Article

Barriers to Implementing Green Marketing Strategies for Sustainable Ecotourism in Kwazulu-Natal

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Abstract: Green marketing, a strategy that promotes environmentally sustainable products and practices, supports ecotourism by minimising ecological impacts and promoting responsible travel in the world. This study investigated the barriers to implementing green marketing to enhance sustainable tourism practices in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study used a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews in person and online with employees from Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, the National Department of Tourism, and iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Thematic coding identified five key barriers: high financial costs, inadequate infrastructure, low consumer awareness, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, and insufficient community engagement. Proposed solutions included promoting public-private partnerships, investing in green infrastructure, launching digital awareness campaigns, enforcing standardised regulations, and encouraging inclusive community involvement through capacity building and revenue-sharing models. These findings provide ecotourism operators with actionable strategies to improve sustainability, assist policymakers in developing targeted and supportive regulations, and promote equitable benefits for local communities. The study contributes to green marketing literature by presenting a scalable framework for addressing implementation barriers in biodiverse, under-resourced regions. It also supports global sustainability goals by promoting environmentally and socially responsible tourism. By overcoming these barriers, KwaZulu-Natal can strengthen its position as a globally competitive ecotourism destination while fostering long-term environmental conservation and inclusive socio-economic development.

Keywords: Green Marketing; environmental stewardship; ecotourism; sustainable tourism; barriers

Introduction

Marketing management literature has consistently highlighted the importance of customer retention and the cultivation of long-term relationships as critical drivers of business performance (Kotler, 2011). As a strategic approach, green marketing focuses on promoting products and services in a manner that minimises environmental impact and supports sustainability goals (Ali, 2021). Studies have shown that green marketing communicates the benefits of environmentally friendly products to consumers and plays a vital role in educating them about the importance of environmental conservation, thereby increasing perceived green consumer value (Kar & Harichandan, 2022). Amid environmental resource depletion and the ecological impacts of traditional practices, green marketing emerged as a key approach. It evolved from ecological marketing in the 1970s to sustainable marketing post-2000 and green marketing, driven by consumer demand for eco-friendly products (Katrandjiev, 2016). In sustainable tourism, green marketing aligns environmental responsibility with consumer satisfaction, promoting eco-friendly products and services across their lifecycle,

from sourcing to promotion (Yao et al., 2024). Ecotourism balanced ecological preservation with economic objectives, using green marketing to support sustainable practices through pricing strategies and authentic promotional campaigns (Wahyuningtyas & Novianto, 2023). It supported ecotourism's sustainability by building tourist trust and encouraging community-driven initiatives (Melnychenko et al., 2021; Suhariyanto, 2022).

Patwary et al. (2020) identified tourism as a key economic and social development driver, supporting global employment and cultural exchange. However, its environmental impact attracted increasing scrutiny, as shifting consumer preferences toward sustainable travel reflected a broader societal commitment to minimising ecological harm (Liburd & Becken, 2020). Despite its potential, ecotourism experienced limited growth, particularly in biodiverse regions such as KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which was ranked 17th globally in terms of megadiversity (Tolley et al., 2019). Suhariyanto (2022) noted that implementing green marketing strategies encountered several challenges, including financial constraints, outdated infrastructure, and weak stakeholder collaboration. Although research suggested that green marketing could enhance awareness and encourage sustainable practices, its effectiveness remained contingent on addressing persistent barriers such as high implementation costs and low tourist awareness. These limitations contributed to the continuation of unsustainable behaviours and placed additional pressure on fragile ecosystems (Nekmahmud & Fekete-Farkas, 2021; Wu et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2021).

Despite its promise, green marketing's application in ecotourism has often fallen short, affecting operational performance, customer outreach, brand strength, and adherence to environmental standards. This is particularly evident in KwaZulu-Natal, where the absence of focused research on green marketing's role in the ecotourism sector has limited stakeholders' capacity to implement effective strategies. This study explored the barriers to applying green marketing in the region's ecotourism industry and offered insights aimed at supporting more sustainable tourism practices. Its findings were intended to assist various stakeholders: operators could use the recommendations to address cost and infrastructure limitations while appealing to environmentally conscious visitors; policymakers could respond to regulatory challenges through targeted interventions; communities stood to benefit from fairer revenue distribution and skills development; environmental groups could use the findings to strengthen campaigns against misleading environmental claims; and travellers could make better-informed, responsible choices. In advancing the academic conversation and guiding future inquiry, this study contributed to the goal of a more balanced and sustainable ecotourism model for KwaZulu-Natal that aligns with broader environmental and development priorities.

