



# MLEZI

## STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2030

A NEW DIRECTION FOR TOURISM IN MULANJE



## *THE MLEZI PLEDGE*

*Spirits of Sapitwa,*

*I take this pledge as your guest,*

*To preserve and protect the Island In The Sky*

*When I explore places around Mulanje*

*I will leave them as I found them*

*I will respect the culture and local communities*

*Travelling with an open heart and mind*

*And in return...*

*You will let me return*

*As a better human being*

*A steward for your place*

*A guardian of your trees*

*And a protector of your plants.*

## **IN MEMORIAM.**

We would like to dedicate this strategic plan to the memory of our dear colleague Edna Chamgwera, Business Development Manager at Exchange and a pillar of support for this MMCT project from the very beginning.



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# INTRODUCTION

## Why this plan?

Tourism is a potent force with immense potential for good. At its best, travelling increases empathy, forges friendships between strangers and reveals a broader perspective. When designed with intention, a place's tourism industry can contribute to a higher purpose that supports residents and the natural environment.

Everyone is a part of the environment, and they must respect it. This idea, embraced by the people that lived here for centuries, signals a holistic approach to life and travel that is gaining popularity around the world. In Mulanje, where the mountains, the cedar trees and Chambe Rock feel larger than life, visitors gain a true sense of connection to the earth and local people. However, tourism must be carefully balanced.

To find balance, Mount Mulanje Conversation Trust and all the stakeholders plan for the future with a realistic view. For example, Mulanje takes climate projections into account and considers what they truly mean for this destination over the long term. Support for tourism is still strong among residents, as is confirmed by our bottom-up consultations with local supervising chiefs, chiefs and residents around the mountain. However, the research also shows that the residents are growing concerned about two things: destruction of main tourism assets by local population as long as deforestation and economic leakage (income of tourism not flowing back to the community). As visitor numbers increase, attitudes towards tourism among residents need to be carefully monitored.

What's better than a visitor? A responsible visitor. Over the past decade, many places on Earth have begun to support responsible, sustainable forms of tourism. The next step is to move toward the even larger concept of regenerative tourism. This means not only preserving and sustaining this region's natural beauty, but more importantly, embracing the challenge of restoring and healing everything that has suffered and regenerating all that has been depleted or threatened.

How can, the tourism industry in general and individuals at large support this noble, global cause? This plan provides an answer. It articulates the inspiration and the higher purpose for all tourism actions in the Mulanje region. It also outlines a strategic framework for that purpose. Purposeful tourism activity not only creates job opportunities and financial revenue but it also sparks regeneration around Mount Mulanje and around the region.

## Why Mlezi?

"Mlezi" or "Mlera" refers to a caretaker or a person who provides care for another person or a group of people. This can include someone who takes care of a child while the parents are away, someone who provides care for elderly or sick people, or someone who takes care of someone's property or animals. However, it can also refer to other types of caretakers, such as nurses or caregivers who work in hospitals, clinics, or care homes.

In this context Mt Mulanje is likened to a Mlezi that take sustainable care of boundary community and beyond and it needs to be well managed to sustain this care. It means that on providing economic benefits to porters and guides and all other tourism service providers, the service providers themselves must ensure to provide their active participation in managing the resources that give them the needed income.

Regeneration requires a healthy relationship with the environment and, often, a new point of view. Consider the words people use to talk about nature. Wilderness is a negative word that commonly describes uncultivated land — a place where nature is unspoiled by human settlement.

However, some people believe that humanity has an inherently positive relationship with nature — or that people and nature are interrelated. Native Americans from the Ute tribe in Colorado believe that when humans are absent from an area for long enough, they lose the practical knowledge needed to interact with the environment. Soon afterward, animals and plants retreat from the earth or hide. People and nature can flourish together.

The knowledge that the local people around Mount Mulanje hold is vast, important and underappreciated. Without intimate interaction with the environment, cultures lose the continuity of knowledge that is normally passed down through generations.

The broken parts of this planet need to be fixed. The history of the communities around the Mount suggests that, among other things, a sense of identity and belonging can grow from a positive relationship with the natural environment. Likewise, degrading the environment risks weakening identity and belonging. A poor relationship with nature triggers consequences that impact everyone's wellbeing. Destination development must work to understand the land as well as protect and promote its vital resources.

Ecological challenges are, in many ways, design problems. Too often, the biosphere cannot sustain human activity: fossil fuels, the food supply chain, the way the tourism economy is organized and new technologies strain the limits. Ecological design requires the ability to understand how separate parts work together within the larger pattern of nature. The regenerative way of thinking acknowledges that humans are a part of nature — part of the ecology. It also says that there is greater evolutionary potential when humans maintain a state of intentional interrelationship with nature. People have a positive role to play. For sustained ecological health, humans must evolve a conscious and integral interrelationship with nature — one that is mutually beneficial, that creates space for being and becoming and that is always aware of evolutionary potential. It is a fully conscious awareness that the health of an ecosystem is dependent on human health while human health is dependent on the health of the whole ecology. Regeneration is co-evolutionary.

## Why a new direction?

Behold, a framework has been crafted to provide guidance for the annual planning of tourism in the Mulanje region, and it serves as a growth strategy. Our aim is to create opportunities for job creation, both for local investors and foreign partners. However, our growth should not come at the expense of everything else, as this new direction is about ensuring that our growth is sustainable and responsible.

We strive for a win-win-win environment where not only the tourism provider and potential visitors benefit, but also the environment, wildlife, local traditions, attitudes, resident wellbeing, and heritage. This is not just about creating a mutually beneficial relationship, but about ensuring that no third party pays the price for our progress. With this vision, we can build a sustainable and responsible tourism industry that benefits everyone involved.

