South Africa.<sup>40</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study contributes to viable theoretically sound interventions that address economic, ecological, and social concerns to achieve sustainable coastal tourism. This section focuses on ecological economics and sustainable development concepts embedded in sustainable coastal tourism as a driver of economic development globally.

### Significance of Ecological Economics

The achievement of sustainable coastal development is based on understanding and adopting some concepts of ecological economics (EE). EE has a clear normative goal - to achieve sustainability - where sustainability is understood to have economic, environmental, and social components. Building an environmentally sustainable economy is crucial for designing strategies of a non-growing society, addressing sustainability-related problems, and addressing injustice within the current generation. Sustainability helps design strategies for a good life for future generations.<sup>41</sup>

Given the need to understand how sustainable coastal tourism can be achieved in Mthunzini, Olale, et.al., iterate that coastal tourism can be a catalyst for growth and development but also can be an engine of destruction and environmental degradation if not properly regulated.<sup>42</sup> In the context of coastal tourism analysis, examples include the extent to which the number of tourists affects economic development. However, as the number of tourists grows, there is an increase in coastal user conflicts, as well as an increase in tourism development of accommodation facilities within the fragile coastal ecosystem, which has led to the destruction of coral reefs, lagoons and sand beaches in some instances.<sup>43</sup> Mthunzini ecosystems are of social, economic, and environmental importance, requiring sustainable development and EE, considering the ocean strategic value and best practices from countries thriving in sustainable coastal tourism.

### The strategic value of the ocean's economy

In EE, the concept of scale is crucial, particularly regarding the size of the economy and its relevance to Sustainable Coastal Tourism in Mthunzini. The South African government launched Operation Phakisa (OP) in 2014 as part of the National Development Plan (NDP) to maximize economic opportunities from the ocean, stimulate growth, and create jobs.<sup>44</sup> OP was inspired by the Malaysian Big Fast Results (BFR) methodology, which aimed to leverage coastal resources for economic development and promote the blue economy. Walker notes that effectively utilizing South Africa's

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<sup>39</sup> Cape Peninsula University of Technology, *Development Framework to Assess the Economic Impact of Coastal and Marine Tourism in South Africa* (National Department of Tourism, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Mercedes Castro-Nuño, José A Molina-Toucedo, and Maria P Pablo-Romero, "Tourism and GDP: A Meta-Analysis of Panel Data Studies," *Journal of Travel Research* 52, no. 6 (2013): 745–58.

<sup>41</sup> Clive L Spash, "A Tale of Three Paradigms: Realising the Revolutionary Potential of Ecological Economics," *Ecological Economics* 169 (2020): 106518.

<sup>42</sup> Olale, Odote, and Kibugi, "Leveraging Integrated Spatial Planning for Sustainable Regulation of Coastal Tourism Activities in Malindi Town, Kenya."

<sup>43</sup> Government of Kenya (GoK), *State of the Coast Report: Towards Integrated Management of Coastal and Marine Resources in Kenya* (Nairobi: Government of the Republic of Kenya, National Environment Management Authority, 2009); Government of Kenya, *Pollution Prevention and Control Guidelines for the Coastal and Marine Environment of Kenya* (Nairobi: Government of the Republic of Kenya, National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Lisa Otto, "South Africa's Operation Phakisa: Development without Security?," *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies* 47, no. 2 (2019): 69–84.

coastal resources could lead to job creation and help reduce inequality and poverty, with state-owned enterprises like Transnet playing a key role in ensuring the safety of ports and railways.<sup>45</sup>

However, progress on OP has been slow, with Britz highlighting a lack of dedicated budget for its six focus areas, which are aquaculture, marine protection, marine transport, offshore oil and gas, small harbours, and coastal and marine tourism.<sup>46</sup> Britz also emphasizes the need to address legislative gaps and financial constraints in managing the ocean economy, requiring collaboration among multiple stakeholders for significant capital investments.<sup>47</sup> The initiative has the potential to foster innovation and leadership in coastal tourism.<sup>48</sup> The EC recognizes coastal and marine tourism as a sustainable sector with substantial growth and employment potential, contributing approximately 10.3% to global GDP and supporting around 300 million jobs.<sup>49</sup>

In Africa, tourism contributes about 7.1% to the continent's GDP and supports approximately 24.6 million jobs.<sup>50</sup> Coastal and marine tourism is considered a critical "new frontier" for economic diversification in several African nations.<sup>51</sup> The value of coastal tourism is projected to rise significantly, from US \$80 billion in 2018 to US \$140 billion by 2030 and US \$180 billion by 2063.<sup>52</sup> Coastal and marine tourism accounts for about 69% (US \$14.3 billion) of total ocean output, making it the largest economic contributor in the Western Indian Ocean region.<sup>53</sup> Potgieter asserts that South Africa's coast offers abundant resources that significantly contribute to the GDP,<sup>54</sup> with the oceans and coasts serving as key engines for job creation.<sup>55</sup> In 2010, during the World Cup, the ocean economy contributed approximately ZAR 54 billion to the GDP, employing around 316,000 people.<sup>56</sup>

According to the National Department of Tourism (NDT) (2016), South Africa's goal is to double employment through tourism by 2030 and contribute R43.3 billion towards the GDP. The LED through Mthunzini coastal tourism is regarded as a prospective economic activity that can contribute to the employment of local people and their surroundings and the preservation of rural communities. Cape Town, eThekweni, Buffalo City, and Port Elizabeth are destinations that account for 28% of total tourism trips, 33% of bed nights, and 40% of total expenditure. Cape Town and eThekweni accounted for 75% and 24% of total spending in 2015, respectively.<sup>57</sup>

Notably, coastal destinations district municipalities of Garden Route in the Eastern Cape contribute 8 %, Overberg contributes 4.9 % in the Western Cape and Ugu contributes 4.4 % in the KZN province. These leading tourism destinations in total account for 82% of the total spending recorded for South African coastal areas during 2015.<sup>58</sup> South Africa's sub-sectors include the maritime industry, with the most sophisticated sub-sectors, such as shipping, transport ports, transport shipping, and coastal and marine resources.<sup>59</sup> South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire are Africa's top five countries in terms of port traffic and the South African government has considered its oceans a strategically significant value.<sup>60</sup>

Mthunzini presents significant economic opportunities, particularly due to the presence of safe submarine cables, such as the East African Submarine Cable System. South Africa boasts six landing

<sup>45</sup> T Walker, "Avoiding the Siren's Song: Will Operation Phakisa Deliver Prosperity," *ISS Today* 28 (2014).

