



# Implications of China's Approved Tourism Destination Status (ADS) on Zimbabwe's Tourism Environment: Insights from Local and Government Tourism Groups in Zimbabwe

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**Abstract** *This study examined system-wide implications of an Approved Destination Status (ADS) granted to Zimbabwe by China in 2004 on Zimbabwe's tourism industry. A total of 150 self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data. The study revealed a disproportionate increase of tourism traffic from the Chinese market and revenue inflows which have largely remained depressed. Findings further highlighted that Chinese's low spending patterns, inaccessibility of the country, and a highly volatile political environment have undermined the ADS. The ADS dispensation has presented local operators with a dilemma on the way forward, hence a shift in marketing strategy, re-configuration of the pricing regime, and improved air connectivity are necessary.*

**Keywords:** *Approved Destination Status, Zimbabwe Tourism Environment, Chinese Market, Implications*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1980, the Zimbabwe government prioritised tourism development on the strength of an array of natural and man-made tourist attractions domiciled in the country. The tourism industry's employment and foreign currency generative capacity saw it getting the same attention like agriculture and mining (Essence of Africa, 2003, Murindagomo, 1990; Travel and Tourism Intelligence, 2001). Zimbabwe's tourism hinges on flora and fauna, and to ensure the sustainable use of the wildlife, Zimbabwe created the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (PWMA) under whose purview fall the custody of the country's national parks.

After realising that the tourism sector is a labour intensive industry and that its meaningful development dictates a corresponding development of a skilled human resource base, the Zimbabwe government introduced and expanded tourism studies at institutions of higher learning to offer degrees and masters in tourism and hospitality management. Such programs were rolled out at the University of Zimbabwe,

Midlands State University, and Chinhoyi University of Technology in 1996, 1999, and 2000 respectively (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, 2004; Manwa, 2009).

On the economic front, the tourism sector is very significant in Zimbabwe. At its peak the sector contribute 12% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and is currently ranked third after mining and agriculture in terms of generating foreign currency and creating employment (Travel and Tourism Intelligence, 2005; Murindagomo, 1990; ZTA, 2003, 2005, 2008). The tourism sector in a good year can contribute USD634 million which is quite a feat for a country with a total annual budget of USD3.4 billion. From modest arrivals of 237 000 in 1980, arrivals doubled to 582 602 in 1990, reached 1,966 582 in 2000, and 2,239 165 in 2010 showing that the arrivals were on an upward trend. Correspondingly, the tourism sector generated USD38.4 million, USD60.2 million, USD125 million, and USD 634 million respectively (ZTA, 2010; Travel and Tourism Intelligence, 2004). At this stage the Zimbabwe tourism sector was buoyed by visitors from European countries, which subsequently became the key traditional source markets.

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Zimbabwe's tourism sector suffered a set-back in the late 1990s when it experienced a down turn in arrivals due to a multiplicity of factors. Political disturbances, unstable economic environment, and negative media reportage resulted in international tourists mostly from Western markets shunning Zimbabwe (ZTA, 2003; Travel and Tourism Intelligence, 2002). The bilateral dispute between Harare and London coupled with the disputed parliamentary and presidential plebiscites triggered negative media coverage on Zimbabwe as an unsafe tourist destination, and the land reform exercise embarked in 1999 was the Achilles' heels on Zimbabwe's tourism sector. It also generated a lot of negative publicity and did not only compound the already frosty political and economic relations between Zimbabwe and Britain, but also with other progressive western countries and international lending institutions (Travel and Tourism Intelligence, 1999). Subsequently, Zimbabwe was slapped with economic sanctions, travel warnings were issued by the US, Japan, EU countries, Canada, Australia, and Britain advising their nationals not to visit Zimbabwe. The tourism sector in Zimbabwe then went into a comatose with most operators recording below 10% capacity utilisation.

