

## **Eco-Tourism for Environmental Conservation and Community Livelihoods Around Budongo Forest in Masindi District, Western Uganda**

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**Abstract:** A study to investigate the effectiveness of eco-tourism in achieving the goal of environmental conservation and improved community livelihoods was conducted from January to May 2007 in Busingiro eco-tourism site, South Western part of Budongo Forest Reserve. Questionnaires and direct interviews were administered to 60 households and 10 key informants from the parishes of Biiso, Kihungia, Nyantonzi and Nyabyeya. The results show that the majority of the respondents are aware and benefit from the eco-tourism activities at Busingiro eco-tourism site. The benefits are in form of employment opportunities, local tourist guidance, income generation from handcraft and entertainment industry and social corporate financial support to rural development programmes. The local community (82%) indicated that the sensitisation process in promoting eco-tourism in Budongo forest reserve has been effective and has reduced the incidences of illegal activities in the forest reserve. The findings of this study have revealed that there is an urgent need to increase local people participation in eco-tourism projects by emphasising education in hotel, tour operation and management skills and provision of training in artisan industry. Private sector investment in eco-tourism should be encouraged to operate with concessions from the government of Uganda.

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**Key words:** Local communities, sensitization, tourism, forest reserve, rural development program, Uganda

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is widely believed to be the most rapidly growing global industry and the World Tourism Organisation predicts that international tourism will grow at approximately, 4% per year through the year 2010 (Kirstges, 2002). As such, it has a major and increasing impact on both people and nature. Effects can be negative as well as positive. Inappropriate tourism development and practice can degrade habitats and landscapes, deplete natural resources and generate waste and pollution. In contrast, responsible tourism can help to generate awareness of and support for conservation and local culture and create economic opportunities for countries and communities. WWF is taking action to reduce negative impacts and to encourage responsible tourism that enhances not only the quality of life but also natural and cultural resources in destinations (Infield, 1988).

According to Valentine (1993), while it is difficult to measure eco-tourism, it is one of the fastest growing segments of tourism. There is considerable debate over what eco-tourism really means. Sometimes it is used

simply to identify a form of tourism, where the motivation of visitors and the sales pitch to them, centres on the observation of nature. Increasingly, this general sector of the market is called nature tourism. Eco-tourism, however, requires a proactive approach that seeks to mitigate the negative and enhance the positive impacts of nature tourism (Mader, 2002).

Eco-tourism can transform rural communities and these ventures generate income and encourage conservation of natural resources. On the other hand, local governance issues and the control of natural resources determine the extent to which local communities or outside agencies benefit from tourism revenues. However, communities living adjacent to protected areas such as forest reserves often do not believe in conservation policies as being efficient (Ross and Wall, 1999) and as such, their attitudes are likely to affect the effectiveness of eco-tourism in achieving its conservation objectives. It is against this background that the study was based.

A recent trend in eco-tourism is the increasing involvement and investment of local communities

(Wallace and Pierce, 1996). There was a time, when people were perceived as the primarily agents of environmental degradation and hence, the conservationist's sought to prohibit people from using the land in order to preserve it and its wildlife. Small native communities were forced to leave their ancestral land in the name of protection. Recent developments show a change in strategy whereby local communities now have an economic stake in sustaining the land and wildlife (Mader, 2002).

Many studies (Ross and Walls, 1999; Wallace and Pierce, 1996; Zurick, 1992) show that eco-tourism can bring new restrictions or more rigorous enforcement of existing legislation that protects species and their habitats and unaccustomed government interference in local activities may breed widespread resentment among residents. It may also, bring about social changes, such as the exchange of traditional roles for unconventional ones, which disrupt the social hierarchy in the local communities. The research objectives were therefore to: explore the effectiveness of eco-tourism in achieving the goal of environmental conservation, assess the local communities' awareness and understanding of eco-tourism, determine the level of local involvement in the management of the Busingiro eco-tourism site and assess the contribution of eco-tourism to the neighbouring communities.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Study area:** Budongo Central Forest Reserve is the largest surviving natural forest in Uganda with a total surface area of 825 km<sup>2</sup>. It straddles across three districts of Masindi, Hoima and the newly created Bulisa district. This is a true forest with very little illegal activity and encroachment that has ensured that the forest remains as natural indeed intended it to be. Professionally preserved and managed by the National Forestry Authority, the forest is divided into three zones. Its strict nature reserve is the oldest in the country, while its buffer zone allows eco-tourism and research to prosper and its production zone caters for commercial activities.