<sup>46</sup> Peter Britz, "The History of South African Inland Fisheries Policy with Governance Recommendations for the Democratic Era," *Water Sa* 41, no. 5 (2015): 624–32.

<sup>47</sup> Britz, "The History of South African Inland Fisheries Policy with Governance Recommendations for the Democratic Era."

<sup>48</sup> Walker, "Avoiding the Siren's Song: Will Operation Phakisa Deliver Prosperity."

<sup>49</sup> Lenzen et al., "The Carbon Footprint of Global Tourism."

<sup>50</sup> World Travel and Tourism Council, *Travel & Tourism-Economic Impact 2020*.

<sup>51</sup> Christian M Rogerson and Jayne M Rogerson, "Africa's Tourism Economy: Uneven Progress and Challenges," *Handbook of African Development*, 2018, 545–60.

<sup>52</sup> Olale, Odote, and Kibugi, "Leveraging Integrated Spatial Planning for Sustainable Regulation of Coastal Tourism Activities in Malindi Town, Kenya."

<sup>53</sup> Obura, *Reviving the Western Indian Ocean Economy: Actions for a Sustainable Future*.

<sup>54</sup> Thean Potgieter, "Oceans Economy, Blue Economy, and Security: Notes on the South African Potential and Developments," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14, no. 1 (2018): 49–70.

<sup>55</sup> M Fabinyi et al., "The Human Relationship with Our Ocean Planet," 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Van Wyk, "Defining the Blue Economy as a South African Strategic Priority: Toward a Sustainable 10th Province?"

<sup>57</sup> Rogerson and Rogerson, "Emergent Planning for South Africa's Blue Economy: Evidence from Coastal and Marine Tourism."

<sup>58</sup> Rogerson and Rogerson, "Tourism, Local Economic Development and Inclusion: Evidence from Overstrand Local Municipality, South Africa."

<sup>59</sup> Van Wyk, "Defining the Blue Economy as a South African Strategic Priority: Toward a Sustainable 10th Province?"

<sup>60</sup> E. Endres, *Africa Survey 2013. Africa in Figures* (Johannesburg: Good Governance Africa, 2013).

points for these cables and has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) exceeding one million square kilometres.<sup>61</sup> The country's ocean economy can be further developed through the establishment of coast-to-coast development corridors and Special Economic Zones (SEZs), also known as Industrial Development Zones (IDZs). Notably, the Richards Bay IDZ and Dube Trade Port in KZN play crucial roles in enhancing the region's economy. Additionally, the aquaculture industry in South Africa is still in its infancy, contributing only 0.8% of total fish and fish products and providing approximately 2,800 jobs, with about 50% of aquaculture farms located in the Western Cape Province.<sup>62</sup>

Currently, Cape Town and Durban are the leading tourism destinations benefiting from coastal and marine tourism developments, while other coastal areas in South Africa lack essential tourism infrastructure.<sup>63</sup> There is an emerging focus on improving tourism infrastructure to distribute benefits beyond traditional tourism hubs. Despite having numerous spectacular beaches, South Africa has not developed large international sun-and-sand resorts. Tourists are attracted to destinations based on various factors, including natural activities, cultural experiences, support services, accommodation, recreational options, uniqueness, environmental quality, food, and accessibility.<sup>64</sup>

The ocean's economy has not yet achieved its intended 'best practices,' and progress has been slow. Pretorius suggests that integrating Operation Phakisa into broader planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes could help embed its objectives within the performance agreements and daily responsibilities of government employees.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the Malaysian model indicates that dedicated funding for specific projects can enhance success, and it is recommended that the National Treasury and the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation actively participate in this process.

## Natural Capital

Since humans can understand the impact on the environment and the significance of managing it sustainably, humans therefore, play an exceptional role in our ecosystems. In addition, EE's primary concern is embedded in social systems within sustaining and containing ecological systems.<sup>66</sup> According to Wironen and Erickson, the magnitude of human reliance on the earth as an ultimate means to satisfy human needs and desires is the main concern of the EE.<sup>67</sup> EE was established on the importance of retaining the economy within its biophysical limits while recognizing the necessity for the ways of human society to respect others, both current and future, human and nonhuman.<sup>68</sup>

Bergstrand and Mayer concur and explicate that society is reliant and a subset of the environment and that economic activity is reliant and a subset of society.<sup>69</sup> In a broader sense, EE refers to economic theory and practice that view the economy as operating within, rather than overlooking, the spheres of nature, society, and culture.<sup>70</sup> The greatest influence of the sea can be traced in the 20-kilometre coastal zone where the development of maritime economic activity and production is observed, whereas in areas far from the sea, it decreases, especially on the periphery of the oblast. As such, the municipality needs

<sup>61</sup> Charles L Griffiths et al., "Marine Biodiversity in South Africa: An Evaluation of Current States of Knowledge," *PLoS One* 5, no. 8 (2010): e12008.

<sup>62</sup> B. Brown-Webb, "Creating a Model to Develop Self-Sustainable Aquaculture Agribusiness Enterprises in South Africa" (University of the Free State, 2023); Mthiyane, Nojiyeza, and Mofokeng, "The Potential Role Blue Flag Status Plays in Promoting Sustainable Coastal Tourism, Mthunzini Beach, Umlalazi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa."

<sup>63</sup> Rogerson and Rogerson, "Urban Tourism Destinations in South Africa: Divergent Trajectories 2001–2012"; Christian M Rogerson and Jayne M Rogerson, "City Tourism in South Africa: Diversity and Change," *Tourism Review International* 21, no. 2 (2017): 193–211.

<sup>64</sup> Papageorgiou, "Coastal and Marine Tourism: A Challenging Factor in Marine Spatial Planning."