Literature Review

Studies conducted by Irfan and Bryła (2024) highlight how green marketing promotes sustainable products and services by integrating environmental responsibility into business strategies to attract eco-conscious consumers, bridging conventional and organic approaches in sustainable food systems. It encompasses practices that prioritise resource conservation, pollution reduction, and social equity, responding to growing consumer demand for sustainable alternatives while ensuring safe, affordable, and culturally acceptable products that safeguard natural resources (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). As a strategy, green marketing employs practical communication tools, such as eco-labelling, digital campaigns, and sustainability certifications, to convey environmental commitment, influencing consumer attitudes and purchase decisions (Smith et al., 2021). Unlike organic marketing, which focuses on avoiding synthetic inputs, green marketing promotes long-term ecological health, economic viability, and social equity, making it a vital tool for industries like ecotourism (Irfan & Bryła, 2024). In tourism, green marketing aligns destination branding with sustainability, educating tourists, and fostering trust (Yao et al., 2024).

1. Ecotourism and Sustainability

Mulyani et al. (2021) conducted research defining ecotourism as responsible travel that minimised environmental impact, supported local communities, and preserved natural and cultural resources using minimum impact on ecotourism appealed to visitors who valued sustainability, Liburd and Becken (2020) noted that providing experiences that maintained biodiversity and cultural legacy. As described in the triple-

bottom-line framework, which gave these three dimensions equal weight, sustainability demanded balancing environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity. Ecotourism aimed to sustain long-term ecological health, boost local economies, empower communities, and match global priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most famously SDG 2, which targeted food security and sustainable food systems (Fanzo, 2019). Ranked 17th worldwide for megadiversity, South Africa included KwaZulu-Natal as a major ecotourism development area (Tolley et al., 2019).

2. Barriers to Ecotourism Development

The literature review revealed that despite its potential for sustainable development, ecotourism faces numerous barriers across different regions. A key challenge identified was the lack of tourist awareness about the environmental impacts of their activities, which perpetuated unsustainable practices and placed strain on fragile ecosystems (Khan et al., 2021). Kiatkawsin et al. (2020) found that while targeted campaigns promoting eco-friendly behaviours could influence tourist choices, they required careful planning and execution to be effective. Financial limitations emerged as a recurring obstacle, particularly for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Amissah et al. (2022) observed that the high costs of implementing eco-friendly initiatives, such as solar panel installations or water harvesting systems, discouraged businesses in resource constrained African regions, including KwaZulu-Natal.

Other studies pointed to awareness gaps and weak community engagement as impediments to green marketing adoption (Nekmahmud & Fekete-Farkas, 2021; Wu et al., 2022). Structural issues compounded these challenges. Ramaano (2024) identified outdated infrastructure and limited resources as significant barriers in KwaZulu-Natal, where popular sites like Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park and Didima in the Drakensberg suffered from ageing facilities. Similarly, Arif et al. (2022) linked unplanned urbanisation and insufficient conservation efforts to the degradation of heritage sites in Mansehra, Pakistan, a trend also evident in KwaZulu-Natal, ultimately compromising destination authenticity. In response to these challenges, scholars such as Ngxongo (2021) advocated for government-led policies and educational programmes to enhance public awareness and reduce ecological footprints, highlighting the need for coordinated action. Empirical studies further underscored these findings: Han et al. (2020) reported that only 30% of ecotourism operators in Southeast Asia adopted green marketing due to financial constraints, a situation echoed in KwaZulu-Natal (Suhariyanto, 2022). Gheorghe, Tudorache, and Roșca (2023) argued that integrating green marketing into sustainable destination development enabled businesses to align with the rising demand for environmentally responsible practices but also plays a crucial role in conserving natural resources and enhancing the socio-economic well-being of local communities.