At the heart of the regenerative approach lies a comprehensive multi-stakeholder engagement. The Mlezi plan aims to engage all pertinent stakeholders, such as the public sector, private sector, local communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), residents, and visitors. In the future, the following principles will guide our approach:

1. Collaborative decision-making: The Mlezi plan will foster collaboration among stakeholders to make informed and consensus-based decisions.
2. Transparency: The Mlezi plan should ensure transparency in decision-making processes and accountability for outcomes.
3. Flexibility and adaptability: The Mlezi plan should be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances and needs.
4. Local ownership: The Mlezi plan should prioritize the needs and interests of local communities and ensure that they have a say in the development process.
5. Capacity building: The Mlezi plan should support capacity building for stakeholders, including training, education, and mentoring.
6. Performance monitoring and evaluation: The Mlezi plan should include a system for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the tourism development strategy and making adjustments as needed.

## Process & Documentation

### PROCESS:

- Conducted data research in 2019, delving into various sources to gather information.
- Undertook mystery visits in 2019, exploring the area with a sense of intrigue and curiosity.
- Organized a stakeholder workshop in 2019, bringing together relevant individuals to exchange ideas and perspectives.
- Facilitated a TAMM workshop in 2019, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing within the local community.



- Presented the findings of our research in 2019, delivering a comprehensive overview of our discoveries.
- Conducted interviews with stakeholders in 2020, engaging in meaningful conversations to gain further insights.
- Held community sessions in 2020, creating opportunities for community members to express their opinions and concerns.
- Paid many visits to traditional leadership in 2020, respecting and acknowledging their invaluable wisdom and guidance.
- Collaborated with MMCT in 2022, organizing a workshop to align our efforts and exchange expertise.
- Arranged meetings with tourism stakeholders in 2022, facilitating constructive dialogues to enhance collaboration.
- Conducted a workshop with TAMM and Operators in 2022, promoting cooperation and shared understanding.
- Presented and gathered feedback on the strategic framework TAMM in 2023, seeking valuable input and insights.
- Presented and received feedback on the strategic framework to officials in 2023, ensuring their involvement and endorsement.
- Conducted a focus group with TAMM in 2023, fostering a deeper understanding of their needs and aspirations.
- Presented the final strategic framework to high-level stakeholders in 2023, acknowledging their importance and influence.
- Developed the final strategy based on the received feedback in 2023, incorporating valuable insights and perspectives.

#### DOCUMENTATION:

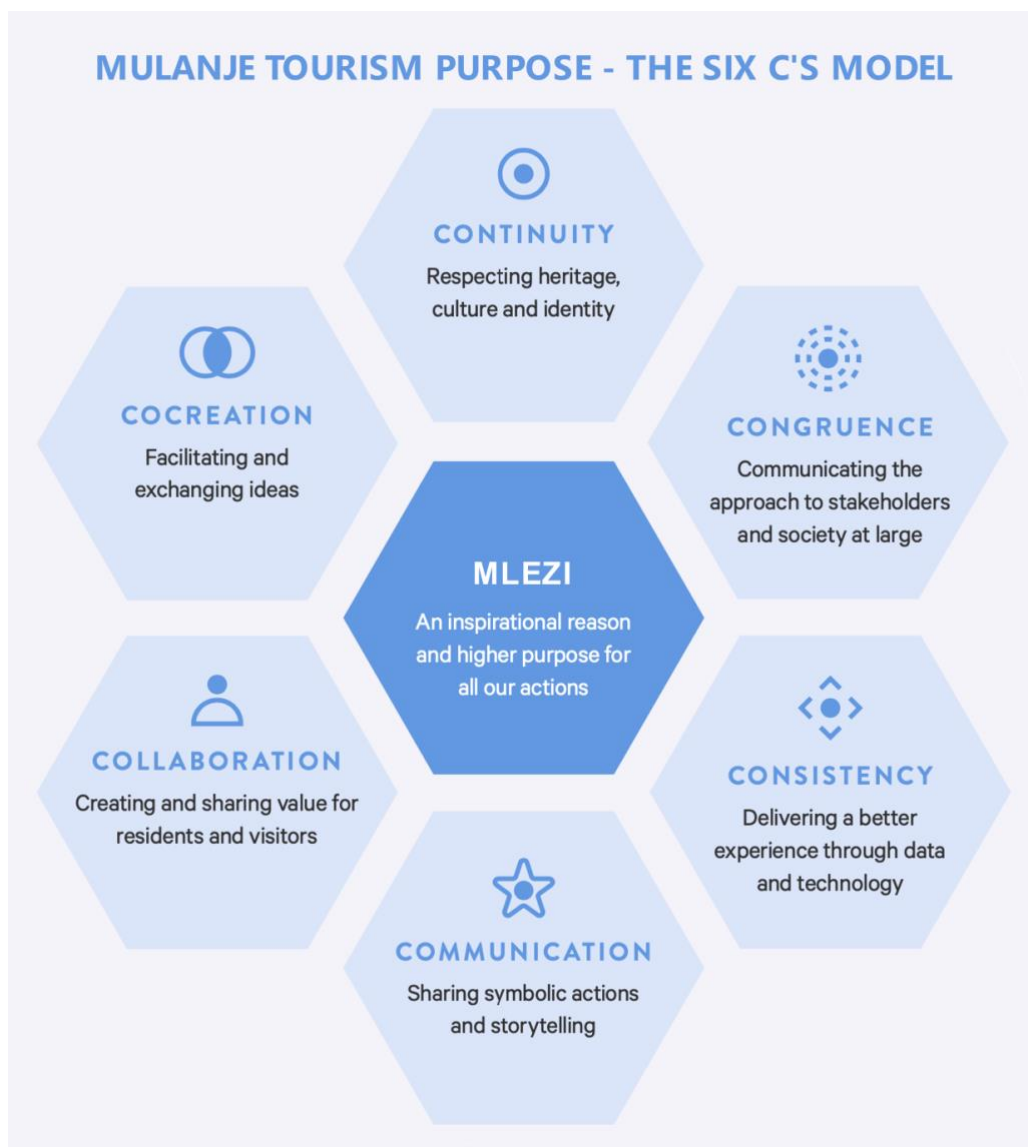
In crafting this strategic framework, we drew inspiration from numerous international benchmarks, as well as Malawian strategies and relevant documents pertaining to the development of the Mulanje area. While an exhaustive list is not provided, we would like to highlight a few key documents that have greatly influenced our approach. Firstly, the National Tourism Policy, National Ecotourism Strategy, and the Ecotourism and Protected Area Management Investment Strategy, which collectively aim to strengthen the sustainable