<sup>65</sup> Pretorius, "The Implications of Comprehensive and Incremental Approaches to Public Sector Reform for the Creation of a Developmental State in South Africa: Case Study of the Oceans Economy Operation Phakisa."

<sup>66</sup> Michael B Wironen and Jon D Erickson, "A Critically Modern Ecological Economics for the Anthropocene," *The Anthropocene Review* 7, no. 1 (2020): 62–76.

<sup>67</sup> Wironen and Erickson, "A Critically Modern Ecological Economics for the Anthropocene."

<sup>68</sup> Spash, "A Tale of Three Paradigms: Realising the Revolutionary Potential of Ecological Economics."

<sup>69</sup> Kelly Bergstrand and Brian Mayer, "'The Community Helped Me: Community Cohesion and Environmental Concerns in Personal Assessments of Post-Disaster Recovery,'" *Society & Natural Resources* 33, no. 3 (2020): 386–405.

<sup>70</sup> Fritjof Capra and Ove Daniel Jakobsen, "A Conceptual Framework for Ecological Economics Based on Systemic Principles of Life," *International Journal of Social Economics* 44, no. 6 (2017): 831–44.

to map out areas favourable for the priority development of specific economic activity and provide proposals for projects.<sup>71</sup>

EE addresses critical issues related to biodiversity conservation, particularly the threats posed by land-use changes and biological invasions. It examines the conflict between economic growth and environmental degradation, highlighting how economic activities can lead to pollution and other negative environmental impacts, for which the principle of "the polluter pays" is applied.<sup>72</sup>

Martinez and Muradian emphasize that the economy is embedded within ecosystems, advocating for both monetary valuation and physical assessments of environmental impacts.<sup>73</sup> While EE considers the physical consequences of human economic activities on the environment, it also suggests a multidimensional approach to understanding these interactions.<sup>74</sup> South Africa, with the third-longest coastline in Africa, is bordered by three oceans: the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Southern Ocean.<sup>75</sup> The country's oceans and seas are increasingly recognized as a "new frontier," rich in untapped resources valued in the trillions of US dollars.<sup>76</sup> Given its extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), South Africa has the potential to benefit significantly from creating enabling frameworks for sustainable development. Therefore, development in Mthunzini must prioritize the protection of vulnerable ecosystems from harmful and unauthorized practices.

### Ecological Economics and Sustainable Development

EE is an economic approach that aims to achieve sustainable development. (Soderbaum, 2019). It serves as a fundamental aspect of green economy trends in new economic thinking<sup>77</sup> and is an interdisciplinary field that addresses the issues of sustainable development that arise from global and local environmental challenges. Sustainable development is viewed as a harmonious process that integrates ecological, social, and economic dimensions. EE promotes a sustainable future that values nature and respects non-human entities.<sup>78</sup>

In Mthunzini, sustainable development requires economic growth that considers conservation, resource limitations, and ecosystem carrying capacity, balancing social and economic goals. Adongo, et.al., highlight that sustainable development, particularly Sustainable Development in Tourism (SDT), is a solution to environmental challenges.<sup>79</sup> The goal of SDT is to maximize economic opportunities and socio-cultural benefits while ensuring environmental sustainability.<sup>80</sup>

Ruhanen, et.al., describe SDT as development that efficiently utilizes resources while meeting environmental, economic, and socio-cultural needs.<sup>81</sup> Governments have various instruments, policies, and laws to influence sustainable tourism development, which should be considered at all levels of policymaking.<sup>82</sup> Other scholars posit that sustainable tourism is characterized as tourism that is

<sup>71</sup> Irina Arhipova et al., "Mobile Phone Data Statistics as a Dynamic Proxy Indicator in Assessing Regional Economic Activity and Human Commuting Patterns," *Expert Systems* 37, no. 5 (2020): e12530.

<sup>72</sup> Spash, "A Tale of Three Paradigms: Realising the Revolutionary Potential of Ecological Economics.," Juan Martinez-Alier and Inge Røpke, *Recent Developments in Ecological Economics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008).

<sup>73</sup> Joan Martínez-Alier and Roldan Muradian, *Handbook of Ecological Economics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> Joan Martínez-Alier, Giuseppe Munda, and John O'Neill, "Weak Comparability of Values as a Foundation for Ecological Economics," *Ecological Economics* 26, no. 3 (1998): 277–86.

<sup>75</sup> Timothy Walker, "Securing a Sustainable Oceans Economy: South Africa's Approach," *ISS Southern Africa Report* 2018, no. 14 (2018): 1–24.

<sup>76</sup> Walker, "Securing a Sustainable Oceans Economy: South Africa's Approach."

<sup>77</sup> Stanislav Shmelev, "Multidimensional Sustainability Assessment for Megacities," in *Green Economy Reader: Lectures in Ecological Economics and Sustainability* (Springer, 2016), 205–36.

<sup>78</sup> Haydn Washington and Michelle Maloney, "The Need for Ecological Ethics in a New Ecological Economics," *Ecological Economics* 169 (2020): 106478.

<sup>79</sup> Charles A Adongo, Francis Taale, and Issahaku Adam, "Tourists' Values and Empathic Attitude toward Sustainable Development in Tourism," *Ecological Economics* 150 (2018): 251–63.

<sup>80</sup> Ömer Ceyhan Apak and Ahmet Guerbuez, "The Effect of Local Food Consumption of Domestic Tourists on Sustainable Tourism," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 71 (2023): 103192.

<sup>81</sup> Lisa Ruhanen et al., "Trends and Patterns in Sustainable Tourism Research: A 25-Year Bibliometric Analysis," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 23, no. 4 (2015): 517–35.

<sup>82</sup> Derek Hall, "Sustainable Tourism Development and Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 8, no. 6 (2000): 441–57; Murray C Simpson, "Community Benefit Tourism Initiatives—A Conceptual Oxymoron?," *Tourism Management* 29, no. 1 (2008): 1–18; M., Mowforth, C. Charlton, and I., Munt, *Tourism and Responsibility: Perspectives from Latin America and the Caribbean* (Taylor & Francis, 2008).

developed and maintained on a viable scale over an indefinite period without degrading the environment.<sup>83</sup> This study contributes to the theories of EE and sustainable development, despite coastal tourism being one of the more threatening forms of tourism.<sup>84</sup> Based on the three pillars of sustainable development and other phenomena related to this, it is noticeable that SDT can only be achieved through the community. Figure 1 explains this concept in depth.