3. Green Marketing's Strategic Role

According to research conducted by Wale and Motau (2018), green marketing was a platform to educate stakeholders and advance sustainability objectives. Empirical research by Yao et al. (2024) and de Grosbois and Fennell (2022) showed that green marketing initiatives enhanced operational efficiency, built consumer trust, and improved organisational reputation through eco-friendly services. Similarly, Wahyuningtiyas and Novianto (2023) found that authentic marketing campaigns effectively attracted environmentally conscious travellers. Moreover, Melnychenko et al. (2021) demonstrated that community-based green initiatives promoted equitable benefit-sharing, strengthening local engagement. However, Nekmahmud and Fekete-Farkas (2021) noted that the success of green marketing depended on overcoming challenges such as high implementation costs and limited consumer awareness.

To address these challenges strategically, businesses can turn to frameworks like the Natural-Resource-Based View (NRBV), introduced by Hart (1995). Unlike the traditional Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasised internal capabilities like human capital and technology, the NRBV posits that firms can use environmental and societal challenges as opportunities for sustainable competitive advantage. This framework identified four key resources: pollution prevention, product stewardship, clean technologies, and the base of the pyramid, each contributing to environmental sustainability and improved firm performance, as

McDougall et al. (2019) confirmed. For instance, adopting clean technologies like solar-powered lodges in KwaZulu-Natal could have reduced ecological impact while lowering long-term costs.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the NRBV framework is depicted through a circular model showing how these resources supported the alignment of ecotourism practices in KwaZulu-Natal with broader environmental and social objectives. Each resource was labelled with its strategic focus and key benefits, adapted from Hart (1995) and McDougall et al. (2019).

The Natural Resource-Based View
Proactive Environmental Strategies

Capabilities

Pollution Prevention
- Waste reduction
- Eco-friendly lodges
- Green energy

Product Stewardship
- Eco-certification
- Sustainable packaging
- Local sourcing

Sustainable Development
- Long-term environmental conservation
- Community involvement
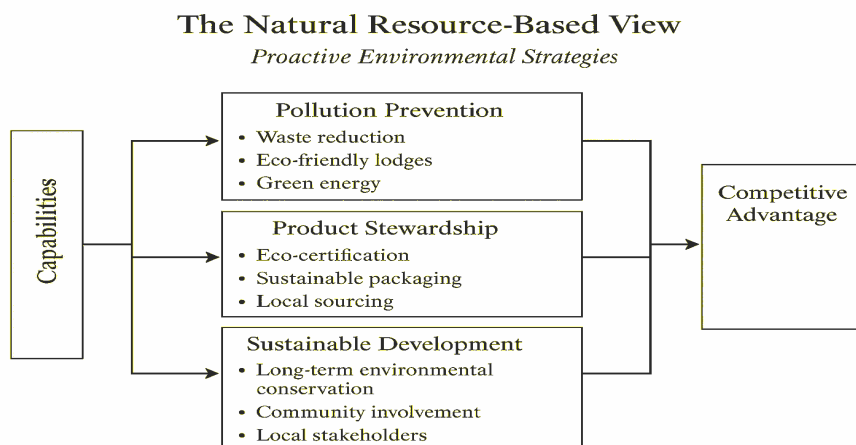- Local stakeholders

Competitive Advantage

Figure 1. *Natural Resource-Based View Framework for Sustainable Competitive Advantage*

Pollution prevention targeted internal operations, reducing waste and emissions to improve efficiency. Product stewardship focused on lifecycle sustainability, prioritising recyclability to access premium markets. Sustainable development encouraged new markets, balancing environmental and social goals. McDougall et al. (2019) criticised its lack of clear distinction between environmental and social sustainability but confirmed its utility for ecotourism. In KwaZulu-Natal, the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) guided operators in using green marketing to enter new markets and address ecological concerns, thereby enhancing sites such as the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

4. Digital Marketing and Technological Integration

Building on green marketing's strategic role, digital marketing, particularly e-marketing, amplified these efforts but posed challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Mgoduka et al. (2024) found that limited funding, expertise, and low educational levels hindered e-marketing adoption among South African SMEs, echoing barriers seen in green marketing. For instance, creating social media campaigns to promote sustainable practices demanded technical skills and funding, which SMEs in KwaZulu-Natal often lacked (Ramaano, 2024). To address this, Mgoduka et al. (2024) suggested public-private partnerships and increased funding, such as subsidies or training programs, to help SMEs leverage e-marketing for ecotourism promotion. These partnerships supported campaigns highlighting sustainability, boosting visibility for destinations like the Drakensberg Mountains.