socioeconomic development of Malawi, recognizing tourism as a catalyst for growth. Additionally, we have aligned our plan with the Tourism Development Plan 2022-2026 for Mount Mulanje Forest Reserve by Nu Leaf and have integrated it with the Mount Mulanje Biosphere Reserve Integrated Management Plan 2019 to 2029, ensuring cohesion and synergy.

# REGENERATIVE TOURISM

## OUR PRINCIPLES / THE 6 C'S MODEL

Tourism will help the Mulanje region flourish. It regenerates (not extracts) to help make our region a better place over time. Visitors are welcomed on our terms and the experience transforms them, as they respectfully share our place as we know it to authentically be. That unique visitor experience transforms their souls, and they take with them a piece of Mulanje's history and culture, as well as indelible impression of our people and place



## COCREATION — FACILITATING AND EXCHANGING IDEAS

**Example:** Co-developing the Mulanje experiences with passionate residents and stakeholders throughout the region

## COMMUNICATION — SHARING SYMBOLIC ACTIONS AND STORYTELLING

**Example:** Highlighting meaningful stories from the Mulanje community that match selected themes.

## CONGRUENCE — COMMUNICATING THE APPROACH TO STAKEHOLDERS AND SOCIETY AT LARGE

**Example:** Re-evaluating the region's goals and reminding stakeholders that the value produced by tourism should be more than financial.

## CONTINUITY — RESPECTING HERITAGE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

**Example:** Identity research that describes the elements of Mulanje's uniqueness, which includes a combination of geography, economy, culture, history, climate and people

## COLLABORATION — CREATING AND SHARING VALUE FOR RESIDENTS AND VISITORS

**Example:** Gathering feedback about this plan from residents through roadshows and public hearings

## CONSISTENCY — DELIVERING A BETTER EXPERIENCE THROUGH SEGMENTATION AND TECHNOLOGY

**Example:** Research has provided a series of passionate communities that are relevant to Mulanje

## OUR PURPOSE

The Seventh Generation Principle is rooted in the wisdom of indigenous peoples across the world. At its essence, it highlights the importance of considering the impact of every decision and action on both people and the environment for seven generations to come. In Mulanje, we embrace this principle as our higher purpose.

As an organisation, MMCT is committed to responsible conduct, demonstrating deep care and connection to this place. Through this approach, we can affect the necessary changes to act in accordance with the Seventh Generation Principle and continue to evolve. By embracing a higher purpose, places and organisations can foster more meaningful engagement with people and establish a stronger presence within the community, leading to greater success. However, this is not our primary motivation. Purpose-driven, regenerative travel aligns with our core mission and underpins everything we do. We will integrate this purpose into our organization's planning and operations for tourism, guided by the following framework to ensure we remain on course.

## BENCHMARKS FOR MULANJE

1. **Manda Bay, Kenya:** This eco-tourism resort operates on principles of sustainability and community involvement, with a portion of profits going to support local conservation and community development initiatives.



2. **Sibuya Game Reserve, South Africa:** This wildlife reserve employs local people and works with neighboring communities to promote conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

3. **The Mosuo Culture and Ecotourism Center, China:** Located near the border of Tibet and Yunnan, this center works with the matriarchal society of the Mosuo people to promote cultural preservation and sustainable tourism practices.



4. **The Ikongo Gorilla Conservation Project, Uganda:** This project supports conservation efforts for the endangered mountain gorillas and works with local communities to promote sustainable tourism practices and alternative livelihoods. Like in Iceland, Palau or New Zealand visitors need to sign a pledge.

5. **The Tofo Beach Community-Based Tourism Project, Mozambique:** This project involves local residents in the management and development of tourism in the area, providing employment and income opportunities while promoting sustainable tourism practices.



6. **Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya:** The Ol Pejeta Conservancy is a wildlife conservancy in Kenya that has successfully implemented a regenerative tourism strategy. The conservancy uses tourism revenue to fund conservation projects, including anti-poaching efforts, wildlife research, and habitat restoration. The



conservancy also works with local communities to provide employment opportunities and support local businesses.

7. **Oi Segera Retreat in Kenya:** Segera Retreat is a luxury eco-lodge in Kenya that is committed to regenerative tourism. The retreat has implemented a range of sustainable practices, such as using solar power, rainwater harvesting, and organic farming. Segera Retreat also supports local communities by providing employment opportunities and supporting community development projects.



8. **Grootbos Private Nature Reserve in South Africa:** The Grootbos Private Nature Reserve is a nature reserve in South Africa that has implemented a successful regenerative tourism strategy. The reserve supports conservation efforts and sustainable agriculture, and it also works with local

communities to provide employment opportunities and support community development projects.