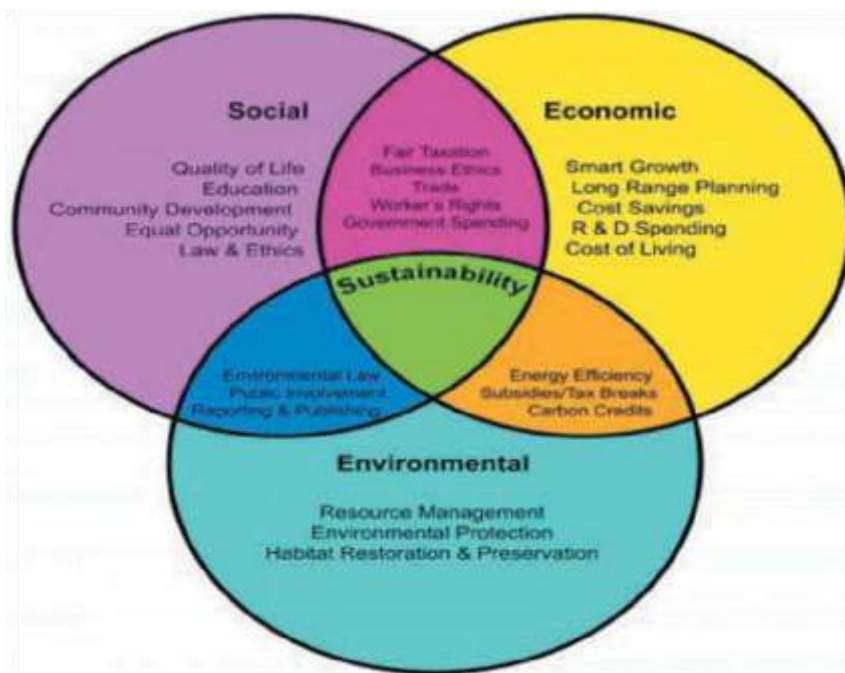


Figure 2: Three pillars of sustainable development  
Source: Wanamaker (2018)

The three spheres of sustainability environment, economy, and society, are interconnected and form the foundation of sustainable development, as recognized by the UN in the context of the SDGs.<sup>85</sup> Although there is no singular origin for this three-pillar concept in academic literature, it serves as a framework for integrating economic growth with social and ecological challenges.

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach is a key tool for examining a company's social, environmental, and economic impacts, emphasizing the importance of incorporating all three dimensions into planning and decision-making for sustainable development.<sup>86</sup> The uMlalazi Local Municipality can utilize this framework to prioritize social, environmental, and economic aspects in its decision-making processes, ensuring that basic human needs are met, ecosystems are functional, and economic growth is sustainable.<sup>87</sup>

The three pillars of sustainable development, economic growth, environmental protection, and social equality, can improve social life and human rights by conserving natural resources and promoting economic resilience.<sup>88</sup> Some scholars argue that the best choices are those that fulfil societal needs

<sup>83</sup> Emaad Muhanna, "Sustainable Tourism Development and Environmental Management for Developing Countries," *Problems and Perspectives in Management* 4, no. 2 (2006): 14–30; Robert J Johnston and Timothy J Tyrrell, "A Dynamic Model of Sustainable Tourism," *Journal of Travel Research* 44, no. 2 (2005): 124–34.

<sup>84</sup> Simpson, "Community Benefit Tourism Initiatives—A Conceptual Oxymoron?"

<sup>85</sup> Ben Purvis, Yong Mao, and Darren Robinson, "Three Pillars of Sustainability: In Search of Conceptual Origins," *Sustainability Science* 14, no. 3 (2019): 681–95.

<sup>86</sup> Timothy F Slaper and Tanya J Hall, "The Triple Bottom Line: What Is It and How Does It Work," *Indiana Business Review* 86, no. 1 (2011): 4–8; Theo Hacking and Peter Guthrie, "A Framework for Clarifying the Meaning of Triple Bottom-Line, Integrated, and Sustainability Assessment," *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 28, no. 2–3 (2008): 73–89.

<sup>87</sup> Purvis, Mao, and Robinson, "Three Pillars of Sustainability: In Search of Conceptual Origins."

<sup>88</sup> DESA-UN, "The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017," April 4, 2018, <https://undesa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html>; Jari Kaivo-oja et al., "Relationships of the Dimensions of Sustainability as Measured by the Sustainable Society Index Framework," *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 39–45,

while being environmentally and economically viable and socially equitable. An assessment of sustainable coastal tourism using the TBL framework addresses ecological sustainability, the quality of life for local communities, and economic benefits, including income flow, expenditure, taxes, and employment.<sup>89</sup>

Campbell argues that the three pillars of sustainability, economic, environmental, and social are often in conflict, with 'sustainable development' at the core of this tension and emphasizes the challenges in achieving a balance between these pillars and advocates for collaboration between development planners and environmental planners.<sup>90</sup> This assertion highlights significant issues that remain relevant to the problem statement of the study. By examining these three pillars, the study illustrates how sustainable coastal tourism can be effectively achieved and offers guidance for formulating strategies, policies, and plans. Consequently, Mthunzini requires careful consideration of all three sustainability pillars to foster effective development.

## METHODOLOGY

This section describes the study setting where the data were collected. The demography, geography, location, natural environment and the socio-cultural environment of the study area are presented and described, revealing the tourism potentials of the Municipality.

