

Seminar on Planning, Development and Management of Ecotourism in Africa

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Development of ecotourism in protected and other natural areas of Uganda: The case of the Budongo Forest Reserve

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1.0 Introduction

Protected areas such as national parks, forest reserves, game reserves and existing cultural manifestations play an important role in the world economy. The value of these resources may be realised through tourism, protection of biodiversity, watersheds, soils, maintenance of climatic stability and preservation of cultural identity. The resources are also of great economic and socio-cultural value especially to the local communities living around them.

Tourism has been defined by Mathieson and Wall (1982) as the temporary movement of persons to destinations outside the normal home and workplace, activities undertaken during the stay and facilities created to cater for the needs of tourists.

In recent years however, a considerable amount of interest has been directed towards ecotourism as an alternative form of tourism (Fennell and Smale, 1992). This has emerged in response to the growing dissatisfaction with mass tourism and its associated environmental impacts. The most popular activities in ecotourism are trekking/hiking, bird watching, nature photography, wildlife safaris, camping, mountain climbing, fishing, river rafting/canoeing and botanical study.

Ecotourism can be characterised by three main features:

- ◆ attracting tourists to natural environments which are unique and accessible,
- ◆ improving nature conservation through education, changing attitudes in local people and governments, community development and alter political priorities and
- ◆ Providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for local people.

2.0 Institutional frameworks

Policy issues, which are important in tourism development, include:

- The interests of the communities;
- The balance between tourism benefit and social impact;
- The re-investment of net gain from tourism to benefit both the product and the environment; and
- The full coordination of public and private sector goals.

The general aim of Government of Uganda therefore is to develop the tourism sector of the economy to the maximum extent possible, consistent with the protection of environmental and cultural values, as a means of generating wealth, foreign exchange, create employment for the local Ugandans, as well as fostering national and international cooperation. Our approach to tourism development is through professional planning which optimises the benefits from tourism and permits or at least mitigates any problems that might be generated, it also ensures sustainability.

3.0 Uganda's biodiversity

Uganda is one of the world's important biodiversity areas. The country covers several major ecological zones, for example, moist equatorial forest, thorn savanna, papyrus swamps and Great Lakes. Uganda's Tropical High Forests are one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the tropical world. About 20,000 plant species exist, of which 4000 are flowering plants. Due to their diversity in food and habitats, Uganda's forests are also rich in birdlife for example: eight families, 345 genera and over 1000 species have been listed of which 33% are entirely found in forest areas. Uganda's forests also support such rare species as the Mountain Gorilla.

4.0 Background to the Ecotourism Project

The concept of the recreational use of Uganda's forests date back to the formulation of the subsector's overall policy. One of the guiding principles of the current forest policy developed in 1993 is that forests should be managed for production, recreation, amenity, tourism and education. So several forests have been developed for non-consumptive uses like ecotourism to provide an income to both Government and local communities.

In 1988, the Forest Department started to reassess its management of Uganda's forest estate, with the initiation of the Forest Rehabilitation Programme. Previous management had tended to emphasise timber extraction. With a new programme, a decision was made to dedicate half of the forest estates to protective management for conservation, and other half for timber production. This change in policy had the objective of achieving a more balanced approach to the management of Uganda's High Tropical forests. The conservation value of Uganda's forests was recognised, as was the potential of other income generating uses of forests, especially non-consumptive uses such as ecotourism. In the new policy, the importance of involving local people in managing forests was officially recognised for the first time.

The objectives for ecotourism development include the introduction of recreational activity as one aspect of sustainable resource use within gazetted forest reserves; increase public awareness of the outstanding variety and beauty within Uganda's forests; foster a general public understanding of the relationship between environmental conservation and tourism development.

Currently, there are five operational ecotourism sites in Uganda's forests: two in Budongo, one in Mabira, Ntanda and Mpanga forests. However there are some ecotourism centres in some of Uganda's National Parks and Swamps as well.

4.1 CASE STUDY "ECOTOURISM IN BUDONGO FOREST RESERVE"

Budongo Forest Reserve, in North Western Uganda, was gazetted in 1932. The reserve, which is a mixture of tropical high forest with a large population of mahoganies and savanna grasslands and woodland, covers 825 km², making it Uganda's biggest forest reserve. It is of exceptional biodiversity importance, ranking third in overall importance in the country. So far, 465 tree species, 366 bird species, 289 butterfly species and 130 species of large moth have been recorded. The forest also contains the largest population of wild chimpanzees in Uganda estimated at between 600 and 800.

In 1991, it was recognised by the Forest Department that there were some serious threats facing Budongo Forest Reserve in the form of illegal pitsawing, in addition the official logging proposals were also causing concern. Of particular concern was the Kaniyo Pabidi area in the north east of the forest, which had never been logged or subjected to arboricide treatment and is therefore ecologically viable. There was limited amount of pitsawing activity there, and a local saw mill was developing plans to log the area. It was decided that Kaniyo Pabidi be developed for ecotourism, while the increased presence of people would facilitate the control of illegal pitsawing and would also prevent the area being logged.