# MULANJE ANALYSIS

## TOURISM DEVELOPMENT MATRIX

Tourism development matrix Mulanje	1. Low pressure	2. Balance	3. Seasonal pressure	4. Continuous pressure
A. Mobility	Overcapacity related to demand - Expensive to manage	Infrastructure is in balance with use	Temporary congestion caused by tourism	Structural congestion and permanent damage by tourism
B. Property	Empty hotels, empty shops and houses	Capacity and use of property is in balance	Temporary pressure on pricing of real estate and holiday offerings – uniformization of housing stock	Crowding out, displacement and aggressive gentrification
C. Public Space (infrastructure)	Oversizing/ undersizing, expensive to manage and/or underdevelopment, lack of urgency.	Design of public space meets needs and is well used	Pressure on places because of overcrowding (wrong behaviour, litter, noise..)	Physical damage
D. Entertainment	Underdeveloped offerings and/o accessibility for both visitors and residents	Demand and offering in balance for both residents and visitors	Enough to do for visitors during high season and not enough for residents during the off season	Tourism entertainment replaces facilities for residents
E. Heritage	Low visitation vs high cost or lack of willingness to invest (chicken or egg situation)	Visitors contribute to management and maintenance of heritage	Cost and conservation of heritage under pressure	Permanent damage
F. Nature	No influence of visitors on nature and ecosystems	Visitors contribute to the preservation and management of nature	Pressure on fauna and flora	Nature disappears, diminishing biodiversity
G. Environment	No damage to environment and health	Visitor pressure is under control	Temporary pressure on people and environment	Damage to ecosystem, climate and health
H. Public space (impact)	Quiet public spaces	Adds dynamics to a place	Temporary disruption of a place due to visitor pressure	Total disruption of the place
I. Personal experience (impact)	No influence on daily life of individuals	Peace, calm, feeling on the right place	Nuisance of visitors interferes with your private experience	Alienation of the place



**A1** – There is of course a seasonal element as well but it seems that occupancy has had a major blow during Covid-19 pandemic

**B1** – No pressure on pricing models as a consequence of visitor pressure. Prices should go up radically for foreign visitors.

**C1** – From finding the visitor center till a lack of picknick places. Must become a major concern.

**D1** – As soon as prior experiences are defined, investments are needed

**E1** – Great opportunity to turn heritage experiences in an asset for tourism

**F2** – This is an opportunity and a pledge for turning your visitors into stewards and making them exemplary.

**G2** – Important to keep monitoring this

**H1** – Lack of public or semi-public spaces

**I2** – One of the strengths which makes Mulanje attractive if this is well managed.

## PROCESS: THREE KEY STEPS

### 1. UNDERSTANDING TOURISM'S RELATIONSHIP TO PLACE

MMCT & Place Generation have led a community-driven research effort to explore the region's place identity. The research delved deeply into site and place, examining various systems such as culture, economy, geography, climate, humanity and ecology. This grassroots research forms the foundation for this plan, as well as other tourism strategies in the Mulanje area. It aims to describe how people, both visitors and residents, perceive this place and identify gaps in their understanding. By bridging these gaps, the region and its people can evolve together.

Furthermore, we collaborated with residents from various workshops throughout the region and utilized big data analysis to develop a storytelling framework. This framework aims to harness the power of storytelling to capture the essence of this place, its place in the world, and the role of its inhabitants in shaping its evolution. The unique qualities of the Mulanje area, such as historic tea estates, climbing and hiking, distinctive flora, local culture, conservation efforts and historical events, provide the opportunity to infuse messaging with appealing and distinctive qualities. This approach offers one way to shift perceptions of the region.

### 2. DEVELOPING TOURISM IN HARMONY WITH PLACE

The alignment between visitation and place is crucial to enhance tourism's value. By acting in cooperation with the land and ecosystems, both residents and visitors can reduce the environmental costs of tourism while maintaining or even improving ecosystem health. MMCT recognises the importance of encouraging the most valuable type of tourism and, therefore, has re-evaluated its visitation goals. Instead of aiming to attract as many visitors as possible, MMCT intends to develop a process that will attract the right visitors - those who add economic, environmental, social and symbolic value to the community, staying longer and spending more. Targeting visitors with inspiring messages is more effective than using unwanted ads. Hence, a new segmentation approach prioritising the passionate interests of potential visitors is necessary.

Research into visitors' passions will reveal their attitudes, behaviours, needs and desires, and MMCT will measure the quality of their local experience. This process will help define the main themes that will act as guiding stars for development and improve communication that aligns with the region's core truths. To provide truly transformational visitor experiences, Mulanje cannot be represented by a mountain alone. Instead, the entire region benefits from uniting through common stories.

### 3. CREATE A CULTURE OF CO-EVOLUTION

The approach described here is a comprehensive and sustainable strategy for developing regenerative tourism in Mulanje. It recognizes the importance of engaging and working in partnership with the local community to create experiences that are aligned with Mulanje's values, traditions, and natural resources.

The strategy involves identifying and targeting specific niche audiences, such as Outdoor Adventurers, Cultural Explorers, and Eco-Travellers, who are likely to appreciate and respect the local culture and environment. This targeted approach can help to ensure that tourism development is both sustainable and beneficial for the local community.

A key aspect of the strategy is the co-creation of the framework with local residents, which helps to ensure that their voices and perspectives are included in the planning process. This collaborative approach can help to build trust and buy-in from the community and create a sense of ownership and pride in the tourism development.

The strategy also emphasizes the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation of residents' attitudes towards tourism and the impact of tourism development on the community and the environment. This feedback can help to guide future planning and ensure that the tourism development remains sustainable and aligned with Mulanje's values and priorities.

Overall, this strategy provides a roadmap for developing regenerative tourism that is both sustainable and aligned with the values and priorities of the local community. By engaging and collaborating with local residents, targeting specific niche audiences, and prioritizing sustainability and community benefits, Mulanje can create a tourism experience that is transformative and memorable for visitors and beneficial for the local community.

## KEY FINDINGS

### MLEZI AND MULANJE EXPERIENCE

Although Africa has a strong international travel brand, Malawi is yet to establish its own distinct reputation, as shown by online analysis. For international travellers, the Mulanje region is often viewed as a stop on a bigger journey through different countries, with Mount Mulanje being the highest peak between Drakensberg and Kilimanjaro. However, a lack of knowledge and understanding limits visitors from exploring the Mulanje region in-depth.