5. Consumer Behaviour and Cultural Influences

The success of green marketing is largely determined by consumer behaviour that is influenced by awareness, cultural values, and social conventions. Hamid et al. (2025) looked into food waste recycling in Malaysia and discovered that sustainable practices are driven by public awareness, social expectations, and religiosity, particularly among younger groups. They suggest green marketing initiatives that align with cultural values to increase demand for eco-friendly travel. Similarly, in KwaZulu-Natal, campaigns that emphasise environmental responsibility and local history effectively engage a wide range of audiences, thereby promoting support for sustainable places (Hamid et al., 2025). However, Forje et al. (2022) support targeted educational campaigns to promote responsible travel because they found that low awareness is a major contributor to unsustainable practices in sub-Saharan African ecotourism..

6. Stakeholder Collaboration in KwaZulu-Natal

Stakeholder cooperation significantly influenced the supply of sustainable ecotourism in KwaZulu-Natal despite the challenges posed by its absence (Suhariyanto, 2022). Supported by green marketing, cross-sectoral partnerships, as evidenced by Matikiti et al. (2018) and Wale and Motau (2018), effectively integrated economic, environmental, and social objectives while promoting community involvement. However, insufficient collaboration exacerbated challenges in achieving sustainable outcomes.. For instance, collaboration on eco-friendly lodging enhanced sites like Ezemvelo Wildlife Resorts. Zulu et al. (2023) identified similar collaboration needs in South Africa's ocean economy, emphasising cohesive strategies. However, Nekmahmud and Fekete-Farkas (2021) noted that limited research on green marketing's impacts restricted KwaZulu-Natal's ability to adopt sustainable practices, hindering operational efficiency, customer engagement, and sustainability compliance.

The literature highlighted green marketing's transformative potential for ecotourism yet identified persistent barriers, including financial constraints, low awareness, and weak collaboration. Frameworks like the NRBV, digital strategies, and consumer behaviour insights offered pathways to overcome these barriers. In KwaZulu-Natal, collaborative green marketing was critical to unlocking ecotourism's socio-economic and environmental contributions, aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Methodology

Building on the literature review of green marketing implementation barriers, this study employed a qualitative research design, guided by Mohajan's (2018) emphasis on systematic inquiry, to explore the complex challenges in KwaZulu-Natal's ecotourism sector. Qualitative methods were selected for their ability to uncover nuanced dynamics through in-depth engagement with stakeholders, such as tourism operators and local communities, allowing a thorough exploration of their perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). An interpretivist philosophical perspective guided the study, aligning with Saunders et al.'s (2019) view that interpretivism effectively captures subjective experiences in their natural contexts. This approach offered deep insights into stakeholder attitudes and behaviours, addressing the study's objective of examining green marketing barriers.

The research design was structured using the Research Onion Model (Saunders et al., 2019), a framework that ensures methodological rigour and coherence. The model's six concentric layers guided the research process: interpretivism as the philosophical foundation prioritised subjective stakeholder experiences; an inductive approach allowed themes to emerge organically from data; a qualitative strategy utilised semi-structured interviews for rich data collection; a mono-method design focused solely on interviews for depth and consistency; a cross-sectional time horizon captured data at a single point; and thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, enabled systematic coding and interpretation of patterns. This layered framework, depicted in Figure 2, ensured methodological alignment with the study:
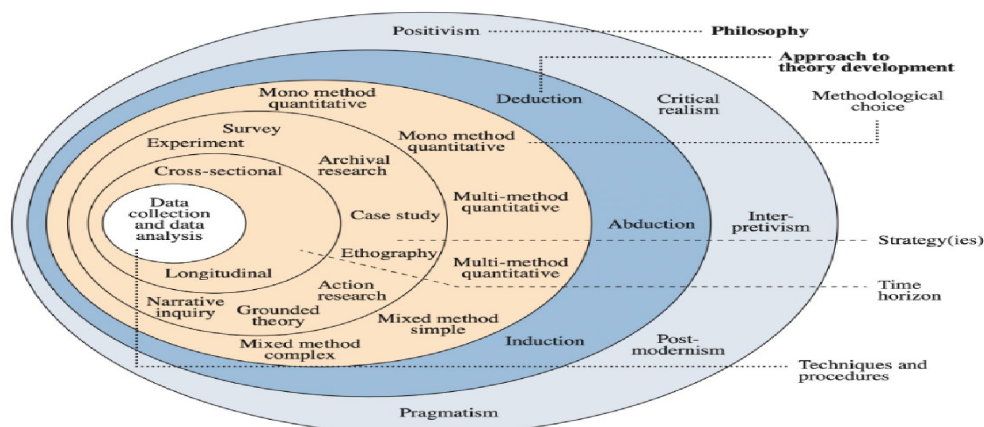