### Mthunzini's Demography, Geographic Location, and Natural Environment.

According to the uMlalazi Spatial Development Plan (SDF) (2019), Mthunzini is a small coastal and residential town situated near the central point of Kwa-Zulu Natal's coastline, with GPS coordinates of 28.9597 S, 31.750 E. The town is strategically located between two major economic hubs, Richards Bay and Durban, within Ward 19 of the uMlalazi Local Municipality, which is the second-largest municipality in the King Cetshwayo District Municipality (KCDM). Mthunzini is accessible through several routes, including the N2 national road, the R66 heritage route, and the R102 and R34 provincial development corridors, which facilitate easy access to the town.<sup>91</sup>

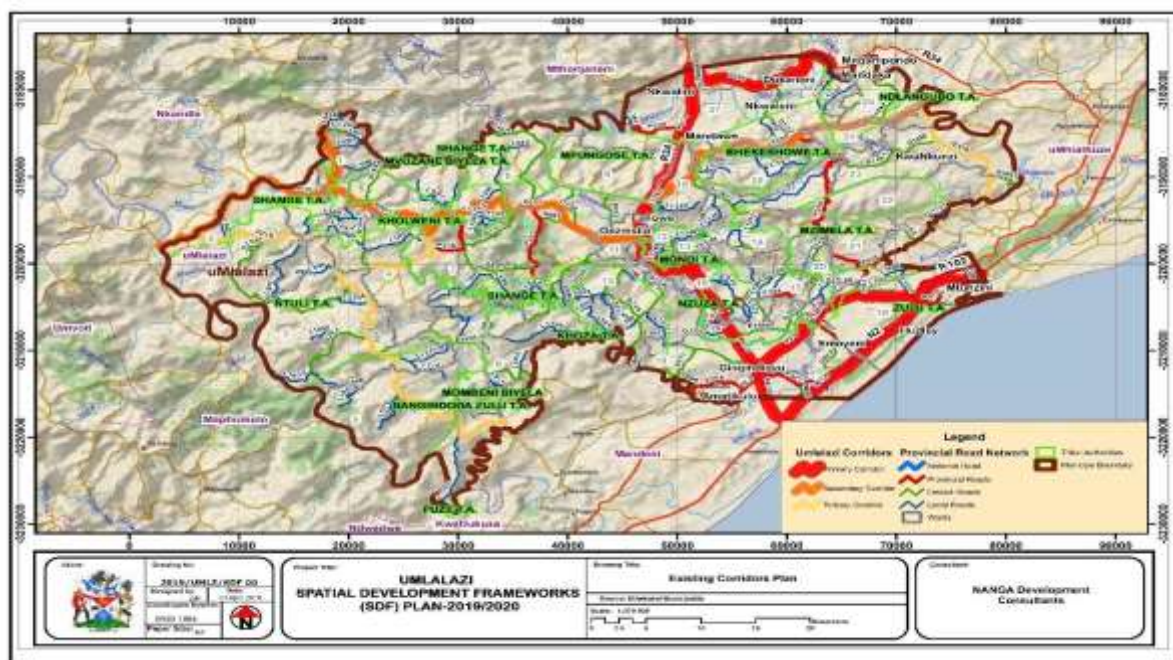


Figure 3: A Map of Mthunzini  
Source: uMlalazi Local Municipality (2021)

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504509.2013.860056>; Michael E Porter and Claas van der Linde, "Toward a New Conception of the Environment-Competitiveness Relationship," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9, no. 4 (1995): 97–118.

<sup>89</sup> Slaper and Hall, "The Triple Bottom Line: What Is It and How Does It Work."

<sup>90</sup> Scott Campbell, "Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities? Urban Planning and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development," in *Classic Readings in Urban Planning* (Routledge, 2018), 308–26.

<sup>91</sup> Umlalazi Local Municipality, "Spatial Development Framework (SDF)."

According to the 2016 community survey conducted by StatsSA, the uMlalazi Local Municipality has a total population of 225,797, while Mthunzini, as per the 2011 census, has a population of 2,199. Mthunzini is recognized as an eco-tourism destination in South Africa, featuring quality residential areas, an estuary, wetland, and mangrove forests.

The town boasts a relatively unspoiled coastline and a beach with sand dunes, along with the uMlalazi Nature Reserve, which is home to rich ecosystems and supports the annual harvest of reeds (Incema and Ikhwani), which benefits many people across the country. Mthunzini is also notable for its biodiversity, hosting around 300 species of rare birds, as well as various flora, fauna, fish, and mammals.<sup>92</sup> The uMlalazi Local Municipality IDP notes that the municipality is bordered by the Indian Ocean along a coastline of approximately 19.34 kilometres, extending from the Mandeni Local Municipality to the City of uMhlathuze Municipality. Mthunzini, located in KZN's north coast greenbelt, is bordered by the Indian Ocean and the Umlalazi River, adjacent to the 1,028-hectare Nature Reserve.<sup>93</sup>

### **Research Approach and Rationale**

A qualitative approach was used to gain in-depth views from participants on sustainable coastal tourism as a driver of economic development. Semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted for 16 participants who participated in the study. The qualitative approach allowed the researchers to be closer to the people involved in planning, development, managing, conservation, and marketing of the coast, and this helped in obtaining in-depth information from the perspective of those involved in the study and what they are trying to accomplish.<sup>94</sup> In the context of the research problem, the study focused on understanding sustainable coastal tourism in a fragile environment while potentially exploring means to economically develop the coast; thus, a qualitative approach is more appropriate.

### **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The presentation of research findings follows the extent to which coastal tourism affects economic development within the Mthunzini Area. The emerging themes from the participants' responses have provided insights into some issues and controversies about coastal tourism concerning the environment, society, and economy of Mthunzini. The participants had diverse views and insights regarding implementing sustainable coastal tourism within Mthunzini, and their responses were captured accordingly. For the protection of their identities, the participants were given pseudonyms.

#### **Mthunzini Proposed development projects**

The leading theme on how sustainable coastal tourism affects economic development can be attributed to that of land earmarked for development by uMlalazi Local Municipality. When asked about the extent to which sustainable coastal tourism affects economic development, the Coastal Working Group representative, Sthembiso Ngobese, explained extensively, and the excerpt is presented below.

“If our land is to be fully optimized and developed the same way as Cape Town, it will even attract more tourists. The development of our coastal land is very critical to the growth of our economy because in that way there are many effects when it comes to economic growth.” (CWG Sthembiso Ngobese).

