Too much sun and not enough fun?

Would you spend your well-deserved holiday in a region that is experiencing severe drought, flooding or extreme temperatures? Climate change has a very real effect on tourism in Africa, such as reducing the availability of tourist attractions and activities, and consequently threatening the livelihoods of people dependent on the tourism industry. There has been a significant increase in research on climate change and its effect on tourism over the past two decades, however, the majority of research is focused on the global North. Hence, NRF-rated researchers, Prof Gijsbert Hoogendoorn (University of Johannesburg) and Dr Jennifer M. Fitchett (Wits University) set out to review existing literature on climate change threats and adaptation strategies for Africa.

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What threats do climate change hold for Africa’s tourism?
The global South is significantly more susceptible to the impacts of climate change due to underdeveloped infrastructure and lower resolution warning systems. Moreover, for African countries, tourist attractions are often predominantly outdoor, including beach/water- and nature-based tourism, creating a greater reliance on a bearable climate.

The intricate relationship between tourism and climate change will, to some degree, affect tourism sectors across the African continent through continued changes in precipitation, temperature, humidity, air pollution, and rising sea levels.

Storms/floods, rising temperatures and droughts are of particular concern as they can have a number of serious consequences such as:

- A decline in wine production in the Western Cape (the wine route is one of SA’s key tourist attractions);
- Changes to wildlife migration (75% of Namibia’s tourism sector relies on game viewing and trophy hunting);
- Coral bleaching (a significant threat for tourism associated with scuba diving and snorkelling at the Sinai Peninsula and Seychelles);
- Increases in the prevalence of malaria and cholera in some regions; and
- Job losses (in 2000, the floods in the Moremi Game Reserve in the Okavango Delta resulted in their complete isolation, forcing retrenchments of many tourism workers in the region).

Challenges and solutions to climate change adaptation

- There are more pressing matters
Many developing countries don’t see the need for adaptation to climate change as a priority since more urgent short-term needs such as poverty reduction, housing, and service provision typically take precedence. It can thus be argued that assistance is required from developed countries in order to build the necessary human and technical capacities to improve adaptability.

- Vulnerability of resources
Rising temperatures and prolonged droughts put tourists and local communities in direct competition for resources such as water, food and electricity.

Tourism operators in Botswana have already responded to increasing temperatures by scheduling activities during cooler parts of the day and by providing more shade, swimming pools and air conditioning to visitors.

Respondents from accommodation establishments in the Okavango Delta indicated an intention to shift from water to land-based activities; to drill for water to ensure waterholes for wildlife, and to maintain large water containers to ensure water provision for tourists. They also raised the importance of educating local communities on the importance of water conservation and working with businesses from other economic sectors to develop mitigation plans.

- Diversity of tourist offerings
The diversity of tourist offerings is a critical component of any adaptation strategy. For example, at the Egyptian Red Sea, diving operators have started to include activities that aren’t water-based, such as lessons in astronomy and local culture.

- Government involvement
Another challenge of successful adaptation of the tourism sector to climate change lies in the apportionment of responsibility. In both Botswana and South Africa, the governments were perceived to be responsible for ensuring sufficient adaptation to the threats of climate change. Tourist accommodation establishment managers rely on government to alert them of any threats. Thus, if governments fail to educate or take action towards adaptation, climate change is not perceived to be a problem.

Based on the literature available, the researchers concluded that it is imperative that more in-depth, location-specific and community-level research into climate change and tourism are conducted if timeous adaptation and mitigation are to occur.