### Destination Decline and Interventions for Improvement

A tourist destination life cycle is of great interest to tourism managers, since an enormous amount of insight can be gained by knowing where a particular destination is positioned within the life sequence at any given point in time (Weaver and Oppermann, 2000). If indicators point towards an old age status, then this implies that continued product deterioration is likely to occur if remedial measures are not taken. According to Mason (2008) the destination life cycle should not be regarded as an unavoidable process, but rather one that can be re-directed through appropriate management measures to realise the outcomes that are desired by destination stakeholders. Zimbabwe as a tourist destination could have reached the stagnation and decline stages of Butler's tourist area life cycle hence the need for intervention by the authorities to give the tourism sector a new lease of life (Weaver and Oppermann, 2000; Mason, 2008; and Cooper *et al.*, 2008).

Grappling with economic sanctions, decrease in tourist arrivals from Western markets, and negative publicity the Zimbabwe government set up a taskforce on perception management to counter the negative publicity of the country. The perception management taskforce sought to re-engage with the western countries to normalise relations and to persuade these countries to remove the travel warnings they had issued. The government also enacted a statutory instrument in 2001 to enable tourism operators to import

capital goods without paying duty (Travel and Tourism Intelligence, 2005).

After the preceding initiatives did not yield the anticipated result, the Zimbabwe government then changed focus and looked East under the much vaunted Look East Policy, when it courted the Chinese tourism market to stem the down turn in tourism traffic and rejuvenate the destination. This literally played midwifery to the birth of the Approved Destination Status (ADS) between Zimbabwe and China.

### Relationship between China and Zimbabwe

China and Zimbabwe had maintained ties during the war of liberation and in the 1980s the country's political leadership expressed Zimbabwe's desire to maintain longstanding ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), regarding China as an all weather friend. The formalisation of diplomatic relations between Zimbabwe and China later served to establish the political foundation upon which commercial relationships like ADS could be founded. In 2004, China announced that Zimbabwe had been granted ADS for Chinese tourists. This signalled the ushering in of a new era of tourism between Zimbabwe and China.

### Chinese Outbound Market, Economic Outlook and ADS in Relation to Zimbabwe

Approved Destination Status (ADS) is a status granted to a foreign country by the Chinese government, which allows Chinese outbound tour groups to travel to that country. The ADS tourism market is different from the traditional tourism market. Without an ADS agreement a destination country is not allowed to receive tour groups from China or to promote its tourism business in China. Under the bilateral agreement, China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) authorises qualified domestic travel agencies to handle outbound travel and Chinese tour groups to an ADS country. Only these authorised agencies are eligible to promote and organise tours, handle visa applications, make financial transactions in foreign currencies, and deal with other related business (Xin, 2004; Yu, 2005). Chinese tourists are officially only allowed to travel to countries, which have obtained an "ADS Agreement" with China. Some of the developing countries in Southern Africa with an ADS-agreement with China are South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique and Namibia

Under this bilateral agreement, an ADS country like Zimbabwe recommends to CNTA a number of travel agencies as land operators for handling Chinese tour groups when they arrive in the destination country. The tourism authority of the ADS country, and in this case, ZTA, is responsible for supervising its travel agencies and for protecting the legal rights of Chinese tourists in the

destination country. With such status, the ADS country is also allowed to open its tourist office in China and to promote travel to its country.

China's estimated population is more than 1.3 billion whose outbound tourism has grown exponentially since the 1990s. By 2020, the number of Chinese outbound tourists is estimated to reach the staggering 100 million (Zhang and Lam, 1998). China is forecast by the WTO to become the leading source market world-wide by 2020, dominating global tourism arrivals (SAT, 1 November, 2006), as such, many competitors in the global tourism market are hotly competing for China's fast-growing outbound market, hence the first priority of most countries is to get on to the ADS list (Lui, 2000; WTO, 2003; Xin, 2004).

China is therefore one of the fastest growing outbound tourist countries, Zimbabwe as a tourist destination need to put in more effort to improve the destination's image and to capture a significant share of this new business opportunity, in the face of intense international competition from other destinations (Yu, 2005). As China approves more destinations for its citizens to travel to, Zimbabwe is facing immense competition from destinations around the region.

## METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENTATION

The questionnaire survey instrument was used in this study. The instrument consisted of two sections. The first part contained questions on demographics of respondents. Such characteristics included: sex, age, work designation, years in service, type of business, and frequency of exhibiting. The second part covered a 9 item, 5-Point Scale anchored from 1= strongly Disagree to 5= strongly Agree. The purpose of this section of the questionnaire was to get insights from industry on the ADS dispensation between Zimbabwe and China. The data analysed for this article relates to a period from 2004 to the end of 2010. The type of data was derived from a questionnaire distributed to participants at the 2009 Zimbabwe Sanganai Travel Expo. Data collection was done over a 3-working days and on Saturday and Sunday in the month of October 2009 at the Harare International Conference Centre (HICC) in Harare. The study population was defined as all the exhibitors at the 2009 edition of the Travel Expo. Respondents were randomly selected using the Exhibitor List directory. First, every third exhibitor at the HICC between 0900hours to 1600hours (local time) was approached and asked if he or she would agree to complete the questionnaire. If the operator refused to participate, the next third operator was approached and asked to participate. Furthermore, if the operator was not a local operator or government agency, he or she was also excluded from the study and another nearby individual was selected to take part in this study. The criterion of exclusion from the study (that is, local operator and government agency) was

necessary because this study focused on local operators and government agencies' perspectives.

This process produced an under representation of small to medium independent tourism players (SMEs) who were not showcasing at the Travel Expo due to financial constraints. The survey is thus biased towards large operators and government agencies and biased away from SMEs who were not physically participating at the annual expo but nonetheless having a significant stake in the Zimbabwe tourism sector. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed during the data collection period. One hundred and two usable surveys were collected. This constitutes an overall response rate of 68 per cent. The structure of the questionnaire was similar to that used by Pan and Laws (2003) in an earlier study and included Likert types seeking degrees of agreement with statements. According to Malhotra and Birks (2006:415), the quality of the measuring instrument and the data should be evaluated in terms of reliability. Reliability was assured through testing and re-testing the questionnaire guided by the works of McDaniel and Gates (2004). Validity was examined from the content perspective in line with McDaniel and Gates (2004). For the current research study, the questionnaires were scrutinised to ensure high degree of face and content validity.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 150 individuals were approached and asked to participate in this study. Of these 68 % agreed to participate, forming a sample of 102 respondents. This sample had 80% males (82) and 20% female (20), with most respondents being between the ages of 25 and 45, and these were part of middle and senior management, with 3-15 years experience in the industry. 87% were hotels, 7% tour operators and 6% being quasi government bodies, and 100% of these were regular exhibitors.

The cardinal implications of the ADS on Zimbabwe's tourism environment revolved on the development of a sound human resource base ; increasing marketing initiatives ; upping tourism attaches ; availability of tourist information ; travel expos ; attending to a punitive pricing regime ; mismatch of tourist traffic and revenue ; tourism policy matters; inaccessibility of Zimbabwe ; poor service provision ; and the politically unstable environment.

### Implication on Human Resource Training and Development

Respondents reported that it was both critical and obligatory for hotels, tour operators, travel agents, the national lead agency, Hospitality Association of Zimbabwe (HAZ), Zimbabwe Council for Tourism (ZCT) and other tourism

related organisations to individually and collectively invest heavily in the development and training of a robust human resource staff base like what South Africa and Mozambique did when they were accorded the same status. This implication was informed from the fact that the Chinese market is different from the traditional western market hence the need to train staff so that they are ready to play host to this new market. This is fully supported by Mullins (1995), and Riley, (1995) who stated that in the hospitality sector employees are part of the product and must be trained and developed in order to provide a flawless hospitality product. Powers (1998) also concur that the tourism industry is a relatively labour intensive sector such that the successful delivery of a quality tourism product hinges on a cutting edge human resources. Essentially, it is instructive to all Zimbabwe service providers to train staff especially in Eastern languages like Mandarin to guarantee quality service delivery. To bridge the communication barrier, close liaison between industry and institutions of higher learning to review foreign languages offered in various degree and diploma programs is a compelling issue crying out for attention. Foreign languages must have an Eastern flair since the ones currently on offer are Eurocentric and are not reflective of the ADS dispensation. A balance must be struck between the two markets.