The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) 16 of 2013 serves as a national framework in South Africa, effective from July 2015, governing spatial planning and land use development. Its primary objectives, as noted by Padarath, include driving spatial transformation and ensuring consistency in planning to address imbalances created by apartheid-era policies.<sup>95</sup> The uMlalazi Local Municipality is working with the private sector and the Municipal Tribunal to facilitate

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<sup>92</sup> uMlalazi Local Municipality, “Spatial Development Framework (SDF).”

<sup>93</sup> J. Brousse, *Umlalazi Nature Reserve, Integrated Management* ( Pietermaritzburg: Plan, Ed, Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife Management Planning Unit. , 2009).

<sup>94</sup> Martin Terre Blanche et al., *Research in Practice: Applied Methods for the Social Sciences* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2006).

<sup>95</sup> R. Padarath, *SPLUMA As a Tool for Spatial Transformation* (Johannesburg: South African Cities Network, 2015).

land development along the coastal strip in Mthunzini, particularly regarding the remainder of ERF 167. Van Wyk and Oranje assess SPLUMA, emphasizing its principles aimed at redressing past imbalances, promoting social justice, equity, and inclusion, fostering community participation, and ensuring transparent decision-making.<sup>96</sup> These principles highlight the significance of property, housing, and environmental management in establishing functional, efficient, and humane settlements.

### The remainder of ERF 167 Mthunzini

The map below (map 2) shows a mixed-used development project that includes retail, a public transport hub, a private hospital, and a school. The aforementioned proposed development projects are the cornerstone of coastal tourism because, without hotels and resorts, very few tourists will venture into the development of the coast.



Figure 4: The uMlalazi Spatial Development Framework ERF 167 Mthunzini.  
Source: uMlalazi Local Municipality, 2019

According to the SDF, the total budget estimated for this mixed-used project is R1.043 billion. The project is anticipated to create approximately four thousand seven hundred and eighty jobs (4780) and just over thirty-six thousand (36000) temporary jobs for the duration of the project. The uMlalazi Local Municipality before approving the proposed development followed the SPLUMA guiding principles to develop the coastal tourism of Mthunzini. The SPLUMA directs municipalities to:

...apply it in its spatial development frameworks, land use schemes and, most importantly, in decision making on development applications SPLUMA lays the foundation for an inclusive spatial planning and land use management system in terms of which integrated housing development is facilitated and the housing rights of disadvantaged communities in South Africa are addressed.

Though approved, these proposed projects by the uMlalazi Local Council have not started due to lack of bulk services and thereby remain the main obstacle. TP Lindo Khanyile (2021) said, “There are great development plans for Mthunzini but there is no progress, and they are never ground-breaking.”

The remainder of ERF 167 is still not developed and delayed because of lack of bulk services as the main challenge. These sentiments were shared by Kerry Black (2021), stating that “...the ERF 167

<sup>96</sup> Jeannie Van Wyk and Mark Oranje, “The Post-1994 South African Spatial Planning System and Bill of Rights: A Meaningful and Mutually Beneficial Fit?,” *Planning Theory* 13, no. 4 (2014): 349–69.

actually is one of the sites with potential, the land is at the top, if you can put a six-floor story building, you can even see Richards Bay.”

It is hoped that implementing the proposed development projects, especially the mall, will further create more investment opportunities. Looking at the land zoned for such development, this research argues that ways must be made to develop Mthunzini to its full potential while safeguarding the integrity of the ecosystems. The proposed mixed-commercial developments on the remainder of ERF 167 are one of the development zones along the N2 that can influence the potential investment pool. The approval by the uMlalazi Municipal Council was a critical decision considering that the interior of Mthunzini is environmentally sensitive for such massive development. This development is an indication of a strong level of municipal leadership style.

### **Local Economic Development (LED) vs. Conservancy**

According to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the uMlalazi Local Municipality is tasked with promoting social and economic development through initiatives and investments that enhance economic growth. Tourism development is recognized as particularly significant for various small towns in South Africa.<sup>97</sup> However, while coastal development is viewed as a crucial driver of change, Patterson and Hardy caution that increased utilization or overexploitation of natural resources may exert significant pressure on the environment, particularly at the land-ocean interface.<sup>98</sup> EE is founded on a commitment to studying environmental issues and aims to contribute to a more sustainable development trajectory. (Sorderbaum, 1998).

This assertion implies that economic development could be compatible with one another. Mthiyane, et.al., concluded that for Mthunzini Beach to maintain its Blue Flag status, it is imperative to strike a balance between economic benefits, conservation, environmental stewardship, development of ecologically friendly infrastructure, job creation and socio-cultural imperatives.<sup>99</sup> Participants have expressed concerns about the potential compromise of the coastal area, which is a significant contributor to the GDP. Such sentiments are captured through their responses. DLED Nomvula Hadebe (2020) argued that:

“Mthunzini coastal area does not contribute much towards the town’s economic development, however, it does cater for the major economic development as a contributor, but its current status is quite low as we are aware that Mthunzini is a protected area.”

Similarly, Morgan and Daly assert that EE aims to advance the view that the state should avoid uneconomical growth.<sup>100</sup> The findings further showed that the reason the Mthunzini coastal area is not expanding is that the coast is environmentally sensitive, and this was noted and explained by a participant named LB2 Suzan Oliphant (2021), “There is no economic development, and it is very little, it is also because Mthunzini is a conservancy and people here want to keep it natural, they are afraid of development”.

Some of these experiences were shared by Fairer-Wessels in a recent study conducted in five rural communities living within a South African protected area, the Isimangaliso Wetland Park.<sup>101</sup> In the context of sustainable coastal tourism development, the study shows that most communities cannot escape poverty because they lack access to information. The study suggests that it is imperative to train

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<sup>97</sup> Rogerson and Rogerson, “Urban Tourism Destinations in South Africa: Divergent Trajectories 2001–2012”; Rogerson and Rogerson, “Tourism, Local Economic Development and Inclusion: Evidence from Overstrand Local Municipality, South Africa.” Donaldson, *Small Town Tourism in South Africa*; Kotsiwe and Visser, “Tourism as a Vehicle for Local Economic Development in Small Towns? When Things Go Wrong: The Case of Aliwal North, South Africa.”

