

EXPLORING INCLUSIVE TOURISM: ACCESSIBILITY OF TOURISM PRODUCTS FOR TOURISTS WITH ACCESS NEEDS IN SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK, TANZANIA

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<https://doi.org/10.11118/978-80-7701-087-0-0143>

Abstract

The global population of tourists with access needs is expanding, and many possess both the financial capacity and motivation to travel. However, participation remains constrained by inadequate accessibility and limited inclusivity across tourism destinations. This study examines inclusive tourism by assessing the accessibility of tourism products for tourists with access needs in Serengeti National Park. Guided by the Long Tail theory of market expansion, an exploratory research design was employed. From a target population of 292 individuals, 66 participants were purposively selected, with data collection continuing to saturation. Data were gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that most tourism products in the park are not designed to accommodate tourists with access needs, limiting meaningful engagement and restricting them as a viable market opportunity. Despite its economic potential, accessible tourism provision remains limited. The study recommends establishing and enforcing accessibility standards and developing supportive tools and digital applications to enhance travel planning and on-site navigation. By highlighting accessibility gaps in protected areas, the study advances knowledge on inclusive tourism product design and its role in promoting equitable and sustainable tourism development.

Key words: universal design, market diversification, visitor experience, disability inclusion, sustainable destination development

Introduction

Accessible tourism represents a dynamically growing and profitable sector with significant potential to enhance destination competitiveness and promote social inclusion (Luiza, 2010; Buiga et al., 2017; Porto et al., 2019), enabling millions of Tourists with Access Needs (TwANs) to participate freely regardless of their functional limitations (Darcy et al., 2008; Darcy, Dickson, 2009; Darcy, 2012). Global statistics confirm the immense purchasing power of this group, which includes approximately one billion people; in Europe and New Zealand alone, this segment represents a key domestic market with multi-billion euro contributions (Domínguez et al., 2013; Zealand, 2014; UNWTO, 2013). Within the specific environment of national parks, accessibility involves not only the physical reachability of sites but also the capacity of tourists to fully engage with complex services tailored to their diverse needs, including safe mobility and specialized programming (Cappelletti et al., 2019; Radygina, 2019). Although evidence from countries like Tanzania confirms that inclusive tourism in protected areas generates economic benefits while fulfilling the principles of sustainable development (Lwoga, Mapunda, 2017), studies from Europe point to persistent barriers that often lead many tourists with access needs to opt for "non-travel" (for example Hungary, Csapó et al., 2019). Despite the growing importance of this segment, there remains a lack of extensive literature addressing tourism products specifically designed for tourists with access needs within national parks.

Materials and methods

The study evaluates accessible tourism products for tourists with access needs in Serengeti National Park (SENAPA), a UNESCO World Heritage Site managed by Tanzania National Parks. Using an exploratory qualitative design (April – July 2024), data were collected from a purposive sample (n=66) via triangulated methods – interviews, observation, and focus group – following approval from Tanzania Wildlife Research Institute and Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology. Findings are contextualized within Tanzania's tourism sector, which attracts ~80 % of international visitors (Bayliss et al., 2014; Hunt, Gorenflo, 2019).

Using non-participant observation across key sites in Serengeti National Park, supplemented by mini-focus group discussions, the study captured service delivery and facility accessibility for tourists with access needs. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed through iterative coding and categorization following established mini-group (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997) and six-phase thematic analysis procedures (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

Results

Following a thematic analysis, the study elucidated key dimensions of accessible products, associated challenges, and tourist spending patterns.

Accessible Tourism Products

The study examines the experiences of Tourists with Access Needs (TwANs) in alignment with accessible tourism frameworks (Buhalis, Darcy, 2011). The findings highlight social support as a central factor in tourism participation, as 58 % of respondents do not travel independently, viewing companionship as a critical enabling mechanism for accessing services. Although SENAPA offers a diverse portfolio of products – from wildlife viewing to varied accommodation – visitors require enhanced support from providers. Specifically, transportation remains a critical gap, emphasizing the need for inclusive mobility solutions and accessible vehicles to improve the overall tourism experience.

