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Dynamics of White-Water Rafting Business and implications for Development in Zimbabwe

By

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Abstract

The study sought to assess effectiveness of white water rafting business in Zimbabwe focusing on Victoria Falls. The study was mainly qualitative and underpinned by interpretivism research approach using case study of 5 companies in the rafting business in Zimbabwe. In this research study, convenience sampling was used to select 10 Tour Operators owners, senior employees and officials from Zimbabwe Tourism Authority. Cross sectional research design was also used in this study. Interview guide were used to collect data. The gathered data was tabulated by blending information with similar characteristics. Data was then used in the construction of graphs and tables and later used in developing themes and sub-themes in the process of presenting, interpreting and analysing. The results indicated that White water rafting is presently a major growth area in the field of commercial recreation. Some of the organisations in the Victoria Falls area have realised an increase in clients' bookings because of the nature of this adventure sport. However the research also indicated that the decisions to accept or disregard regulations, qualifications, and policies used in this industry are made by business owners and managers and that the government's role in the rafting and adventure tourism industries is significantly lacking. From the findings it is recommended for the tourism authorities to reduce bureaucracy, the administrative hierarchy which act as obstacles in dealing with issues of tour operators. The policies governing the tour operations should be updated so that they can make it easier for foreign tour operators to adapt to the business environments in Zimbabwe. Longitudinal studies need to be done to assess the effectiveness of white water rafting in the Tourism sector in Zimbabwe.

Key Words: White Water Rafting, Business, Victoria Falls, Development, Zimbabwe

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Introduction and Background of the Study

Emerging studies are indicating that tourists are becoming more and more interested not only in the traditional site seeing, nature and wildlife visits; rather they are also getting interested in tourism packages that enable them to be actively involved within the activities provided in particular physical and adventure-like activities. There is need therefore to promote physical and adventure type of tourism activities and one such package is white-water rafting.

White water rafting is presently a major growth area in the field of commercial recreation. Despite the high profile of adventure activities given by commercial operators and by the tourism industry relatively little public research has been conducted in Australia on the motivations of participants and the impacts of specific activities on the recreational resource. However, the literature lacks evidence of the actual water rafting business industry, its structure and global makeshift of the rafting market in Zimbabwe. Most researches have looked at the motivation and perceptions toward rafting demands and the risk management. Literature has also revealed the need to conduct more studies in the growth and development of white water rafting ventures in the developing world. A few studies have been carried out in Africa and so far this will be the first white water rafting business appraisal in Zimbabwe.

Adventure tourism packages are drawing interests among visitors and one notable package in this regard is white water rafting which as described by McKay (2014), enables the active, physical, and emotional involvement of the visitor into the activities. Assigned in three relative categories namely; hard, soft and nature-based adventure tourism (Buckley, 2006 and McKay, 2013a). Buckley (2010) is of the assertion due to its nature of being riskier, more demanding physically and more challenging, white water rafting is indeed a tributary of hard adventure and hence a 'hard' activity. Also synonymous with Europe, Japan, New Zealand and United States of America (USA), Swarbrooke et al (2003) and Buckley (2010) describe white water rafting as an activity involving a group of four to eight tourists who pool their efforts in driving an inflatable raft with the aid of single-blade paddles. Commercially, river guides do the most steering and propelling of the paddles (Wilson et al, 2013). McKay (2014) adds that the rafting is conducted on white water or on water with varying states of roughness thereby presenting new exciting and challenging situations for the tourists.