<sup>98</sup> Patterson and Hardy, “Economic Drivers of Change and Their Oceanic-Coastal Ecological Impacts.”

<sup>99</sup> Mthiyane, Nojiyeza, and Mofokeng, “The Potential Role Blue Flag Status Plays in Promoting Sustainable Coastal Tourism, Mthunzini Beach, Umlalazi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.”

<sup>100</sup> J Morgan and H Daly, “The Importance of Ecological Economics: An Interview with Herman Daly,” *Real-World Economics Review*, no. 90 (2019): 137–54.

<sup>101</sup> Fairer-Wessels, “Determining the Impact of Information on Rural Livelihoods and Sustainable Tourism Development near Protected Areas in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa.”

and educate survivalist communities to mobilize themselves economically and ensure inclusion of local tourism development, as these communities are of the view that environmentally sensitive areas cannot be developed.<sup>102</sup>

EE advocates for integrated, resilient, and sustainable management of the world.<sup>103</sup> This aligns with the South African Constitution's Section 24(b), which promotes ecologically sustainable development while promoting economic and social development. However, the interpretation of this right in developing countries remains ambiguous. EE can help society overcome its addiction to unsustainable growth and transition to a more sustainable world. The interviewee described the current status of Mthunzini "...is depressed since there is no longer an influx of people visiting the area. There is not much coastal tourism in Mthunzini because the main activities are swimming, fishing, surfing, and camping" (UTA2 Angelina Reed, 2021).

In Mthunzini, while camping is a recognized activity, other coastal tourism activities, such as fishing, surfing, and swimming, are lacking. This limits tourism's role as a major economic driver. The local economy is characterized by small-scale, subsistence income with potential for commercial tourism development. However, the contribution of privately owned tourism sites to the community is minimal, and the nearby Nature Reserve provides only limited employment opportunities that do not sufficiently cover daily expenses. In contrast, the Hibiscus Coast, the second-largest domestic tourism destination in South Africa after Durban, attracts approximately 2.2 million visitors annually (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Durban, Amanzimtoti, and Margate are popular for their natural beauty and recreational activities. Mthunzini and Richards Bay can learn from their successful tourism activities to enhance their coastal tourism sector.

### **Mthunzini Local Businesses and SMMEs**

This study also investigated the extent to which coastal tourism creates opportunities, particularly for the SMMEs of the local community and explored the multitude of challenges facing the viability of SMMEs as well as possible interventions. From the participants' responses, the local businesses acknowledge the significance of tourism and one of the participants stated, "This village cannot survive without tourism. The more tourists that visits the area, the more jobs are created and if there are successful businesses, more jobs will be created" (LB1 Shawn, 2020).

The extent to which coastal tourism creates job opportunities was well-articulated and confirmed during the interview. One of the participants explained it thus:

...tourism does create job opportunities, however not to the extent of making a significant contribution in addressing unemployment for the municipality. Employment from tourism is seasonal like in December and when schools are closed, along the year you do not get much, and they do not earn much. It does not provide much-skilled labour, it's mostly unskilled labour (TP Lindo Khanyile, 2021).

Participants in the discussion highlighted concerns about employment in tourism, particularly the irregularity and seasonality of jobs in the sector. In his State of the Nation Address (SONA), President Cyril Ramaphosa emphasized economic transformation and job creation as key priorities for South Africa, advocating for the implementation of programs and projects aimed at transforming the economy and creating jobs (The Presidency, 2025). Dwyer supports this view, noting that coastal and marine tourism can improve local production and improve households' incomes and living standards.<sup>104</sup>

This initiative not only stimulates local business growth but also increases job opportunities, particularly for women and disadvantaged groups. Small businesses are crucial to driving economic development within the tourism sector. According to Makhaola and Proches (2017), tourism generates numerous employment opportunities due to its labour-intensive nature, allowing many individuals to find work. Miller et al., further argue that coastal tourism provides livelihoods for those involved in

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<sup>102</sup> Fairer-Wessels, "Determining the Impact of Information on Rural Livelihoods and Sustainable Tourism Development near Protected Areas in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa."

<sup>103</sup> Côté and Schwartz, "Comparing Psychological and Sociological Approaches to Identity: Identity Status, Identity Capital, and the Individualization Process."

<sup>104</sup> Larry Dwyer, "Globalization of Tourism: Drivers and Outcomes," *Tourism Recreation Research* 40, no. 3 (2015): 326–39.

developing accommodations, attractions, and various tourism-related services.<sup>105</sup> Additional coastal business activities include guiding, instruction, and the provision of special equipment for recreational activities, such as sport fishing, boating, and bird watching.

### **Coastal tourism and its environmental impact**

It is essential to discuss the negative impacts of coastal tourism in Mthunzini because it sets the tone for how development should be pursued. This will also help to design strategies and balance the competing interests of environmental sustainability and economic development. It will also assist in shaping and guiding the already existing good practices that ideally can be enhanced and improved. An example of the impacts of coastal tourism according to one of the respondents (UTA2 Angelina Reed, 2021) is:

The massive construction of infrastructure that includes the demolition or cutting down of mangroves can increase a destination vulnerability and without mangroves as a buffer particularly in Mthunzini, coastal resorts and other tourism facilities like your golf courses are at the mercy of the more intense and erratic storms and a huge decline on species like birds in Mthunzini (UTA2 Angelina Reed, 2021).