Busingiro Eco-Tourism Site is located in the South Western part of Budongo Forest Reserve. This area is a habitat for several primate species including chimpanzees, monkeys and baboons. However, the chimpanzees in Busingiro are not yet habituated for visitor tracking. Mahogany iron wood, fig trees, stranglers and a host of medicinal trees form a bulk of floral species in this seemingly untouched natural forest.

Birds, butterflies, reptiles, small mammals and other micro-organisms form the eco system that makes this particular site enviable. There is the proverbial royal mile,

which is one of the highlights of Busingiro. The Royal Mile is a stretch of one mile with a collection of all the tree species in Budongo Forest Reserve. Activities in Busingiro include forest walks, bird watching, primate identification, conservation education, research and butterfly identification, among others. There is a primate research station on the site of an old sawmill at Sonso. The forest trails at this site are well developed and well maintained for tourist purposes.

**Data collection and analysis:** Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. A structured questionnaire consisting of both open and close-ended questions based on a set of questions in relation to the study objectives was administered to solicit information from household individuals. Likewise, a checklist was prepared for gathering information from key informants. Semi structured, open-ended interviews were conducted in the local language. Notes were taken during interviews and those notes were then written up in narrative form. Secondary information was obtained through an extensive literature review to establish the involvement of local communities in the management of eco-tourism sites, opportunities as well as challenges and what had been happening elsewhere in relation to eco-tourism activities. The information obtained was supplemented with field observations where some areas were visited to appreciate the real situation on the ground with regard to various eco-tourism activities related to forest use.

Data were collected in two phases; the reconnaissance survey of Budongo and Biiso sub-counties of Masindi district and the actual field survey. Permission to conduct research in Budongo CFR was sought from NFA to carry out data collection in the four parishes of Nyantonzi, Biiso, Kihungia and Nyabyeya. In all, the survey covered sixty households to whom the questionnaire was administered and ten key informants, who included one sector manager, two forest supervisors, one eco-tourism officer, one district forest officer, four Local Council Chairpersons and one officer from Jane Goodall Institute, which is in charge of Busingiro Eco-tourism site. The data collected were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) programme where, both inferential and descriptive analysis were carried out.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Household socio-economic characteristics:** The survey results show that majority (77%) of the people in the study area practise subsistence farming as their main economic activity. Only 8% is employed in the civil

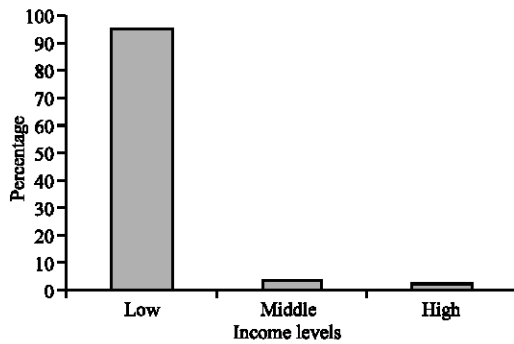


Fig. 1: Levels of household incomes

service, while 10% are engaged in petty trade. The remaining 5% are occupied by other activities such hunting and illegal harvesting of forest products. This implies that the local communities heavily depend the forest reserve for their livelihoods through involvement in eco-tourism activities or direct harvesting of forest products.

The rapid income assessment was made and the findings reveal that the average annual household incomes in the study area are considerably low with 95% of the households being low income earners, 3% medium income level, while only 2% have a high income level as shown in Fig. 1. To supplement their incomes, local residents have adopted diversified livelihood strategies, some of which have undesirable impact on the forest reserve.

The majority (62%) of the respondents of were males and the rest (38%) were females. Out of the sixty residents interviewed, a bigger (85%) were married, 8% divorced, while 7% were single. About 10% of the respondents had not attained formal education and the majority (67%) attained primary education, while 20% completed secondary school and 3% attained university education. Such a level of education is a hindrance to people's perceptive of the usefulness of eco-tourism activities. The implication is that given the low levels of education, local communities have a negative perception of eco-tourism. Secondly, they are compelled to do low paying jobs and supplement their incomes by participating in activities that have an adverse environmental impacts.