Hall and Mc Author (2005), studied on the commercial white water rafting business in Australia. A survey of eight tour operators operating indicated an approximate increase of 75 per cent in participants over the seven year period, a trend that appears to have continued since 1987 (Hall and Mc Author, 2005). Despite the high profile of adventure activities given by commercial white water rafting operators in Australia, the tourism industry relatively has done little research on white water rafting. There is however the provision of basic data, such as the establishment of demographic profiles for rafting participants, gives operators and managers a better foundation for ensuring a satisfying recreational experience. Despite the growth of the adventure travel market substantial business problems remained. In particular, it was concluded that the industry experienced a high turnover of operators. The reason being

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that the tour operators survive on for a short lifespan that may be attributed to lack of capital and business management experience. Many of the smaller operations were run on a part-time basis by interested individuals who have limited business or adventure experience. The study recommended that for long term viability, the small white water rafting operators require financial aid from the government in order to expand their business. Also reduction in taxation levied and the high interest rates on borrowed capital makes it difficult for small business survival. Australian white water rafting should have behavioural and environmental quality controls, including high levels of safety and professionalism which ensure potential problems are kept to a minimum and the public profile of the activity remains favourable.

In a study conducted by Howard (2009) in Canada focusing on the white water standards and risk management operations and in particular on Ottawa Valley, the study examined the significance of regulatory environment with special emphasis on Special-purpose Vessels Regulations. The study involved six participants composed of three guide managers and three proprietors of adventure businesses with the main focus directed in establishing the impact of the newly proposed regulations on commercialised white water rafting in the entirety of Canada. The findings of the study indicated lack of constitutionalised establishments directed towards the monitoring of the guides. In addition, the study revealed lack of institutionalised rescue training resulting in rifts amongst the proprietors. Based on the findings of the Ottawa study, it was established that an organisation be established to supervise the operations of the companies in particular producing disturbance report forms to the businesses from the inception of the rafting season till the end.

Nelson (2011) conducted a study in Uganda to investigate the state of commercial rafting industry and its relationship with other adventure tourism activities. The major thrust of the study was in determining the influence of commercialisation of water rafting on local businesses and the community in its entirety. The findings of the study indicated that the rafting industry employed unorthodox business strategies that were only peculiar to the country's industry. One good example is the employment of guides who lacked basic skills in customer relations and lack of global packaging standards seen as critical in customer loyalty and penetration of the market (Nelson, 2011). The study however revealed that the tourism industry injected a total of 7.6% (UGX 3,256.8 billion) to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Additionally, 17% Ugandans in formal employment are in the tourism sector in which Nelson (2011), explicitly notes white water rafting as playing a significant contribution amounting to 80% of the country's adventure tourism. One of the major highlights of the study was recommendation on the government to offer incentives for growth through import tax breaks.

In South Africa, McKay (2014) conducted a study aimed at determining the progress of white water rafting. Using the internet foot printing method, pamphlets and brochures gathered from outdoor/adventure exhibitions conducted in Johannesburg in 2011 and 2012, a data base consisting of 49 white water rafting entities was produced. The study indicated that the country's white water rafting industry had been running for more than 25 years having been started by a small number of men who established their own rafting businesses (Kallie, 2013). From a small number of enthusiasts, the white water rafting industry has made significant strides as reflected by the spreading of the 49 companies to all the 9 country's provinces and the employment of more than 500 workers. The findings of the study indicated that despite uneven geographical distribution resulting in Free State and Western Cape being the dominating provinces, the white water rafting industry was well established.

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McKay (2014) further notes that the South African white water rafting companies were locally-owned with the majority of the owners getting involved in the day-to-day operations of their entities. On average, the industry contributed a total of R320 million into the country's GDP. The industry however faced a myriad of challenges stifling its growth and chief among them the presence union that fails to address the needs of the players of the industry. There were also revelations that the industry lacked skilled people which was detrimental in managerial, leadership, marketing and financial management operations of the white water rafting companies. The suggestions of the study indicated the need of government support concerning safety regulatory environment and the reduction of cumbersome procedures and training in business and financial management as vital in the growth and development of the industry. There are indications therefore of little knowledge on water rafting business especially in developing countries hence the need to appraise the white-water rafting business in Victoria Falls in the Zimbabwean context.

Statement of the Problem

The tourism industry is identified as significantly contributing to the country's GDP during a period in which other sectors are struggling in Zimbabwe. However, although the international tourism industry is becoming increasingly segmented, it is important to ensure all branches of the tourism industry in particular white water rafting are also promoted so as to determine their contributions. White-water rafting is considered as a niche market within the sport tourism. This is a global industry with a huge growth potential. There is limited literature on white-water rafting effectiveness in the tourism sector in Zimbabwe which this study sought to establish.