Figure 2. Research Onion Model Guiding the Study's Methodological Choices

With the methodological structure in place, the study adopted the Natural-Resource-Based View (NRBV) as its conceptual framework, linking pollution prevention, product stewardship, and sustainable development to ecotourism practices (McDougall et al., 2019; see Figure 1). The NRBV framed green marketing barriers within sustainable strategies, providing a theoretical lens to interpret findings. This framework complemented the Research Onion's methodological structure, ensuring the research was theoretically grounded and methodologically robust.

An inductive approach, endorsed by Kyngäs (2020), facilitated the emergence of patterns from participant narratives, particularly regarding barriers and enablers of green marketing. Thematic analysis, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2023), offered a deeper understanding of stakeholders' perspectives by uncovering explicit and implicit meanings in the data. The study conducted semi-structured interviews with purposively selected employees from Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife's marketing and conservation departments, the National Department of Tourism, and iSimangaliso St Lucia's tourism strategy team. This focus provided deep operational insights, though the limited inclusion of stakeholders outside KwaZulu-Natal restricted generalisability, offering scope for future research. Interviews exploring topics like marketing challenges and sustainable practices were conducted face-to-face and via virtual platforms (MS Teams, Zoom). A pilot study with three professionals from iSimangaliso Wetland Park refined questions to align with the study's objectives (Cash et al., 2022).

2. Data Collection Process

Guided by the Research Onion's techniques layer, the study employed semi-structured interviews with participants from Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife's marketing and conservation teams, the National Department of Tourism, and iSimangaliso St Lucia's tourism strategy departments. As noted, purposive sampling ensured participants' expertise aligned with the research objectives (Cash et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews offered flexibility to probe deeply into barriers like financial constraints or sustainability practices while maintaining consistency. Face-to-face interviews captured nuanced verbal and non-verbal cues, while MS Teams and Zoom accommodated logistical needs. A pilot study with three iSimangaliso Wetland Park professionals refined questions to focus on barriers to green marketing in KwaZulu-Natal's ecotourism sector.

3. Data Analysis

The study systematically analysed collected data. It transcribed interview recordings into Word documents and imported them into NVivo software for thematic coding. Parent nodes corresponding to the research objective facilitated the identification of significant patterns and themes. This analytical strategy aligned with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations for systematic data organisation and coding. By combining insights from primary data with secondary sources, such as academic literature and government reports, the study contextualised its findings within global and regional ecotourism trends. This approach ensured a holistic exploration of the barriers to implementing green marketing strategies in ecotourism initiatives in KwaZulu-Natal.

The Findings

Following the qualitative methodology, this study explored challenges to adopting green marketing strategies in KwaZulu-Natal's tourism industry. It engaged stakeholders from Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife's marketing, conservation, and tourism strategy teams, alongside representatives from the National Department of Tourism and iSimangaliso St Lucia's tourism strategy units, selected for their expertise as outlined in the methodology. Thematic saturation was achieved after analysing responses from a majority of participants, ensuring diverse and reliable insights into green marketing obstacles.