#### Awareness of eco-tourism activities at Busingiro site:

The majority of respondents (75%) were aware of the eco-tourism project in Busingiro and minority (25%) were not aware either due to the fact that they have no interest in the project or due to the government policy of controlled harvesting of forest products, which has hindered their forestry based businesses. The local communities have been exposed to different forms of

Table 1: Sensitisation given to the local people

| Kind of sensitisation                                   | Frequency | %   |
|---|-----------|-----|
| Conservation of Budongo CFR                             | 31        | 52  |
| Avoid poaching and illegal harvesting of forest produce | 11        | 18  |
| Attitude towards visitors/tourists                      | 8         | 13  |
| Importance of forest products and animals               | 6         | 10  |
| Benefits of eco-tourism                                 | 4         | 7   |
| Total   | 60        | 100 |

sensitisation as summarised in Table 1. These results are in agreement with the responses got from all the key informants who indicated that there was some form of sensitisation given to the local people on eco-tourism.

These results from the household survey indicate that conservation of Budongo CFR was the most common type of sensitization given to the local population. This is important because tourist make Uganda their destination because of its natural endowment and beauty, which should be safeguarded seriously by all Ugandans. Any sensitisation devoid of nature conservation would be ill-fated. Those, who indicated that they had been sensitised about illegal activities, which includes hunting of wild animals found in the forest revealed that they had been warned against illegal activities in the forest and the consequences if caught in the act. Budongo is known for chimpanzee tracking, birding, other primates like monkeys, baboons, mahogany and other tree species. Anybody threatening their existence is considered illicit.

Respondents, who were sensitised about handling of tourists reported that they attended workshops conducted in the country in relation to developing community tourism products. The local communities were trained in setting up tourism craft shops and producing other products, which can attract tourists to spend money within their localities. Sensitisation on the importance of forest products and animals has also been done. This is according to six respondents interviewed. Finally, 7% indicated that they have been sensitised to the benefits of eco-tourism and this is evidenced by the mushrooming of craft shops in the trading centres neighbouring the forest.

The organizations participating in eco-tourism included: Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), The Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Industry (MTTI), an NGO called CARE, forestry students from Makerere University Forestry Students, Secondary Schools especially during geography lessons, Tourism Association and Peace Corps volunteers.

#### Effectiveness of the sensitisation process in promoting eco-tourism:

The majority of respondents (82%) indicated that the sensitisation process in promoting eco-tourism in Budongo forest reserve has been effective and has reduced the incidences of illegal activities in the forest reserve. Only five respondents (8%) stated that the

Table 2: Effectiveness of the sensitisation process in promoting eco-tourism

| View                  | Frequency | %   |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----|
| It has been effective | 49        | 82  |
| Not effective         | 05        | 08  |
| Not very sure         | 06        | 10  |
| Total                 | 60        | 100 |

Table 3: Benefits of eco-tourism to the local population

| Benefit   | Yes       |    | No        |    |
|---|-----------|----|-----------|----|
|   | Frequency | %  | Frequency | %  |
| Establishment of hotels   | 51        | 85 | 9         | 15 |
| Employment in the tourism industry                                    | 49        | 82 | 11        | 18 |
| Source of foreign exchange  | 37        | 65 | 23        | 35 |
| Development of the rural areas  | 40        | 67 | 20        | 37 |
| Linkages with the education sector                                    | 45        | 75 | 15        | 25 |
| Development of the local market                                       | 50        | 83 | 10        | 17 |
| Others (medicinal plants, control of soil erosion, reliable rainfall) | 06        | 10 | 54        | 90 |

process has not been effective and reported that the local communities have not heeded the sensitisation and awareness campaign, which is why they are still acting contrary to the laws on protection of the environment. Six of the respondents (10%) could not commit themselves and instead reported that they were not very sure about the effectiveness of the sensitisation process (Table 2).

These results, however, create some doubt, whether majority of the respondents were practising, what they had been taught because most of the local people can hardly acknowledge their involvement in illegal activities carried out in the forest reserves. Moreover, the presence of some snares at the eco-tourism site indicates that some people are still involved in illegal activities like trapping of animals in the forest reserve. On a good note, however, all the respondents agreed the rate at which, the chimpanzees are interfered with has greatly reduced these days. The information obtained from the key informants also revealed that there has been a remarkable decline in illegal activities taking place in Budongo CFR.

