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Continuity and Change in Kenyan Ecotourism Practices

For a long time, Kenya has been known as a leading destination for nature-based tourism. Since the 1990s when sustainable tourism ideals were placed high on the tourism agenda, Kenya has been quite at ease converting to the global popular paradigm of achieving sustainable development through tourism. Many aspects of the country's safari tourism were quite similar to the then new small-scale tourism proposals governing the new trend towards global sustainable tourism. Ecotourism, which espouses important ideals of sustainable tourism, has consequently become a popular concept among various stakeholders in the country.

Between independence and the late 1980s the emphasis in Kenya has been on mass tourism where the number of tourist arrivals mattered more than their impact on the destinations. However, in the 1990s, Kenya enhanced principles of ecotourism to position herself as a destination for the new niche-based tourism, respecting sustainable development ideals. The country was among the first in Africa to fully recognise the value of key aspects of the new tourism forms and initiatives. These involved the various stakeholders, especially local communities that lived in key ecotourism destinations, as well as ecotourism entrepreneurs. Some of the new initiatives include community-based natural resource management, community-private partnerships, etc.

However, more than a decade since the new alternative sustainable practices were introduced, many of the practices common in the mass tourism era have died out and this continues to influence the outcome of ecotourism enterprise in the country today. The main reason for this is spatial overlap of tourism destinations and hence products and attractions that draws both mass and ecotourism to the same places. In what ways have some of the practices of the past persisted and what are some of the new transformations that have been brought about by ecotourism? Is the practise of an ideal sustainable ecotourism possible in Kenya today?'

Continuity of mass tourism practices

Despite the adoption of ecotourism as a matter of policy and practice in Kenya, there are still perceptions of Kenya as a mass tourism destination. Certain practices have persisted in many tourism destinations in the country. Continuity of these elements under the current ecotourism segment begs the question on how best to reconcile the practices of mass tourism and ecotourism in an era that favours the latter and the consolidation of the ecotourism gains already realised.

Over reliance on wildlife/park-based tourism

One of the principles of ecotourism is to have as little adverse impact on the environment as possible. Over-reliance on one tourism product may cause a high influx of visitors to some areas. The leading Kenyan ecotourism destinations are wildlife-dependent and those that offer alternative attractions are not as popular with visitors, both local and foreign. Indeed, the most popular parks and reserves in the country

are better known for their wildlife diversity which has formed the key selling point for Kenyan tourism in general. Even the "parks beyond parks" conservation initiatives (conservancies) that came to characterise the ecotourism projects of the 1990s depended heavily on the abundance of wildlife in areas that had been created adjacent to conventional parks or reserves. The logic of their creation was that most of Kenya's wildlife lives outside protected areas and if well developed and managed, these places would provide green travel experiences associated with ecotourism. Such initiatives that are today rampant in group ranches in the Amboseli ecosystem and also in the Maasai Mara have come to characterise many ecotourism initiatives in the country.

The increasing influx of tourists to parks as hot nature spots or tourism hubs has altered the perceptions of these destinations as having a pristine and wild character. Mass promotion of areas like the Maasai Mara along popular lines

as “*the eighth wonder of the world*”, “*the area where the greatest natural phenomenon (wildebeest migration) on earth occurs*”, “*the one-stop-shop for big five viewing*” all appeal to the mass tourist. This appeal is targeted both to the local and foreign tourists. The increasing popularity of the Maasai Mara has for instance led to over-development of tourism facilities such as lodges and camping sites in and out of the reserve with a heavy impact on the parks due to increased vehicular traffic. This has deteriorated the quality of the attractions with contamination through informal human modifications such as the many trading centres sprouting at various park gates and at the entrance of conventional lodges.

However, sustainable ecotourism cannot predominantly rely on wildlife alone but also on diversification to other wild resources such forest, birds, bushes, mountains and local cultures. These are resources that can sustain a thriving ecotourism sector. In the recent years, these attractions have been promoted under the ecotourism product diversification strategy. The general effect of this strategy is to increase the spatial spread of ecotourism sites by opening up new destinations that possess other natural assets of appeal to ecotourists. This eases environmental stress and pressure on the popular wildlife destinations brought about by high tourist numbers in these areas. Opening up new areas such as the western circuit where Kakamega forest is located or the re-branding and modernisation of the Meru National Park are key factors of the strategy.