Unlike Malawi, Mulanje requires a different approach to build its reputation. A distinct reputation can only be built by confidently delivering a destination experience that people will remember, recognise as unique, and recommend to their friends and family.

### MULANJE'S UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Fortunately, Mulanje is home to a vault of untapped potential. Varying levels of maturity and capacity in the tourism industry indicate room for growth. Mulanje has the unique ability to lead destination development by creating eco-tourism-based experiences for modern visitors. Its ability to manage growth while delivering remarkable experiences rooted in the local identity will be the driving force in the destination's success.

### CONNECTING THE PEOPLE

Mulanje is home to villages and communities that all have their own unique flavour. Instead of dividing them into individual silos, it should be considered a strength because each place contributes to Mulanje's identity. By connecting these communities, a stronger, more robust destination brand can be created. Mulanje cannot be experienced in one single location, and the entire region can benefit by uniting its common threads. This approach will encourage broader visitation, as one location offers an invitation to visit the next. Together, the distinct communities can lift the reputation of the region as a whole, providing growth for everyone.

## ALIGNMENT WITH GLOBAL TRENDS

There is a growing trend in destinations worldwide that embraces a holistic approach and the idea that as people, we must respect the environment we are a part of. In Mulanje, where the mountains, trees, and plants are unique, exploration offers a true sense of connection to the earth. However, it must be carefully balanced. Degrading the natural environment risks weakening the bond with the environment, triggering consequences that impact the well-being of everyone in the region. Therefore, future development plans must take care to understand the land and protect and promote its vital resources.

## RISING CONCERNS ABOUT ECONOMIC LEAKAGE

Support for tourism in Mulanje is strong, as reported during consultations with local communities, chiefs, supervising chiefs, organisations, Tourism Association Mulanje, NGOs, public services, and other stakeholders. In the face of growth, current attitudes towards tourism are more positive than globally. Anyway, although job creation and revenue might be number one on the wish list, it is still imperative to ensure that development plans and target audiences align with local attitudes. The people are the living DNA of the region, and any growth in development and visitation should be seen as adding and not extracting to their quality of life within the destination.

## MARKETING

Pursuing aggressive marketing tactics to attract a high volume of tourists may seem alluring, but it is incompatible with the principles of regenerative tourism. Furthermore, investing in such promotional activities to establish Mulanje as a generic brand is impractical. Instead, it is imperative to reconsider the meaning of marketing and focus on becoming renowned for offering unique and specific experiences. Growth is crucial but Mulanje must establish itself as a destination that provides distinct and memorable activities.

# VISION, MARKETS & PRIORITIES

## VISION

We aim to create a place that fosters sustainable tourism practices, benefiting the local communities and safeguarding the environment. Our aspiration is to develop a thriving tourism industry that offers visitors one-of-a-kind and genuine experiences while preserving the region's cultural legacy and natural splendor. Our endeavors are geared towards establishing a future for Mulanje where tourism plays a vital role in enhancing the economic, social, and environmental welfare of the place and its inhabitants.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The Mlezi-framework identifies four strategic priorities that will collectively grow demand for the destination, whilst enhancing the visitor experience and increasing investment and supply. These priorities are based on a platform of stewardship to manage, develop and plan growth, whilst considering environmental, social and cultural interests.

**The four strategic priorities are:**

- 1. Target the right visitors at the right time with the right messages**
- 2. Connect with residents**
- 3. Enhance the visitor experience**
- 4. Grow capability and increase supply**

Success for us as a destination will be achieved when truly unique experiences align with Mulanje's capacity to deliver them. At that point, the Mulanje region will be recognized as a destination that travelers within our target markets must experience. To be able to understand how Mulanje is performing as a destination, an improvement of monitoring and evaluation will be undertaken.

At the same time, to enable the planning of operations Mulanje needs to achieve a greater understanding of infrastructure needs, the operating landscape and the impact of the tourism industry on the region in a more holistic way than has been done before.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY	SUCCEES CHARACTERISTIC	METHOD
<b>Target the right visitors at the right times with the right messages</b>	Increased sentiment scores for visitors of targeted audiences	Understanding and tracking visitor satisfaction levels among the target markets
	Increased visitation within passionate communities that are relevant for Mulanje	Exploring methods to measure visitation numbers and flow
	Increased average stay and expenditure by visitors within Mulanje's passionate communities	Measuring the economic impact of the sector (including visitor spend) and changes over time. Exploring opportunities to understand spend and length of stay by target market
<b>Connect with Residents</b>	Resident support, as measured through a resident network	Evaluating and monitoring residents' satisfaction with, and perceptions of, tourism in the region in order to understand our social license to operate
	Resident engagement	Exploring methods to measure resident engagement with Mulanje marketing and storytelling (i.e., social media, website and other channels)
<b>Enhance the visitor experience</b>	High visitor satisfaction, as measured through the visitor feedback	Understanding and tracking visitor satisfaction factors affecting perceptions and opportunities to enhance the visitor experience
<b>Grow capability and increase supply</b>	Sustainability or regenerative environmental practices	Tracking the number of new products or enhancements to existing products to ensure continual improvement of the region's product offering
	Increased industry capability (digital and experiential)	Monitoring digital marketing to ensure continual improvement in this area

## MARKETS

### Cultural Explorers



Cultural Explorers are travelers who are interested in having an in-depth experience. They like to take their time in order to immerse themselves into the destination in all its aspects. This often starts before the trip, in the planning phase. They want to learn about the local culture and customs, religion, history, heritage, arts scene, food, industry and more. They would rather go where the locals go than where the tourists go. Experiences designed for cultural explorers should also appeal to locals. They are frequent travelers and environmentally conscious.