**Benefits of eco-tourism to the local population:** The local communities benefit directly through employment in the tourism sector or indirectly through the sale of goods and services to the tourists and other employees within the tourism sector (Table 3). The benefits of eco-tourism for local communities can be broadly categorised as economic, socio-cultural and physical. The most direct economic benefits are the improvements in employment and income. It is recognised that local communities living near the eco-tourism site have generally low incomes. Hence, eco-tourism provides a viable economic option for such communities. Before eco-tourism gained popularity, the extraction of natural resources for the purpose of economic development such as forest logging and land clearing for agricultural were the major sources of income for these communities yet such activities can lead to environmental degradation.

The most frequently mentioned benefit to the local population is the growth in the hotel business as a result of the thriving eco-tourism in the area. Hotels and guest houses been constructed recently in Masindi to respond to the pressures of the increase in visitors to the forest reserve.

As the Uganda Wildlife Authority intensify its sensitisation and awareness campaigns to make local community responsive to the demands of the tourism, small scale commercial enterprises are springing up to the advantage of the local population. This emergence of the local markets has been a great achievement in the local communities. Another benefit is employment in those businesses related to tourism. Though, very few people are employed at Busingiro Eco-tourism site, many people are employed in these hotels and other guest houses that have been constructed in the town. In this way the local population is benefiting very much from eco-tourism activity.

Other benefits were realised in form of the linkage with the education sector, whereby many respondents revealed that they get the money for payment of their children's school fees directly from their jobs in the tourism sector. Others reported that some tourists are generous and extend sponsorship to bright but poor children to pursue their education. Therefore, the linkage between the tourism industry and education sector should be noted. It was also noted, during the survey that two primary schools, one in Nyabyeya and another in Kihungia parishes have been renovated as a result of remittance from eco-tourism activities in the area.

The establishment of Busingiro eco-tourism site has also lead to the development of rural areas to urban centres. This is because places, which were previously inhabitable now have facilities like electricity, water, roads. Foreign exchange earnings as another benefit was mostly mentioned especially by those who had attained some formal education, as it is well known that the tourism industry is a topic in geography classes and students are normally taught that the tourists bring in the much needed foreign exchange required for development.

Other benefits mentioned during the study included varied sources of tree species, which are sources of medicine to the local communities, control of soil erosion and availability of reliable rainfall as a result of the existence of Budongo CFR. Besides protecting the environment, eco-tourism can also help transform local communities in a positive manner. In fact, it has been argued that local community participation or community-based eco-tourism is the essence of eco-tourism sustainability. It should therefore, be acknowledged the participation of the local community for the development and sustainability of eco-tourism. This is because, the

local communities are the direct recipients from eco-tourism; it is only relevant that local communities play an active role in the planning, development and management process.

Eco-tourism, on the other hand, encourages responsible travel to natural areas that safeguards the integrity of the ecosystem and produces economic benefits for the local communities that can encourage conservation. Thus, eco-tourism is a more sustainable development strategy, protecting the ecosystem and at the same time serving as an income and also employment provider for the local community (Wight, 2002).

With regards to socio-cultural benefits, since ecotourists are travellers seeking unique and authentic travel experiences, there is an added incentive for local communities to retain their traditional heritage and lifestyles for long-term viability. These include the preservations of religious architecture and symbols, rituals and ceremonies, arts and crafts and even music and dance. Finally, the most direct physical benefits are the conservation of the environment. Conservation will help prevent inappropriate development and practice that will lead to degradation of habitats and landscapes, depletion of natural resources and contribute to waste and pollution.

During the study, the local communities were asked, whether they work at the eco-tourism site. The response revealed that 78% of the people interviewed do not work at the site, which leaves only 22% of the local people employed at the site. Out of these thirteen respondents (22%), who indicated that they were employed at the eco-tourism site, 8% research as guides and 92% as casual labourers.

**Culturally negative impacts of eco-tourism:** The study revealed several unquantifiable negative cultural impacts that are associated with eco-tourism activities in the area. These negatives impacts include: cultural deformation on local dressing. With tourism, local culture has changed drastically and it now common to see people in putting up western attire. Cultural conflicts have been reported in the local communities for example, wearing very short dresses and embarrasses local people. Lack or poor of a cultural binding code, which could dictate on what and how people should dress in the country may have contributed this.