Challenges in Product Accessibility

Guides identified the poor condition of roads between Ngorongoro and Serengeti as a major obstacle, causing discomfort and fatigue, particularly for the elderly and those with limited mobility. Field observations in SENAPA also revealed poorly designed pathways restricting wheelchair users and safety risks such as damaged handrails. Furthermore, the absence of sign language interpretation highlights significant gaps in inclusive communication.

Spending on Accessible Products

Tourists with access needs typically stay two to four nights, spending between \$800 and \$2,000 on service packages. Since they often travel with companions, their overall economic contribution to the destination is higher. They show the greatest interest in iconic experiences, such as the wildebeest migration, where the accessibility of these attractions directly increases satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations. SENAPA holds high potential to become a competitive destination if it improves the quality and accessibility of its key products.

Discussion

The study of accessible tourism products SENAPA highlights the provision of universally designed services enabling independent, dignified access for tourists with diverse needs (Darcy, Dickson, 2009). Findings indicate TwANs often rely on close assistance during travel, corroborating previous research showing caregiver accompaniment enhances both tourist satisfaction and service quality (Kang et al., 2020).

The study identified the Serengeti Media Center as an accessible tourism product, aligning with Jamaludin and Kadir (2012), who argue that public buildings should adopt barrier-free designs to promote inclusive access, accommodating individuals with visual or hearing impairments, wheelchair users, the elderly, and parents with strollers, thereby facilitating integration and usability for all visitors. The study identified special rooms with ramps in service areas such as dining and reception as accessible tourism products in Serengeti National Park, reflecting consideration for tourists with access needs. This aligns with Yau et al. (2004), who note that individuals with disabilities have similar travel desires but specific requirements, and Boxall et al. (2018), emphasizing that comfortable, accessible accommodations foster attachment, identity, and likelihood of repeat visitation.

Observations revealed that outdated, inaccessible tour vehicles reduced satisfaction among tourists with access needs (TwANs). Consistent with Devile et al. (2012), much of tourism infrastructure remains inadequately prepared for accessibility, and despite progress, access to tourism products and services for people with disabilities remains limited. Destinations that effectively address these needs gain a competitive advantage (Smith, Richards, 2013).

Conclusion

The study concludes that Serengeti National Park holds strong potential to serve tourists with access needs, offering diverse tourism products across wilderness, accommodations, and tour services. Nonetheless, opportunities exist to develop additional accessible offerings. Addressing current accessibility challenges is essential for enhancing visitor satisfaction and promoting sustainable tourism development in Tanzania's national parks.

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Acknowledgement

The authors thank each other and Serengeti National Park management for their collaboration and support in data collection. This research was supported by Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences, grants number VEGA 2/0031/23 Analysis and evaluations of the environmental history of selected types of Slovak landscape from the early prehistory to the present, and with support from Project APVV-24-0101 Biosphere reserves as living labs.

Souhrn

Cestovní ruch pro osoby se specifickými potřebami se celosvětově rozšiřuje, avšak jejich účast je omezena nedostatečnou přístupností a inkluzivitou. Tato studie zkoumala inkluzivní cestovní ruch v národním parku Serengeti a posuzovala přístupnost produktů cestovního ruchu pro tyto návštěvníky. Průzkumný design, vedený teorií dlouhého chvostu (Long Tail theory), využil záměrný výběr vzorku; data byla sbírána prostřednictvím rozhovorů, ohniskových skupin a terénních pozorování až do bodu nasycení a následně tematicky analyzována. Zjištění naznačují, že většina nabídek parku nedostatečně vyhovuje turistům se specifickými potřebami, což omezuje jejich zapojení i tržní potenciál. Studie doporučuje zavést standardy přístupnosti, podpůrné nástroje a digitální aplikace pro zlepšení plánování a navigace, což přispěje k rovnému a udržitelnému rozvoji cestovního ruchu.

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