Mulanje has a lot to offer for this targeted audience: rich cultural heritage including colonial history, slave trade history, local communities, crafts, culture, myths and legends, Africa's oldest tea estates.



## Outdoor Adventurers



Outdoor Adventurers are exactly that - people who like to enjoy the outdoors. They are adventurous, environmentally conscious and often have a love for sports. Outdoor adventurers like to challenge themselves but are also interested in the natural surroundings they experience. They are interested in wildlife, flora and fauna; both on land and water. Potentially Chambe could become the El Capitan of Africa for the rock climbing and free solo community. The possibilities for mountain biking seem to be enormous.

## Biophilia-Travellers



Mulanje has a unique and diverse biodiversity. The mountain is a natural wonder and the highest point between Drakensberg and Kilimanjaro.

Biophilia appeal to a diverse set of travelers, ranging in all ages and interests including the other markets identified above. Biophilia-travelers are interested in social, economic and environmental sustainability. Most biophilia-travelers seek authentic local experiences that include opportunities to give back to the host communities they visit. They often participate in 'tourism with purpose' activities. Ideally, all visitors should be eco-conscious tourists. This transition will take time and commitment from many people. Having this end-goal in mind, this ambition can drive the development of the destination.

# ACTIONS, OBJECTIVES & TIMELINE

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

### **TARGET THE RIGHT VISITORS AT THE RIGHT TIMES WITH THE RIGHT MESSAGES**

1. Redefine marketing plans and activities based on different segmentation. Markets should focus on the passionate communities. There are three for Mulanje: Biophilia Traveler, Outdoor Adventurer and Cultural Explorer.
2. Understand visitation patterns and profiles of the targeted niches ('passionate communities'). Start a pilot with one passionate community (suggested: the Biophilia niche). Evaluate the business model to best align to these target markets.
3. Collaborate with strategic partners (in Malawi and globally) to drive visitation during tourism season. Insource capacity and training for marketing.
4. Develop further the regional brand. Keep the slogan 'The island in the sky' but make it come alive with stories and story themes based on local identity.
5. Identify local storytellers and look for global influencers to raise awareness. Set up a program of sponsoring (local operators, authorities, NGO's, industry) to sponsor the cost (tickets, accommodation) of such an influencer program.
6. Develop or revamp new inspirational website with online visitor sales and service capability.
7. Select one social media channel. Close all the others. Boost online engagement, not volume. Over time: use this community will do your marketing (brand ambassadors).
8. Use the MLEZI PLEDGE as a symbolic action and create PR value out of it. Make people walk their talk.

## **CONNECT WITH RESIDENTS**

1. Develop in partnership with the communities surrounding Mount Mulanje a Memorandum of Commitment, which will be called the MLEZI PLEDGE. Use this memorandum for internal communication and education for the local population.
2. Form a Leadership Advisory Group to serve as a consultative group for the execution of the MLEZI framework. Include community leaders in this group.
3. Partner with existing organizations around Mount Mulanje and emphasize that the primary responsibility for a place strategy (tourism) lies with the people who live there.
4. Seek out local partners to disseminate visitor information about the mountain at gateways, and consider making this information available in local shops and through tourism industry channels, as modeled by Visit Scotland.
5. Implement PR and communication initiatives to highlight how MLEZI can benefit both residents and visitors, and make these benefits clear through visible mechanisms.
6. Regularly assess resident awareness by meeting with representatives.

## **ENHANCE THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE**

1. Show every visitor the MLEZI PLEDGE and offer them the opportunity to sign it. Encourage them to reflect on how special this place is and become co-stewards of it.
2. Ensure consistency by implementing existing destination development plans and giving priority to key physical improvements such as viewpoints, hides, picnic spots at trailheads, interpretive nodes, signage, and access infrastructure.
3. Improve the existing Visitor Information Centre in Mulanje by making it visible from a distance and promoting it with signage. Reimagine the Visitor Centre as an experiential destination, including options such as a café, shop, restaurant, or picnic area, and create partnerships to enhance the visitor experience.
4. Develop a user-friendly visitor app and use it not only for information, but also to enhance the visitor's experience with educational information. Promote the use of the app on the internet and through partnerships.
5. Understand and measure visitor satisfaction by using online reviews and feedback, and streamlining a survey system for service providers

6. Connect the destination experience with target markets by tailoring experiences to meet the needs of different communities, such as mountain bikers, rock climbers, and ecotourists, who have different needs and require different services.
7. Walk the talk by raising awareness of the expectations associated with labels, such as 'eco-lodge,' which come with a certain responsibility.
8. Improve touch points of the customer journey for the selected markets (passionate communities).

#### **GROW CAPABILITY & INCREASE SUPPLY**

1. Execute the MLEZI-plan. Make Tourism Association Mulanje responsible for the execution, supported and led by MMCT.
2. Review pricing models of existing tourism attractions with your partners, and consider establishing a visitor destination management fund to support the sustainable development of tourism in the region.
3. Support the industry to understand the importance of regenerative tourism, which seeks to restore and enhance the natural and cultural assets of a destination while providing economic benefits to local communities.
4. Build on relationships with well-established conservation and tourism NGOs such as African Parks and WeForest.
5. Set up and/or repeat training in marketing, hospitality, and experience design for tourism operators and service providers in the region
6. Develop toolkits to support the establishment and growth of sustainable tourism businesses in the region, including resources on business planning, marketing, and sustainability best practices.
7. Invest in lodges in local villages that create revenue and jobs for the local people. Set up a system of micro-investments.

## RECOMMENDED OBJECTIVES

These overall objectives can help to guide the development of annual planning that focuses on regenerative tourism for Mulanje in Malawi, with a strong emphasis on sustainability, community involvement, and responsible tourism practices. This list is not exhaustive.

**1. Increase awareness and interest in Mulanje as a destination for sustainable and regenerative tourism by 20% within the first two years of implementation.**

This objective can be achieved through targeted marketing campaigns and partnerships with sustainable travel organizations and influencers to promote Mulanje as a destination for responsible tourism.