The respondent group was primarily aged 36–55 (69%) and included 62% men and 38% women, with 54% in senior management roles. All held tertiary education, with 54% having bachelor's degrees and 31% postgraduate qualifications. Their expertise provided credible insights into green marketing challenges in KwaZulu-Natal's ecotourism industry. Despite recognising the value of sustainable practices, participants

identified several obstacles to green marketing adoption, including high costs, outdated infrastructure, limited consumer awareness, and challenges sourcing eco-friendly materials. The section that follows lists the themes that emerged from the responses.

Table 1. Themes emerging from the barriers experienced by stakeholder respondents

Obstacle	Percentage of Respondents	Description
High Costs	23%	High initial investment for sustainable infrastructure like solar panels or water harvesting systems is particularly challenging for small businesses.
Outdated Infrastructure	15%	Logistical difficulties in upgrading rural facilities with eco-friendly systems.
Limited Consumer Awareness	15%	There is a low demand for sustainable services due to tourists' lack of understanding of the impact of their choices.
Challenges Sourcing Eco-friendly Materials	23%	Limited availability and high costs of sustainable materials locally.

High costs, noted by 23% of respondents, particularly affected small businesses investing in sustainable infrastructure like solar panels or water harvesting systems at sites such as Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park, with one marketing manager stating, "The initial costs of going green are high, and it is hard to justify without immediate returns." Infrastructure challenges, cited by 15%, included logistical difficulties in upgrading rural facilities with eco-friendly systems, as a conservation officer remarked, "Upgrading rural facilities with eco-friendly systems is costly and logistically tough." Limited consumer awareness, reported by 15%, reduced demand for sustainable services, with a tourism strategist noting, "Many tourists do not understand the impact of their choices, so they do not prioritise eco-friendly options." Additionally, 23% struggled to source sustainable materials due to limited availability and high costs, as one participant explained, "Finding affordable, eco-friendly supplies locally is a constant challenge." These financial, infrastructural, awareness-related, and material-related obstacles limited the widespread adoption of green marketing in KwaZulu-Natal, mirroring global challenges in sustainable tourism.

Discussion

The study's findings, drawn primarily from ecotourism stakeholders, provided valuable insights into sustainable practices and aligned with previous research Khan et al., 2021). High costs emerged as a key barrier, with 23% of participants noting the heavy financial burden of eco-friendly technologies like solar panels, water harvesting systems, and energy-efficient infrastructure. This barrier was especially acute in KwaZulu-Natal, where many operators lacked capital for sustainable investments and government incentives were scarce. Khan et al., (2021).similarly found that financial constraints often deter small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from adopting eco-friendly practices. Ngxongo (2021) suggested that the government should consider public-private partnerships that offer tax breaks, subsidies, or low-interest loans tailored for ecotourism businesses to address this. Global grant programs from environmental organisations could further ease the financial strain on SMEs.

Infrastructure challenges, reported by 15% of respondents, limited sustainable practices, particularly in rural Drakensberg areas lacking renewable energy and waste management systems. This echoed Ramaano's (2024) observation that outdated facilities hinder ecotourism growth, highlighting the need for modern infrastructure investments. Consumer awareness gaps, cited by 15% of respondents, reduced the impact of green marketing campaigns. Tourists' limited understanding of sustainable tourism's value led operators to question the return on such investments, as Kiatkawsin et al. (2020) noted. Educational campaigns targeting tourists to sites like iSimangaliso Wetland Park could bridge this gap.

Inconsistent policies also posed a challenge, with respondents highlighting the lack of clear guidelines for green practices and raising concerns about greenwashing, which refers to misleading claims about environmental benefits to attract consumers. McDougall et al. (2019) recommended a robust regulatory framework with eco-certification criteria to clarify standards and build trust. Finally, weak community

engagement hindered effective green marketing. Respondents struggled to integrate local culture, such as involving local communities in conservation efforts, highlighting the need for stronger collaboration. Adopting green marketing in KwaZulu-Natal's ecotourism industry faces financial, infrastructural, awareness, regulatory, and community engagement challenges. Coordinated stakeholder efforts are essential to overcome these obstacles and establish KwaZulu-Natal as a leader in sustainable tourism.