The main objective of developing the Budongo Forest Ecotourism site was to encourage conservation of the forest reserve at a local level by:

- Improving the socio-economic status of the local people by maximising their financial return from ecotourism;
- Increasing the local communities' involvement in the management of the forest reserve;
- Deterring illegal use of the forest by increasing presence of people involved in legal use;
- Increasing the knowledge and awareness of the local communities about forest conservation, through an education and extension service.

One other objective was to encourage conservation of the forest reserve at a national level by:

- Increasing the returns to the Government from the forest reserve by establishing sustainable tourism;
- Raising the national profile of the forests by increasing the number of tourism circuits in Uganda;
- Encouraging Ugandans to visit the forest.

Consultations were done with the communities surrounding Budongo Forest to solicit opinions at village level through a community interview process. Tour operators who were potentially interested in ecotourism were interviewed at length. A questionnaire was distributed amongst tourists to the Budongo Forest to ascertain their interests and needs. Then in 1994 ecotourism started in Budongo Forest Reserve.

Since the inception of the project, there has been a positive trend in tourism arrivals and receipts at the forest reserve (See Table below showing arrivals and revenue generated from Budding ecotourism sites).

Year	No. of Visitors	Revenue in Ug. Shs.
1994	354	1,669,500
1995	806	7,060,500
1996	858	8,860,050
1997	1,043	11,617,500
1998	1,327	15,631,000
1999	1,086	13,137,000
2000	967	10,525,100

4.2 Ecotourism and the conservation of wildlife and habitat

The policy of managing this protected area is that any development in the area must support conservation. At the same time the project must show signs of sustainability within a period of five years. This means both economic sustainability and sustainability in terms of the conservation of the forest and having local people managing the tourist sites with the Forest Department undertaking an advisory role only. Policies and regulations on the management of ecotourism in forests have been incorporated in the Management plan of Budongo Forest Reserve.

In order to limit negative environmental impacts in pristine areas like the Budongo forest reserve, it is necessary to put in place a visitor quota. In light of this, a maximum of people in a group is allowed to go for chimpanzee tracking or nature walks at specific times of the day. The ecotourism programme is aimed at attracting a small number of affluent tourists who can spend more and stay longer than the conventional tourists.

As a result of the ecotourism development in Budongo, illegal activities have reduced tremendously. While the community's standard of living has improved. Harvesting of forest resources on sustainable basis is also encouraged. Local participation has helped to achieve sustainable ecotourism development

in Budongo forest reserve. Local environmental education programmes have been important in making local populations appreciate the importance of sustainable ecotourism development.

It should be realised that the development of ecotourism in Budongo was based on the growing awareness that protected areas alienated from local people were doomed to fail. Therefore the idea is to promote forest conservation by integrating conservation with community development, and to achieve active involvement of communities in the protection and management of the forest.

4.3 Public and Private cooperation

In Budongo Forest Reserve, local people have started to take responsibility to protecting the forest. Community members always report the presence of illegal pitsawyers to the Forest Department; they even mobilise to prevent their entry themselves. Before the development of ecotourism, this was unheard of. There is also better cooperation between the private sector including the communities and the public sector.

The communities have elected Tourism Advisors who advise Forest staff on the type of structures, which are compatible with the liking of the communities around the forest reserve and in tackling illegal activities in the forest reserve. Through the advisory committee, the local communities have found an accessible forum in which they can resolve conflicts with the Forest Department. The success of Ecotourism Advisory Committees in working with the communities has led the Forest Department to expand a process of collaborative forest management to other sectors of forest management.

The development of sustainable tourism in the forest aims to provide a small but regular income for both local people and government, and to create opportunities for communities and the Forest Department to work together in managing the resource.

- Community project proposals for income generating activities are prepared with the help of Forest staff and sponsored by the ecotourism project in the area.
- Some portion of the revenue is used to sponsor social community projects like schools, health centres and safe water provision.
- Community groups around the forest reserve have formed an association called Budongo Community Development Organisation (BUCODO) and have already acquired some funding from the Germany Government for income generation activities, environmental conservation and reproductive health.

4.4 Other Benefits of Ecotourism Development to local people

- There has been rural employment to communities bordering the forest reserve
- The communities around have also benefited from training and extension work thus encouraging conservation at the community level.
- The local communities are using facilities and services at the centres.
- The tourist sites provide a means for women to sell their handcrafts as a supplement to their income
- At the moment, local communities are involved in the planning and management of the recreational development ensuring that their needs and ideas are incorporated.
- A favorable climate for the development of business activities was created and the private sectors both national and international have done some investments near the reserve.

4.5 Conclusion

Conclusively it is noted that conservation is a crucial aspect of ecotourism development and has wide implications for policies, investment decisions, resource mobilization, and project design and management of natural areas. In future, we expect to see the role of local people in managing and benefiting from forest resources become even greater. Through ecotourism, the local communities are

empowered to be partners in conservation of the Forest and sharing in benefits on a sustainable basis.