Apart from the above, operators must also look at a possibility of hiring expatriates particularly from China and Japan as trainers for quicker results. The status quo obtaining in the tourism industry whereby communication barriers are the hallmark of tourist complaints must be speedily addressed as a matter of urgency. The nature of the tourism product dictates interaction at the point of interface between the guest and the front line service staff, and hence globally successful tourist destinations strive to provide multi-lingual staff to effectively cater for this (Powers, 1998, Jones, 1996). An official from the Zimbabwe tourism authority had this to say:

*'As the regulatory authority, plans are already afoot to commence training people in Chinese language with the intention of having as many local Mandarin speakers as possible, in expectation of an increased inflow of Chinese tourists after the Asian country granted us an ADS. We are working with the ministry of higher and tertiary education, Ministry of Environment and Tourism and various training institutions to make sure that we have local people trained to speak Chinese. For the record, ZTA has already invited Mandarin speakers to register with it so that they could provide their services as and when required'*

The idea to train and multi-skill people in customer service in various facets is imperative so that when the front line service staff interfaces with visitors, there would be a marked difference in the national customer service delivery culture (Powers, 1998, Riley, 1995, Jones, 1996, Mullins, 1995). This

is practically applicable to Zimbabwe's present scenario and can be also viewed as a means of redressing the problems of recruitment at a time when the country's tourism industry has suffered massive skills flight to neighbouring countries as stated in Africa Sun's Annual Report of 2008. The Zim-Host program was specifically designed to foster the spirit of unconditional and collective hospitality in Zimbabwe by improving service standards nationally through training and creating awareness of the importance of individual's role in their place of work, and as ambassadors of their country. Critical key service personnel whom training is necessary are those in the front of the house in the tourism sector, and others from such areas as immigration, police, army and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA). The usual chaotic manner in which immigration formalities are handled particularly at entry points are falling short of expectations on the back of the ADS.

A human resource training director from a leading chain group revealed:

*'Our organisation once sent staff to Brussels for training, and has done the same again by sending chefs to Japan and China for training in Asian cuisines. That is the philosophy of our organisation, continuous training. Of note too, Japanese chefs have also been seconded at various hotels within the group to impart skills to local chefs.'*

This is the way to go for all local tourism groups so that they reap the most out of the ADS.

In addition to the above, development of language skills is obligatory as noted by one respondent from the Hospitality Association of Zimbabwe:

*'The current tourism and hospitality courses offered by institutions of higher learning are Eurocentric encompassing French, Portuguese and Germany as languages. As a matter of urgency Mandarin and Japanese must be introduced to complement the ADS. That is a deficit on our part as service providers'*

On this count, it shows that Zimbabwe as a country is lagging behind to playing host to the Chinese market and this negates the well meant ADS.

World over an increasingly culturally diverse clientele has necessitated specialist training in the field of knowledge building of staff (Jones, 1996; ILO, 2001). ITT Sheraton, for example, operates a number of resort hotels in the Hawaiian Islands where the presence of Japanese clients has encouraged the creation of Japanese language and culture courses. The result has been fantastic as this initiative has resulted in a significant increase in the number of Japanese guests frequenting the hotels, while the courses themselves have become problem-solving sessions with staff. On a separate but similar case, in 1992, the Fair Seasons Hotel and Resorts developed the Self-Access Learning Centre in

Indonesia, where the company was opening a new resort, to teach English to locally recruited staff. The centre now teaches French and Japanese as well as Bahasa Indonesia (ILO, 2001). Zimbabwe tourism operators must take a cue from this.