Research Objective

1. To determine the nature and state of the white water rafting business in Victoria Falls

Methodology

The study was mainly qualitative and underpinned by interpretivism research Philosophy using case study of 5 companies in the rafting business in Zimbabwe. In this research study, convenience sampling was used to select 10 Tour Operators owners, senior employees and officials from Zimbabwe Tourism Authority. Cross sectional research design was also used in this study. Interview guide were used to collect data. The gathered data was tabulated by blending information with similar characteristics. Data was then used in the construction of graphs and tables and later used in developing themes and sub-themes in the process of presenting, interpreting and analysing.

Theoretical Framework

Various theoretical lenses are relevant in understanding strategy implementation in organisations. The study will discuss Structural Theory by Chandler (1962) as an underpinning theory in this study. According to Chandler (1962) strategy is the determination of long-term goals and objectives and it is a plan for action to achieve one or more of the organization's goals. It is integrating activities and allocating and utilizing resources within the organizational so that objectives are met. Strategy takes into consideration the environment under organisations operate. According to Johnson, Kevan and Richard (2006), structural fit with strategy suggests that firms consider formal structures important and that firms deliberately seek fit, as defined by current theory, when they change strategies and

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structures. (Chandler, 1962) concluded that strategy must be adjusted to avert inefficiencies and change of strategy bring in challenges that may require restructuring to successfully implement new strategies. (Johnson et al. 2008) postulates that strategy is the direction and scope of an organization in the long run and enabling use of resources efficiently in the complex environment resulting in fulfilment of stakeholder and client expectations. There are advantages for the organization through its configuration of resources within a complex environment, to meet the needs of markets and to fulfil stakeholder expectations.

Review of Related Literature

1. The nature and state of the white water rafting business in Victoria Falls.

Christian (2004) analysed the growth of white water rafting tourism at the Zambian city of Livingstone, which is currently emerging as Africa's 'adventure tourism capital'. Since 1996 Zambia has opted to promote economic programs partly by marketing the country's white water rafting tourism experiences. The Livingstone water rafting business was opened up by foreign investors, mainly from neighbours Zimbabwe and South Africa and internationally New Zealand. The cluster of white water rafting in the Town of Livingstone was linked to the upgrading of local tourism infrastructure, which included improved, airport facilities, the influx of major South African investments in hotels. The study also revealed that currently the Majority of visitors to Livingstone are intra – African tourists rather than the intercontinental tourists and the largest contribution to the growth of white water rafting business in Zambia was owed to the political instability in Zimbabwe. Hence future prospects would be enhanced by stability in Zimbabwe which will improve future white water rafting and perception of Southern Africa as a whole (Christian 2004).

Several water rafting observers have argued that the expansion of white water rafting in Africa is a critically important for the Zambian economic development through the tourism receipts development and a source of tourism diversification (World Bank, 2003). The Zambian tourism is essential tool for the new national drive contributes to the diversification of Gross Domestic Product away from its former focus on minerals- led development (World Bank, 2003). The Livingstone white water rafting major challenges relates to the fact that Zambia is an expensive tourist owing to the high cost of product and service as a whole it is a relatively high-cost destination, compared to other tourism destinations in Africa as a whole and southern Africa in particular (Rogerson, 2003). Also the local economy of Zambia suffers from the national over- regulation of tourism and more so the Livingstone city enjoys limited tourism marketing initiatives (ECI, 2002). However, the future growth of white water rafting business in Zambia is certain with the need for a regional approach to the tourism marketing.

McKay (2013) also conducted a study on South African Ash River with specific reference to white water rafting and kayaking boundaries. The case study was of great importance for white water rafting due the volumes of water flow, speed, consistency and the quality of rapids together with exceptional water quality. The indications were that water adventures were generating substantial incomes directly and indirectly and also created a wide array of job opportunities. The study also revealed that the majority of the black population was magnificently underrepresented in white water rafting when compared to their white counterparts.