Hsu and Chen, emphasize the significance of sustainable development for coastal zones and ecosystems, highlighting the positive environmental impacts of coastal and marine tourism, which promotes conservation, community revitalization, and beautification.<sup>106</sup> The reliance of tourism on attractive coastal environments and cultural heritage increases the awareness of its value among stakeholders, fostering greater commitment to conservation efforts.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, coastal and marine tourism can help reduce social or national prejudices, promoting mutual understanding between hosts and guests.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, tourism development can economically support the preservation of local culture through the sale of culturally inspired handicrafts produced by local communities.<sup>109</sup>

### **Community Benefits**

Tourism supports protected areas by generating revenue through admission fees, and sustainable tourism development relies on effective management systems that control negative impacts and share benefits. Jobs created by coastal and marine tourism can also help reduce emigration from more remote areas.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, sustainable coastal and marine tourism development requires local communities to benefit from the industry, alleviate poverty, improve livelihoods, and encourage better management and conservation practices.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, a participant indicated that:

... If tourism employment opportunities are not created for youth to find business and employment opportunities they will emigrate and there will be no future for the town (CWG Sthembiso Ngobese, 2021).

A study conducted by Yanfika *et al.* has also reported that community participation is required as a prerequisite for successful development.<sup>112</sup>

### **Tourism as a tool for positive change**

Tourism is a rapidly growing sector globally and is recognized in South Africa as a key economic growth area, catalyzing job creation and a tool for poverty alleviation, as highlighted in the National

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<sup>105</sup> Miller, Auyong, and Hadley, "Sustainable Coastal Tourism: Challenges for Management, Planning, and Education."

<sup>106</sup> Kang, Hsu and Jyun-Long Chen, "The Coastal Future We Want: Implications of Coastal People's Perceptions on Satoumi Actions and Sustainable Development in Northeastern Taiwan," *Sustainability* 15, no. 10 (2023): 7919.

<sup>107</sup> UNEP, *Towards a GREEN Economy. Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication. A Synthesis for Policy Makers*, 2011.

<sup>108</sup> Dwyer, "Globalization of Tourism: Drivers and Outcomes."

<sup>109</sup> Martha Honey and David Krantz, "Global Trends in Coastal Tourism" (Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, 2007).

<sup>110</sup> Honey and Krantz, "Global Trends in Coastal Tourism."

<sup>111</sup> Dwyer, "Globalization of Tourism: Drivers and Outcomes."

<sup>112</sup> Helvi Yanfika et al., "Evaluation of the Success of Programs and Strategy for Sustainable Coastal Community Development in Tanggamus Regency," in *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, vol. 1467 (IOP Publishing, 2020), 012026.

Development Plan. Although tourism can bring economic benefits, it also has social and negative environmental impacts that can alter coastal environments.<sup>113</sup> Sowamber and Ramkissoon contend that the significant effects of tourism on a country's economy and environment are often overlooked and underestimated, despite the potential advantages associated with tourism development.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, the authors suggest that it would be intelligent to use the tourism sector as a tool for positive change. A resident of Mthunzini indicated that “The idea of economically developing Mthunzini is fully supported, however, not at the expense of the environment” (UTA1 Kerry Black, 2021).

Tourism expansion boosts local development and infrastructure provision and diversifies economies by providing livelihood opportunities and aiding remote development. Tourism-related development of local supply chains generates further employment and income in the other economic sectors.<sup>115</sup> In the same vein, Rogerson et al., asserts that the role of local governments is critical for developing tourism as a driver of economic development,<sup>116</sup> and consequently, Bukola and Olaitan recommend that the government should attract private investors to invest in tourism so that the economy can be stimulated.<sup>117</sup> The paper advocates for sustainable coastal development in Mthunzini, emphasizing the need for infrastructural improvements for tourism and local employment, based on participant responses and views on the region's economy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Noting that ERF 167 was zoned for a shopping mall, a private hospital and a hotel, it is therefore imperative for the uMlalazi Local Municipality to prioritise these infrastructure projects within its IDP. There is also a need for Umlalazi Local Municipality to follow up on the application to grant uMthunzini Beach a Blue Flag Status. This will entail directing investments towards infrastructure development, including tourism facilities such as bulk water services, installation of electricity infrastructure, and the maintenance of water infrastructure. There is also a need to benchmark with uMngeni Local Municipality, which is using the Nelson Mandela Capture Site as a tourist attraction. Mthunzini Beach has the potential to drive sustainable coastal tourism, including cultural and historical sites as drivers for tourism destination marketing. Tour operators need to be supported financially and provided with incubation services to create jobs, bring tourism services closer to local people and ensure that they equally benefit from sustainable coastal tourism.

## CONCLUSION

Sustainable coastal tourism in Mthunzini positively impacts local communities, businesses, and economic development, while the sustainability of resources remains largely intact. However, the benefits of coastal tourism are contingent on enhanced efforts from officials responsible for driving economic development. A critical analysis of the IDP and tourism strategy indicates a predominant focus on environmental protection, such as safeguarding natural forests, wetlands, and nature reserves, over economic development. This emphasis may lead to conflicts between tourism development and environmental sustainability.

Therefore, it is essential for planning documents to clearly outline how both environmental protection and tourism development can coexist, prioritizing the preservation of fragile ecosystems against harmful practices. The findings suggest a significant gap in the current planning framework across all levels of government, which requires a reassessment to facilitate tourism growth while preventing the degradation of environmentally sensitive areas. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge in EE and sustainable development by offering municipalities strategies to minimize environmental degradation through legal frameworks, such as the "polluter pays principle," and

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<sup>113</sup> Larry Dwyer, “Emerging Ocean Industries: Implications for Sustainable Tourism Development,” *Tourism in Marine Environments* 13, no. 1 (2018): 25–40.

<sup>114</sup> Vishnee Sowamber and Haywantee Rumi Ramkissoon, “Sustainable Tourism as a Catalyst for Positive Environmental Change: The Case of LUX\* Resorts & Hotels,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Tourism Impacts* (Routledge, 2019), 338–49.

<sup>115</sup> UNEP, *Guidelines for Social Life Cycle Assessment of Products* (Paris: United Nations Environment Program, 2009).

<sup>116</sup> Rogerson and Rogerson, “Urban Tourism Destinations in South Africa: Divergent Trajectories 2001–2012.”

<sup>117</sup> Aremu Atinuke Bukola and Lawal Lateefat Olaitan, “Tourism Development and Sustainable Economic Development: Evidence from South Western Nigeria,” *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–9.

implementing effective real-time monitoring systems to combat pollution. Overall, the concepts of EE and sustainable development have played a vital role in informing this study.

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