## Marketing Initiatives Implication

Most tourism players bemoaned and expressed reservations on the ability of the ZTA in its marketing and promotional efforts. Respondents underscored that ZTA was not doing enough in terms of marketing the country in the Chinese market in line with the ADS, a factor hampered by budgetary constraints. There was consensus among respondents that the national tourism lead agency must mount an aggressive marketing campaign in China as per the dictates of the ADS between the two countries so that the country is given a head start ahead of other Southern Africa countries with the same status. Such proactive is deficient on the ZTA hence South Africa is taking advantage and is currently receiving many Chinese tourists than Zimbabwe. The sentiment was that the ZTA was not meeting its part of the bargain in marketing the country in China hence this flows against the positive stream of the ADS.

The above supports some narratives proffered by industry analysts who stressed that the ZTA must be mindful of the fact that this coveted ADS was not granted to Zimbabwe only but also to South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania and a host of other Southern Africa countries who seem to be actively promoting their tourism industry in China using superior marketing initiatives. South Africa is reportedly recording close to a million Chinese tourists yet Zimbabwe's Chinese traffic stood at 60000, a figure which does not make a positive reading. In addition, the national tourism board must abandon the one cap fits all marketing approach, but must tailor made a marketing strategy as alluded to by Morgan *et al.*, (2002) specifically for the Asian market since it is a new and totally distinct market. One way of intervening is for the ZTA and tourism groups to collectively hold familiarisation tours to conscientise the market and to show case Zimbabwe's tourism product.

Budgetary constraints were cited by respondents as the main hindrance on the execution of an effective marketing campaign by the ZTA. One official revealed that: *"If you compare what our national tourism organisation is allocated in the fiscus is a far cry. In the region South Africa Tourism Authority (SATOUR) has a marketing budget ten times higher than us, and obviously this stifles the marketing of the country. The 2 per cent tourism levy is not enough to make a difference"*.

This has tilted the ADS in favour of South Africa as evidenced by Chinese tourist traffic into South Africa where they spent more courtesy of her superior marketing prowess.

Whilst tourism operators acknowledged that there was noticeable tourist increase from 320000 in 1981 to 2093283 in 1999, the general feeling is that these figures could have been surpassed if the ZTA was adequately funded. This buttresses the argument put forth by Mamimine, (1998) in which he stated that owing to underfunding the ZTA has not been able to finance its foreign offices such that at one time it had to recall its attaches from Germany and close some of the offices altogether. To this end, inviting sporting personalities, celebrities and newspaper editors from China to sample the Zimbabwe tourism product and subsequently write positively about the country upon their return to China seems a more credible way to penetrate the Chinese market as revealed by operators.

It was interesting to note that respondents concurred that the ADS granted to Zimbabwe by China was a giant step as it recognises the country as one of the tourist destination in Southern Africa but hastened to warn that Zimbabwe's national tourism body must complement this overture by upping its tourism attachés not only in China but in other key Asian countries. Now that some of the attaches posted in some Western countries were recalled (Mamimine, 1998), these must be re-posted to this promising market if the tourism sector is to benefit meaningfully from the ADS. The current arrangement in which the country has an attaché in China only negates the essence of the ADS arrangement (Africa Sun Annual Report, 2008). The same can be said on tourist information offices and investing in cyberspace. In this day and age of information communication technology, the ZTA must harness the information superhighway to provide up to date web pages showcasing what is on offer in Zimbabwe (Kotler *et al.*, 1999, Middleton and Clarke, 2001, Morgan *et al.*, 2002).

According to Benckendorff and Black (2000) cyber marketing dictates that the recency of information is an issue that can make or break a tourist destination's marketing efforts. The tourism industry, with its intangible products and services is intrinsically suited to Internet marketing (Middleton and Clarke, 2001). As travel continues to become increasingly global, the competitive pressure on individual destinations will increase. An observation was made urging the local operators not to over market the Victoria Falls at the expense of other equally compelling attractions like Kariba and The Eastern Highlands. Most respondents suggested that ZTA must attend expositions in Asia like the Shanghai Travel expo implying that by so doing Zimbabwe as a tourist destination remains visible to the Chinese market in line with the ADS.