The developing world still has miles in coming to appreciate the economic significance of their rivers for tourism. One of the major factors in that regarded as note by

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McKay (2013) is the unpredictable political climate that determines the access to much of the rivers. The situation is however not the same with the developed world where access to run particular rivers may depend on the priorities and permitting systems of particular land management agencies. Crowding is another threat discouraging the participation of people into white rafting and this as explained by McKay who notes that), ‘during peak season on popular rivers in many developed nations, it sometimes appears as though the entire water surface is covered in large multi-coloured bubbles of plastic and rubber. Overcrowding therefore presents stiff competition for major rapids and this has resulted in land management agencies introducing quota and booking systems to ameliorate possible conflicts. Despite these difficulties, white water tourism is one of the major components of river tourism more broadly, and the principal option available in the upper sections of most rivers. There is no reason to suppose that it will not continue to thrive.

Rivers are often seen by rafters as constituting more of a wilderness landscape than they actually are (Anderson and Rigby, 1981; Anderson, 1984). Nevertheless, the desire for a natural environment is clearly an important factor to consider in examining rafter's motivations and perceptions, particularly as their response will have major implications for the way in which the experience and the resource which provides that experience is managed. Furthermore, the extent of environmental impact may be related to party size. Group size and style are undoubtedly key determinants of the magnitude of externality problems such as degradation of the environment and a corresponding loss of enjoyment of the landscape (Cullen, 1987, p.5). As Anderson and Rigby (1981) noted, with uncontrolled growth and intensity of use (group size) environmental sensitivity may be lost, and rafting may become 'another roller coaster ride'.

White water rafting is presently a major growth area in the field of commercial recreation. Despite the high profile of adventure activities given by commercial operators and by the tourism industry relatively little public research has been conducted in Zimbabwe which this study sought to establish.

Results and Discussion

Response Rate Analysis

Table 1: Response Rate Analysis

Description	Number of interviews administered	Percentage of response rate
Respondents	10	100%

Source: Survey (2020)

As indicated in Table 1, there was (100%) response rate. The high response rate imply that the subject matter was of great importance in the tourism sector in Zimbabwe. In this research study qualitative responses came from select 10 Tour Operators owners, senior employees and officials from Zimbabwe Tourism Authority.

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The nature of white-water rafting in Victoria Falls

Respondents were asked to briefly evaluate the nature of whitewater rafting and implications for development in Zimbabwe. Various responses were given. Respondent 1 had this to say:

I guarantee this will be one of those days that you will remember for the rest of your life and whatever time of year you go you are going to get wet, very wet. Names of rapids like Stairway to Heaven, The Terminator, The Washing Machine, Judgement Day, Devils Toilet Bowl and Oblivion, give you a small insight of what to expect.

Evidenced by photography, respondent 1 had this photo to show:



Figure 1: White-Water rafting in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

Source: Survey (2021)

Respondent 2 added that:

The intensity of rafting varies due to the fluctuating levels of water plunging through the gorges. On the whole, lower water levels means higher thrill levels. This is because when the water levels are very high, they flood the rocks and outcrops which are the formation of the rapids. As water levels drop, rocks get closer to the surface and the white water starts to really boil and crash through the gorge.

Respondent 3 asserted that water levels determine the safety of the rafting process. Respondent 3 had this to say:

However when the water level is very high the sheer volume of water makes some rapids unsafe, hence the need for the high water run where the first 10 rapids are left out. As water levels get increasingly higher around about March, the whole river becomes unsafe so the Victoria Falls White Water Rafting is closed until the water levels start to drop again in around June.

Respondent 1 added his illustrations with a photograph in explaining characteristics of the Zambezi river as in Figure 2.