- KPI: Increase in website traffic to Mulanje tourism website.
- Metric: Number of unique visitors to the website before and after the marketing campaign.
- KPI: Increase in social media engagement.
- Metric: Number of likes, comments, and shares on social media posts related to Mulanje tourism before and after the marketing campaign.

**2. Increase the number of sustainable tourism businesses in Mulanje by 25% within the first four years of implementation.**

This objective can be achieved by providing resources and support to local entrepreneurs and businesses to encourage the development of sustainable tourism products and services.

- KPI: Number of new sustainable tourism businesses established.
- Metric: Number of new businesses registered with the local tourism board within the first two years of implementation.
- KPI: Number of local entrepreneurs and business owners trained in sustainable tourism practices.
- Metric: Number of participants in capacity-building programs and training workshops.

**3. Implement sustainable tourism practices in at least 75% of existing tourism businesses in Mulanje within the first five years of implementation.**

This objective can be achieved through capacity-building programs and incentives for existing tourism businesses to adopt sustainable tourism practices, such as waste reduction and responsible water usage.

- KPI: Percentage of existing tourism businesses implementing sustainable tourism practices.
- Metric: Number of businesses that have implemented sustainable tourism practices as a percentage of all tourism businesses in Mulanje.
- KPI: Reduction in waste and water usage in tourism businesses.
- Metric: Amount of waste and water usage before and after the implementation of sustainable tourism practices.

**4. Increase the percentage of tourism revenue that benefits local communities by 20% within the first four years of implementation.**

This objective can be achieved by implementing community-based tourism initiatives and working with local communities to ensure that they receive a fair share of the economic benefits of tourism.

- KPI: Percentage of tourism revenue staying in the local community.
- Metric: Amount of revenue generated by tourism businesses that stays in the local community, as a percentage of total tourism revenue generated in Mulanje.
- KPI: Number of community-based tourism initiatives established.
- Metric: Number of tourism initiatives developed in partnership with local communities, such as homestays and cultural tours.



**5. Monitor and measure the environmental and social impacts of tourism in Mulanje and implement strategies to mitigate any negative impacts within the first five years of implementation.**

This objective can be achieved through regular monitoring and evaluation of the destination's sustainability performance and the implementation of strategies to address any negative impacts identified.

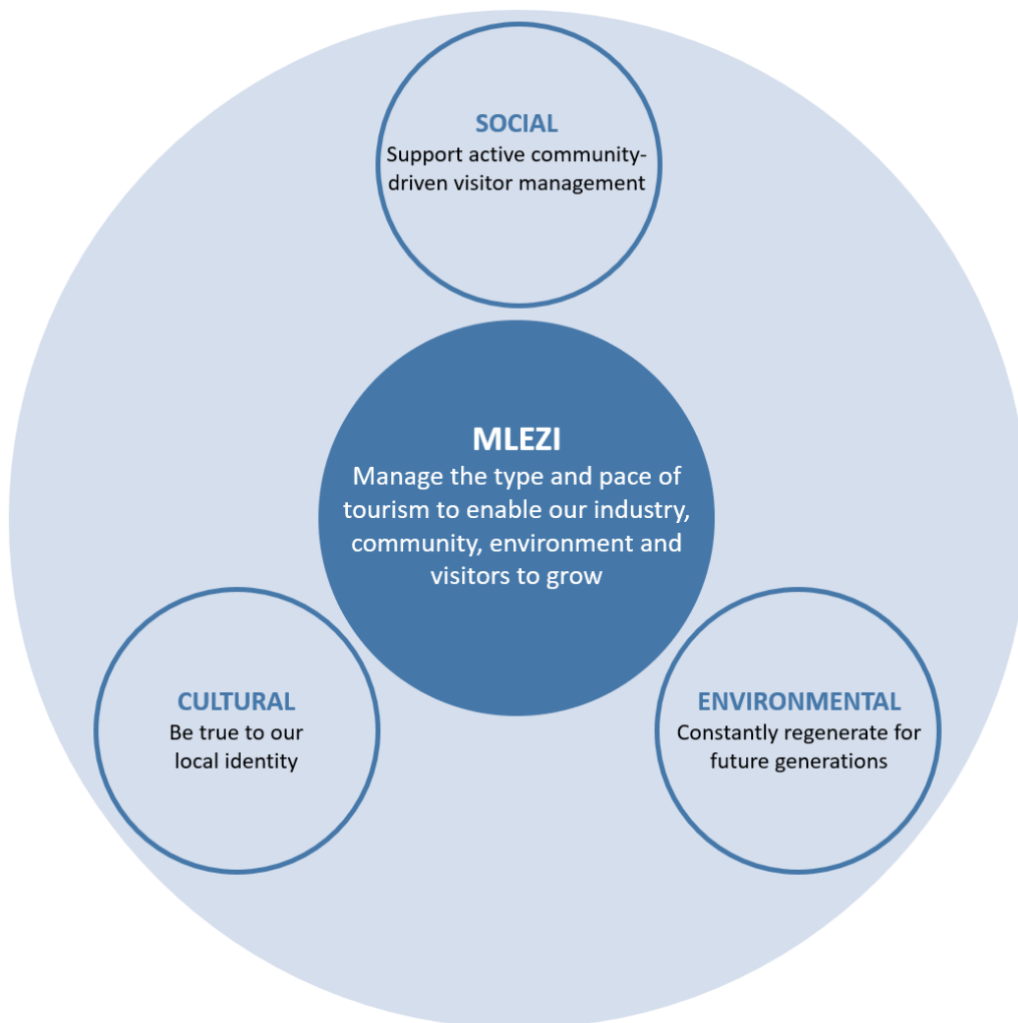
- KPI: Reduction in negative environmental and social impacts of tourism.
- Metric: Amount of reduction in environmental and social impacts identified through monitoring and evaluation.
- KPI: Number of sustainable tourism practices adopted by tourism businesses.
- Metric: Number of tourism businesses that have adopted sustainable tourism practices identified through monitoring and evaluation

## TIMELINE





# MLEZI: RESPONSIBLE TOURISM



## ACTIONS

### **CONNECT VISITORS WITH RESPONSIBLE TOURISM.**

Help people make informed choices by choosing and rewarding responsible operators — those who contribute to regenerative tourism. Select organisations that protect and preserve nature, wildlife and cultural heritage, as well as those that collaborate with local people. Support businesses that prioritize sustainability and invest in local guides that observe regional laws and customs. Give money to environment-friendly establishments that work not only towards sustainability but, more importantly, towards regeneration and restoration.