## Revising the Tourism Product Pricing Regime

Another interesting finding was in the area of pricing the Zimbabwe tourism product. The implication of the ADS was for local operators to revise downwards their rates in view of the price sensitive Chinese market. Insight from respondents pointed to the Zimbabwe's tourism product being perceived as too expensive largely due to the use of a multi-tier pricing system adopted by local tourism groups specifically for the traditional western markets. Such a punitive pricing regime does not resonate well with the ADS premised on tour groups. An expensive tourism product may result in repelling Chinese visitors and may compel them to substitute Zimbabwe with other destinations in Southern Africa. In addition, an expensive tag on Zimbabwe as a destination does not only dent the image of the country but also impaired the face of the country's tourism industry since international tourists, Chinese tourists included, feel that they are being ripped off. So the implication is that tourism groups in Zimbabwe must not replicate such a pricing approach on the Chinese market as this may result in travel diversion at the expense of Zimbabwe.

## Financial Implication

Respondents contend that with Chinese tourist statistics showing China's strong economic performance, there is a tremendous growth potential for Chinese outbound travel, especially by the expanding middle class in China. China will have grown to become the fourth largest provider of outbound tourists globally by 2020, representing 6.4% of all international tourists (UNWTO, 2005). Given the significance of the Chinese outbound market, it is critical that tourism organisations develop informed strategies to capitalise on this opportunity (Keating and Kriz, 2008).

Although the expectation was high that with the ADS granted to Zimbabwe the envisaged increase in tourists from China would correspondingly increase revenue the scenario on the ground sadly provides a different picture. Respondents bemoaned an inverse relationship between the tourism traffic from China and revenue. This was attributed largely to the characteristic features of the Asian market of being price sensitive, their movement in groups, and being on tours which are heavily discounted by intermediaries in the source region (Wu *et al.*, 2000). Local tourism operators concur that Easterners are generally low on their average spending in contrast to the Western market. The unpacking of the Chinese market has resulted in mixed feelings and reaction to the country's tourism sector in relation to the ADS. The overall impression given by local operators was that indeed the ADS is a noble arrangement but it eats into their bottom line and were at a loss as to how to increase revenue from this market.

Some respondents expressed reservations on estimations by the Zimbabwean authorities of Chinese tourist arrivals. They suggested that Zimbabwe is not a privileged destination for Chinese tourists and that the new tourists' routes to Africa are rather used for informal trade purposes. However, this seem to be in sharp contrast to a Chinese information source which reported that the number of Chinese tourists in Zimbabwe rose up to 3 354 in 2003 and reached 11 584 by end of October 2004 (ZTA, 2008). In light of the fact that South Africa, Zimbabwe's neighbour, reportedly received approximately 40 000 visitors from China in 2004 it seems that there is scope for expansion especially if one considers the possibility of package deals.

One marketing officer from a renowned tour operating organisation indicated: *'...certainly one must carefully consider the economic significance of those figures given that a lot of visitors enter Zimbabwe with tourist visas but do spent little money in the tourism sector. Easterners are not high spenders. Yes, they increase occupancy but not revenue. Their spending pattern is different and rather on the downside than the Western market. Of major concern is the fact that Chinese tourists move around in supervised gangs called 'duck tours' and keep their hands in their pockets when visiting curio stalls. They are not big spenders and the implication is that they cannot substitute tourists from the traditional markets of Europe and North America...'* The above revealed mixed feelings among local tourism operators on the ADS.