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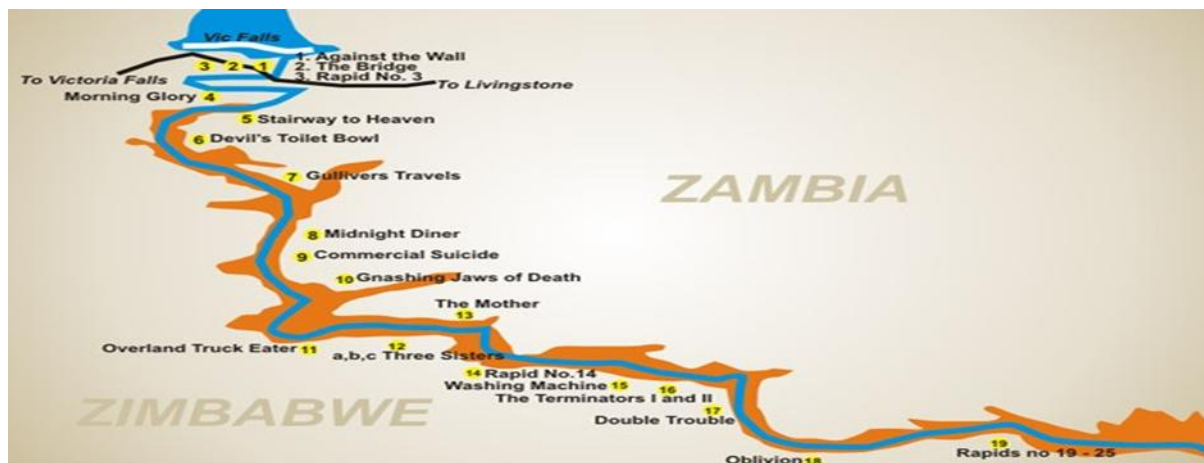


Figure 2: Charecteristics of Zambezi River

However study results are in line with Gitelson and Graefe (2020) who outlines characteristics of Five river flows for recreation purposes in America (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Characteristics of the Five Study Rivers

	Chattooga River	Gauley River	Kennebec River	Middle Fork River	Nantahala River
Trip Length					
Miles	8-20	14-28	28	100	8
Float time	1-2 days	1-2 days	1-2 days	5-6 days	3-4 hours
Dam Controlled	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Wild and Scenic Designation	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Commercial Use Limits	Annual	None	None	Annual	Midweek days
Difficulty of Rapid	II-V	III-V	III-V	III-V	II-III
Normal Use Season	April-Nov.	Sept.-Oct.	May-Sept.	May-Sept.	April-Nov.
Market	Region	Nation	Region	Nation	Local-Region
Annual Commercial Use (1000's)	39	45	36	4.5	213

Source: Water Resources Bulletin

Respondents were asked to explain the benefit of whitewater rafting sport in the tourism sector in Zimbabwe comparably to other tourism attraction in Victoria Falls. Respondent 6 had this to say:

White-water rafting brings revenue to the economy of Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, revenue collection is the responsibility of the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority which was established in 2001 in terms of the Revenue Authority Act (Chapter 23: 11). It is the sole revenue collection agency with specific mandates to assess, collect and enforce the payment of revenue. ZIMRA was established in 2001 as a successor to the then Department of Customs and Excise. Its responsibilities include assessing, levying and collecting revenue from various taxes that include income tax, capital gains, duty tax, resident shareholders tax, Value Added Tax and stamp duty, among others. ZIMRA also issues and controls tax revenue certificates, administers regulations

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pertaining to import and export control exchange as well as licensing and controlling premises used for the manufacture of goods under rebate.

Respondent 7 also added that:

Spending by visitors is the primary engine for affecting an economy through recreation. For a recreation resource, the economic impacts measure the change in the level of market activity in the local economy if visitation to the resource were to change. With such information, policy makers could examine the loss to the economy of limiting recreational use of a crowded river or, conversely, examine how much an economy would grow if recreational use were expanded.

However Respondent 8 argued that:

Not all expenditures made by nonlocal are necessarily relevant to economic impact analyses, particularly for multiple site trips.