**LEAD BY EXAMPLE.**

The Mount Mulanje region needs to walk its talk. This region is quintessentially Malawi, yet it delivers a unique experience and needs to fulfil its particular promises. The MLEZI Pledge is one example. Communication about the pledge must become more compelling and actions stricter to support the values that it represents. MLEZI should be a critical aspect of touchpoints like trails, entry points and accommodations.

**COMMUNICATE YOUR INTENTIONS.**

It will be important to make your purpose for tourism visible in physical spaces where tourists visit. Items like road and trail signage or restaurant placemats and menus could be useful communication tools. Staff members must also support these stated intentions through their actions and attitudes.

**ACT LOCALLY AND THINK GLOBALLY.**

This is about more than regenerative tourism and giving back to the local community. It also means giving visitors from around the world unique experiences that might transform them. Consider the right visitors for Mulanje. The region needs to draw tourists who will visit local businesses and taste authentic food. The right visitors for Mulanje will explore local shops, support local trade and buy locally made crafts.

**INTEGRATE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS.**

The United Nations has set out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to improve the quality of life for people and the health of the environment. Some SDGs are more urgent for Mulanje than others. The region can work toward the most relevant goals while communicating its relative strengths.

### **CONSIDER RECOVERY TAX.**

A growing number of people want to protect and restore ecosystems as they travel, and they are becoming more conscious of environmental sensitivities and resilience. Raise awareness among visitors of the importance and contribution of restorative work in the region. Make sure visitors know exactly where their tourism taxes are invested in supporting restoration.

### **RETHINK TOURISM EXPERIENCES.**

Focus on the unique qualities of place and expand the definition of “experience” beyond stereotypes like swimming pools, cocktails and big entertainment events.

Mulanje can take inspiration from Scandinavian countries that protect and value resources that contribute to incredible experiences: clean air, starry nights, silence, natural healing, biophilia, connection to trees and so on. If these fragile attributes are damaged they will be difficult to restore.

### **ENGAGE THE NEXT SOURCE GENERATION.**

Involve young people in the process whenever possible. Their perspectives can spark new ways of doing business and can help the region communicate and develop better experiences. For example, hospitality students already know so much about locally produced food. Young adults are becoming global citizens and can often teach older generations about food security, mobility and sustainability, rather than the other way around. These are just the kind of people who are needed to help Mulanje navigate the future.

### **SUSTAINABLE SOUVENIRS.**

Souvenirs are part of any travel experience, but people need to know what they buy and where it comes from. Traceability becomes just as important as how attractive the items appear to be.

### **HELP VISITORS CHOOSE REGENERATIVE ACTIVITIES.**

Look for enjoyable activities that do not pollute or use energy. Locals can encourage visitors to join activities — such as tree planting, forest cleanups and arts and culture festivals — that have immediate restorative and regenerative effects.

**BE COUNTERINTUITIVE.**

When Wonderful Copenhagen wrote its four- year destination strategy called The End of Tourism as We Know It, the goal was to create harmony between residents and visitors. It also was a cunning PR stunt that signaled the time to stop and take a moment to reposition tourism. The strategy changed the tone of the conversation, brought new stakeholders to the table and bought the destination time to develop a new direction.

# CONCLUSION

This is a comprehensive strategy for the entire Mount Mulanje region, encompassing not only Mulanje itself, aimed at utilizing tourism as a driving force for regional growth.

Designed as a framework, this strategy provides clear direction on how tourism in Mulanje should evolve over the next eight years. In order to grow in a responsible manner, the approach chosen is regenerative tourism.

Through a series of meetings, workshops, and focus groups involving stakeholders, communities, and traditional leaders, we have developed a framework that envisions the responsible and conscious growth of Mulanje. Our overarching goal is to foster regenerative and restorative tourism, promoting economic development and job creation while benefiting the local community and preserving the region's fauna and flora for future generations.

The framework recommends reimagining tourism experiences, tapping into untapped potential, and shifting the focus towards a high-quality visitor segment characterized by their inherent respect for the environment and local population. Such a change in approach necessitates not only investments but also a paradigm shift within the tourism industry itself, as visitors will hold us accountable for aligning actions with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promoting eco-friendliness, and minimizing economic leakage.

At a practical level, numerous suggestions have been made to prioritize next steps, establish a Mulanje pledge, invest directly in local initiatives, and enhance touchpoints along the customer journey to cater to specific niche markets. These niches include the biophilia niche (nature lovers), outdoor adventurers (rock climbing and mountain biking enthusiasts), and cultural explorers seeking to engage with local communities and experience the region's heritage and traditions.

The successful execution of the plans derived from this framework necessitates a new form of governance, with the local tourism association assuming ownership of the strategy and receiving guidance from an advisory board. Marketing efforts should be finely tailored to target audiences as defined within the framework.

The plan's name, MLEZI, resonates strongly with the concept of a regenerative approach. It closely aligns with the English word "stewardship," signifying the commitment to care for the place of origin, encompassing the well-being of residents, visitors, and the environment alike.