## National Tourism Policy Implication

In terms of traffic from China, there were significant statistical differences among respondents, with the exception of the ZTA. Respondents from hotels said tourists from China were constant; tour operators and travel agencies indicated that very few Chinese provide them with business, whilst ZTA was upbeat that figures from China were peaking. Despite the discord in the exact arrivals from China respondents were agreeable that what matters most are not the figures but the revenue realised as stated by Bhatia (2001) that the net financial value expended by the tourist is more important than the number of tourists. Tourism players conceded that for the country's tourism industry to survive in the long term, the ZTA must not be livid about bringing mass tourism under the guise of ADS as this is depletive to the environment, a fact underscored by Morgan *et al.*, 2002). Tourism players impressed that the development of new tourism markets be in synch with the country's national tourism policy which is low volume high value. Therefore, the implication of the ADS is that a revision of the country's tourism policy is needed to avoid somewhat policy inconsistency. On the ground the reverse seems to be true if the statistical figures proffered by

ZTA are anything to go by because Chinese move in groups and in large numbers yet they spend less revenue.

### Implication on Accessibility

The ADS is hamstrung by the unavailability of direct flights between Zimbabwe and China. If the tourism environment in Zimbabwe were to fully benefit from the ADS arrangement it is critical that the destination is easily accessible (Page, 1999; ZTA, 2003). Zimbabwe experienced withdrawal of airline carriers in the late 1990s rendering the destination hardly accessible by the long haul market. The long haul market can only access the country through air transport and currently Air Zimbabwe is grounded thus weighing against the ADS. In view of the foregoing respondents challenged the Zimbabwe government to recapitalise the national airline carrier so that it resumes direct flights to Asia. It is imperative that the Civil Aviation Authority of Zimbabwe (CAAZ) court other international airline carriers to provide direct flights between Zimbabwe and China as a way of increasing load factors. In an ADS arrangement air transport is the life blood of the tourism sector. On a comparative note, after South Africa was granted ADS, the South Africa Airways (SAA) doubled flights between Pretoria and Beijing (SATOUR, 2010). To this end, Zimbabwe tourism stakeholders must take a leaf from SAA.

### Service Provision and the Physical Tourism Product

The ADS implied that local tourism service providers provide quality products to guarantee repeat purchase. This dispensation requires first class service and this must be the buzz word among Zimbabwe's tourism players. This would result in positive word of mouth advertisement on behalf of local tourism players. Respondents were concerned with the physical tourism product that is showing visible signs of fatigue, and the implication of the ADS is that the physical product is in need of a facelift and refurbishment. To support this Kotler *et al* (1999) stressed that a quality service/product is the most effective marketing tool, once one provides mediocre products customers will complain by their feet going to other destinations who are normally competitors. In this ADS dispensation because of the physically tired Zimbabwe tourism product, Chinese tourists would end up going to South Africa, Botswana and Namibia who are regional competitors with better physical tourism structures, hence are having an edge over Zimbabwe and are better positioned to reap the benefits of the ADS.

### Implications on Cuisines/Dishes

Respondents noted that the ADS called for a complete overhaul of the dishes offered to the Chinese market. Local

operators had modelled their cuisines to serve the traditional western market, and these cuisines implied that they are now out of step with the ADS and Chinese market. There was consensus on the need to introduce Chinese dishes to delight this new market. To underscore the foregoing, local tourism groups revealed posting chefs to Eastern countries for training in Asian cuisines and some have taken a different route of hiring expatriate chefs from China and Japan to train and complement local expertise. All this was done in an effort to provide dishes appealing to the new market necessitated by the ADS granted to Zimbabwe by China.

### Political Environment Implication

The wider political environment in Zimbabwe can make or break the ADS obtaining between Zimbabwe and China. Whilst local operators concur that Zimbabwe has recently been flooded with reports of dramatic recovery in tourism, they conceded that those bulletins maybe premature in view of the political environment that is still volatile. The country still carries the political instability tag despite the obtaining political dispensation of the inclusive government. The power-sharing government has not completely allayed the safety and security concerns of tourists and this undermines the ADS. According to Boniface and Cooper (2001) international tourists are increasingly becoming conscious about their safety and security and tend to shun tourist destinations punctuated by political instability. Zimbabwe's political environment has had mixed signals scaring potential tourists. Indeed tourism may be finding its feet after 10 years of recession, but the ADS's success lies in Zimbabwe's political stability since tourism is a peace industry.

## CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to assess the implications of the ADS to Zimbabwe's tourism environment. The study concludes that there have been numerous implications ranging from training and developing skilled human resources, cuisines, and constraints in marketing as informed by insights from local operators and government agencies. Strategically, ADS provides Zimbabwe an opportunity to access and tap on the new Chinese market, however, the ADS was not privileged to Zimbabwe only but was also granted to other Southern Africa countries. As such tourism diversion is inevitable hence the need for superior marketing initiatives on the part of Zimbabwe. If the sentiments proffered by local operators are anything to go by, the conclusion which could be drawn is that ADS from China must not be misconstrued to mean a complete demise of the western source markets, but must be taken as market diversification.

In addition to the above, for the Zimbabwe tourism industry to prepare for the ADS tourism business, many lessons can

be learned from destinations that have received visitors in the past years. Positive word-of-mouth brings business. ADS for Zimbabwe bring tremendous opportunities, not just for the traditional tourism industry but also for other sectors in the economy. ADS tourists include not only leisure travellers but also those whose main travel purpose is to seek business and education opportunities. Embracing ADS for Zimbabwe means to meet the needs of both leisure and non leisure travellers; it also means to obtain the full economic benefit generated from the ADS tourism market. In order to achieve these goals, a new, innovative and integrative approach is needed. As a crown corporation of Zimbabwe government, the ZTA would be in the best position to play a coordinating role and to serve as information centre in the ADS tourism market. It is very useful for the ZTA to establish a comprehensive Chinese language website, which provides information to ADS and their travel agencies. The Chinese language website is an efficient marketing tool for Zimbabwe businesses. Airlines, hotels and tour operators will have to reshape or re-tool their mechanisms, products and abilities to deal with a vast number of Chinese tourists with different habits and preferences. In inter-cultural settings like Zimbabweans and Chinese, the role of the tour guide as the mediator between tourists and host communities and culture is particularly critical as foreign travellers depend on tour guide for communication and other trip experience "is at least partially filtered and structured by a single mediator, their guide" (Yu *et al.*, 2002:77).

Key practical implications for local tourism groups in Zimbabwe can thus be summarised as re-aligning the country's national tourism policy with Chinese traffic, revisiting service providers' pricing regime, and consensus between private and public sector organisations on the marketing strategy. In addition, the projection of China as the largest source of outbound tourism in the world by 2020 shows it is a market worthy investing in, characteristics of the Chinese market will always impact adversely on the revenue and staying with the same point the mismatch between visitor inflow from China and revenue would remain a nightmare until strategies are put in place to increase Chinese spending, and the image of the country in the face of competition is critical. Another critical implication relates to the booming Chinese economy which is also enticing even developed countries to focus on the Chinese market with better packaged tourism offerings and world class infrastructure. This would obviously crowd out weakling developing countries like Zimbabwe despite the existence of ADS. Finally, Chinese are keen to travel to countries with good diplomatic ties with Beijing hence it is a plus on Zimbabwean tourism operators.

## Research Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

Findings are peculiar to Zimbabwe as a tourist destination and cannot be superimposed on other Southern Africa countries extended an ADS by China prior to and post 2004. Since the purpose of this study was to explore the implications of an ADS granted to Zimbabwe by China in 2004, a one shot cross-sectional design was deemed appropriate. To avoid the risk of no responses owing to the length of the measurement instrument, only large operators and tourism organisations were selected at the expense of small and independent players. As a result, the design might render the results limited in validity and generalisability, and so future studies should be conducted encompassing all local tourism players irrespective of size. This study is further limited by its use of a sample, as the sample might not be sufficiently representative of the Zimbabwe tourism industry. But overall, this study provides valuable benchmark and baseline information for further research and sheds light on the implications of the ADS to Zimbabwe's tourism environment.

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