The incomes obtained from tourism activities is associated with changes in consumption pattern whereby some men use the money to purchase alcohol. Excessive consumption of alcohol is associated with developing new relationships outside marriages and abandoning other family responsibilities. Peace and harmony in the

families is therefore, threatened and the families are vulnerable to sexual transmitted disease such as HIV/AIDS infections.

**Challenges facing Busingiro eco-tourism site:** One of the objectives of the study was to find out the challenges facing the eco-tourism site. As mentioned by some key informants, Busingiro eco-tourism site is located at the Southern periphery of Budongo CFR. This puts it in close proximity to the adjacent communities, which renders it vulnerable to human activities related to encroachment. These in turn have negative impacts on Eco-tourism.

The Chimpanzee groups at Busingiro have not been habituated. They pose a risk to both the visitors and the local communities since they are not used to human presence. This also denies, the site of the much regarded flagship species as an attraction. Another major challenge facing this particular eco-tourism site is that the visitor facilities at the site are inadequate and in disrepair. As a result, many potential visitors are discouraged from visiting the site. Important still is the fact that the visitor services such as guiding and information delivery still leave a lot to be desired.

The site has concentrated on bird watching and forest walks as the prime activities. These activities may not attract adequate numbers of visitors to make eco-tourism at Busingiro eco-tourism site economically viable. The local communities adjacent to the site are not organized enough to benefit from the visitor flows in terms of souvenir sales, service provision and entertainment of visitors.

## CONCLUSION

A random survey of the structural characteristics of the study area shows that the local communities in all the parishes neighbouring Busingiro eco-tourism site have low levels of education and relatively large families. The main economic activity in all the four survey parishes is subsistence farming and their income levels are generally low. This is likely to increase their dependence on natural resources particularly, the neighbouring Budongo forest reserve.

The majority of the respondents were aware of eco-tourism activities at Busingiro eco-tourism site. All the respondents had received different forms of sensitisation and awareness on the value of conservation of nature, but conservation of Budongo CFR was the most common among the respondents. Most of this sensitisation had been done by UWA.

The effectiveness of the sensitisation process is held high among the local population and they reported

reduced incidences of illegal activities in the forest reserve. Eco-tourism benefits both the local people and the entire nation in different ways. At macro level, eco-tourism fosters economic growth, foreign exchange earnings and increase the state revenue distribution and balancing regional development. At the micro level, there has been an improvement in the people's well-being in areas of job creation and revenue generation. The study also revealed that local tourism has not been developed in all the four parishes. Specifically from Busingiro eco-tourism site, a very small percentage (22%) of the local population has benefited in form of employment. Despite the low number of the respondents employed in the tourism industry, the local people support the idea of conservation of forests in their area. All respondents interviewed unanimously answered that they support the idea of nature conservation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Training programs should target the communities that already experienced in the delivery of eco-tourism products. Funding for training to experienced communities, such as those living close to forest reserves and creating apprenticeship programs that offer hands-on experience to trainees will help to inspire greater interest and commitment to the learning process than the use of foreign consultant trainers.

Utilize the existing, local eco-tourism industry in the training process. Too often experienced local businesses are not asked to assist in the training of people from local communities. Qualified, local trip leaders from the private sector can provide an important link to communities and perform the work of outside consultants with much more depth and responsiveness than foreign consultants. Their knowledge of how to research with tourists in the local context, deal with emergencies, trouble shoot and manage special visitor issues related to the local ecosystem can help the native guides to better understand the entire process of group management.

The Government of Uganda should consider promoting private sector investment in eco-tourism. The professional tourism institution of learning should be

expanded if possible and the private sector should be encouraged to operate with concessions from the government of Uganda.

The government through the NFA should put a body to regulate and govern the local people in pricing their locally made products so that they are not exploited by middlemen and the tourists. For example some of the local people do not know the value of the dollar like wise the foreigners to not know the value of the local currency hence, exploitation of each other. National Forestry Authority should be adequately funded to fulfil its objectives of conservation of natural forests. The Law enforcement unit in NFA should be enforced so as to reduce on the loss caused by the illegal acts.

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