Conclusion

This research identified key barriers to sustainable marketing in KwaZulu-Natal's ecotourism industry. Despite ecotourism's potential, high costs, outdated infrastructure, limited consumer awareness, and unclear policies posed major obstacles. These hurdles, evident at sites like Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park, underscored the need for collaboration among government, private stakeholders, and local communities to foster sustainable tourism growth.

The study's alignment with the NRBV framework deepened the understanding of green marketing barriers by highlighting how infrastructure limitations and policy gaps hinder pollution prevention, product stewardship, and sustainable development. Sustainable marketing bridged these gaps by raising awareness and aligning stakeholder priorities, as seen in efforts to educate tourists at iSimangaliso Wetland Park. These findings advanced knowledge of practical strategies to overcome barriers, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions. Effective, sustainable marketing enhanced KwaZulu-Natal's global competitiveness, supporting environmental preservation and community well-being. By tackling barriers through innovative partnerships, the industry positioned itself as a leader, serving as a model for other biodiverse regions. Continued research and collaboration are crucial to realise sustainable marketing's potential in ecotourism.

A coordinated approach is required to overcome the identified barriers to implementing green marketing in KwaZulu-Natal's ecotourism industry. The following table maps each barrier to targeted solutions, integrating financial support, infrastructure development, consumer education, regulatory clarity, and community involvement to address high costs, outdated infrastructure, low awareness, inconsistent policies, and limited community engagement.

Table 2. Barriers to implementation and practical solutions

Barrier	Solution
High Costs	Government and financial institutions should provide grants, low-interest loans, and subsidies to support ecotourism operators, particularly SMEs, in adopting sustainable practices. Public-private partnerships can pool resources and expertise to reduce financial obstacles for eco-friendly infrastructure investments at sites like Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park.
Outdated Infrastructure	Coordinated investments in renewable energy, waste management, and sustainable transport, driven by collaborations among government, private investors, and environmental groups, can modernise rural ecotourism sites. Adopting global best practices ensures solutions align with conservation goals and local tourism needs.
Low Consumer Awareness	Stakeholders should launch digital campaigns, leveraging social media and virtual reality, to highlight sustainable tourism's benefits at sites like iSimangaliso Wetland Park. These efforts can educate diverse audiences, boosting demand for eco-friendly travel and encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable marketing strategies.
Inconsistent Policies	Clear, enforceable standards defining sustainable operations, supported by a robust certification system, can distinguish genuine efforts from greenwashing. Collaboration among government, industry experts, and environmental groups fosters a transparent regulatory environment, building trust among consumers and operators.
Limited Community Engagement	Engaging local communities in planning ecotourism initiatives cultivates ownership. Capacity-building programs can equip residents with skills to benefit from sustainable tourism, while revenue-sharing models direct tourism income to community projects, addressing socio-economic challenges.

These solutions, implemented through collaborative stakeholder efforts, unlock ecotourism's potential as a driver of sustainability and economic growth, positioning KwaZulu-Natal as a leader in eco-conscious travel. The study's focus on ecotourism stakeholders, such as those from Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, the National Department of Tourism, and iSimangaliso St Lucia, provided deep operational insights. However, excluding municipal governments and local community leaders limited the diversity of perspectives,

particularly those that influence policy development. Future research could incorporate these stakeholders to offer a more comprehensive view of green marketing barriers and their policy implications. This study identified opportunities to enhance eco-friendly marketing in KwaZulu-Natal's tourism industry through future investigations. Building on financial challenges, one area explored cost-effective solutions for SMEs facing high initial costs. Investigations examined innovative financing, such as micro-financing and impact investing, to help SMEs overcome obstacles to adopting sustainable practices.

The study's findings on rural infrastructure challenges prompted research into scalable technology solutions. Studies assessed decentralised renewable energy and community-based water harvesting, providing insights into improving infrastructure in underdeveloped regions like the Drakensberg. Such investigations also explored how these upgrades influenced eco-conscious tourists' perceptions and behaviours. Another focus of addressing low consumer awareness was evaluating consumer awareness campaigns' long-term impacts on sustainable tourism. The research tested communication strategies, including virtual reality at sites like iSimangaliso Wetland Park, to educate tourists about ecotourism. These efforts measured effectiveness in shifting preferences and increasing demand for eco-friendly travel.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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