Inference to literature indicate that a common practice is to prorate expenditures as a function of either time spent at other sites or the number of other sites visited (Cordell et al., 2010). In a state-level study, Gitelson and Graefe (2011) examined the contribution of rafting on the upper portion of the Youghigheny River in Maryland to a local and state economy. Their results indicated that each 1,000 rafters stimulated about \$116,100 in total output from the one-county economy, and about \$139,320 for the state of Maryland's economy. The study results are in line with literature on how river recreations benefit the economy of a nation in a particular given time. Table 3 show economic benefits of selected recreation rivers in America.

Table 2: Summary of Previous Research on Regional Economic Impacts of River Recreation

	Delaware Water Gap ² River	Upper Delaware River	New River Gorge ² River	Klamath ³ River
Sample (user types)	All Users	All Users	All Users	Rafters Only
Mean Expenditure Per Person Per Trip in Local Economy	\$52.53	\$24.95	\$25.62	\$157.00
Local Economy Size (number of counties)	5	6	7	2
Economic Impacts Per 1000 Visitors:				
Industrial output (\$1000)	98.2	88.9	49.9	203.2
Jobs (number)	1.72	1.51	0.91	5.3
Nonresident Visitation (1000s of visitors)	90.7	193.1	66.0	3 to 5
Annual Economic Impacts:				
Industrial Output (\$ million)	8.9	17.2	3.3	.07 to 1.6
Jobs	156	292	60	16 to 37

Source: Survey (2020)

The study results are in line with research findings by Gitelson and Graefe (2020) examined the contribution of rafting on the upper portion of the Youghigheny River in Maryland to a local and state economy. Their results indicated that each 1,000 rafters stimulated about

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\$116,100 in total output from the one-county economy, and about \$139,320 for the state of Maryland's economy.

The localized nature of the impacts has several consequences. Whitewater recreation can be a major force, good or bad, to rural communities near the river. Respondent 10 had this to say:

River recreation can provide an environmentally friendly boost to an otherwise slow economic base, or be the center-piece for the development of a more varied tourism-related sector. However, there are also down sides; automobile exhausts, runoff from roads and parking lots, and sewage treatment can have noticeable negative effects on the river ecosystem. These types of issues are particularly important for river managers who wish to use river resources for rural development but must balance use with river and ecosystem protection.

For long term viability, white water rafting must have behavioural and environmental quality controls, including high levels of safety and professionalism which ensure potential problems are kept to a minimum and the public profile of the activity remains favourable. While it is important for operators to understand this, it is also important that management bodies consult with operators over the area in which activity is taking place, in order to arrive at a set of operator guidelines which meet the needs of both the producer and consumer of the white water rafting product and the requirement of ensuring that the recreational resource on which the activity ultimately depends is not unduly degraded.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although white water rafting is labour intensive, the fact that the industry is seasonal is also translated in the industry's culture of recruiting the majority of its workforce during the peak times, which is rafting season. For long term viability, white water rafting should have strict behavioural and environmental quality controls to avoid overcrowding, water pollution and, including high levels of safety and professionalism which ensure potential problems are kept to a minimum and the public profile of the activity remains favourable. While it is important for operators to understand this, it is also important that management bodies consult with operators over the area in which activity is taking place, in order to arrive at a set of operator guidelines which meet the needs of both the producer and consumer of the white water rafting product and the requirement of ensuring that the recreational resource on which the activity ultimately depends is not unduly degraded. From the findings it is recommended for the tourism authorities to reduce bureaucracy, the administrative hierarchy in the tourism business has some unnecessary protocols which acts as obstacles in dealing with issues of tour operators which require immediate solutions. The government should develop some policies to attract the private educational sector to conduct trainings to the tour operators with minimum difficulty. The government should also involve itself more into large projects such as infrastructural developments in the country that is through media of transportation and to make the white water rafting activities highly accessible from all corners of the country. Destination branding and expansion can also be a gate way of expanding the Victoria Falls white water rafting business. The legal framework in the tourism industry should be regulated to make it easier for tour operators to adapt and implement their business operations. The policies governing the tourism industry should be improved to encourage efficiency in the

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sector. The policies governing the tour operations should be updated so that they can make it easier for foreign tour operators to adapt to the business environments in Zimbabwe.

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