Ecotourism promotion and mass tourism

Since independence, the policies of the Kenyan government have promoted the private sector in the development of tourism. Indeed, today, most of the tourism facilities and services (campsites, lodges, hotels, tour operators and agents) in the country are private-sector owned and operated. The policy of a private-sector driven tourism

industry thus continues. The private sector plays a key role in the marketing of Kenya as a destination. In order to meet enough clients to sustain their business enterprises, the private sector hence plays a crucial role in tourism marketing of popular destination areas. Therefore, competition for visitors among the various industry players has emphasised large numbers, a characteristic mark of mass tourism at the expense of a low volume of visitors with reduced impact on the facilities and destinations in particular.

Even though there are several genuine ecotourism operators and promoters, their efforts are undermined by those unconcerned about the ideals of ecotourism. For instance, in the Maasai Mara, many campsites purely driven by business interests, continue to use wood fuel for their energy needs. In areas like Mount Kenya, pollution of trails through poor waste disposal methods poses environmental challenges. These problems stem from poor management of visitor influx further worsened by the ecological fragility of the destinations. In general terms, ecotourism continues to depend on the mass tourism marketing channels and networks because it is the very same mass tour operators and agents who are used to promote the country as an ecotourism destination.

Change and emerging best practices in ecotourism

The practice of ecotourism requires its actors to observe certain standards and parameters within its key principles. It is the observation of these sustainable ecological and socio-cultural operations and principles that goes towards defining or labelling an area or facility as a perfect ecotourism destination. In Kenya, since the mid-1990s when the ecotourism concept gained momentum and acquired popularity among the players in the tourism industry, several changes in practice have been noted in attempts to cash in on the ecotourism craze. Even though some operators adopt ecotourism practices as a ploy to

market themselves and thus improve their businesses without necessarily being committed to its ideals, a number of innovations indicating the changes in the tourism industry towards a truly ecotourism destination are evident.

Quality of ecotourism destination spaces and facilities

Despite the challenges in realising sustainable practices across many tourism destinations and even within the eco-facilities, many ecotourism operators are providing the lead in realising eco-friendly environments. The key challenge in the realisation of quality ecotourism destinations is particularly prevalent in certain popular camping places adjacent to the parks and reserves where there has been proliferation and over-development of ecotourism facilities like camping sites. The situation is especially true in areas near the park gates in the Maasai Mara and the Amboseli. However, there are a number of operators committed to the principles of ecotourism who run eco-facilities mostly located inside community lands. They work towards conservation and improvement of natural landscapes. Changes in ecotourism practices can be seen in the following areas:

Meeting energy demands

An increased number of lodges and tented camps are using sustainable energy means, particularly in the greater Amboseli and the Maasai Mara. These are mainly camps that offer exclusive and personalised services. Among the popular practices is the use of solar energy for energy needs such as lighting, heating and charging. Briquettes made from agricultural produce and biomass waste are also increasingly being used for water heating and cooking purposes. The use of alternative eco-friendly (little or no pollution) energy sources is rapidly being accepted even among local small-scale ecotourism services providers. These have a lower impact on the immediate surrounding in terms of carbon emission than firewood or ordinary charcoal do.

However, charcoal and firewood continue to be popular in the shopping centres mushrooming adjacent to the national parks and reserves. Firewood also continues to be popularly used in the proliferating camping sites especially for providing heat at night and warming of water. The juxtaposition of facilities proclaiming to be in nature-based tourism within areas that do not have blotted the ideal ecotourism landscape images in most of the destinations.

Littering and waste disposal

Waste disposal is also a big challenge to management of ecotourism destinations and different strategies are used to manage the problem of waste. In the Mount Kenya area (especially) along the trails or mountain hiking routes, regulatory mechanisms and education are being used as a management strategy of waste disposal. Littering prevention rules from the countrywide Kenya Safari Code² are being enforced by the Kenya Wildlife Service as a measure towards control of litter on the trails with varying

degrees of success. A fee of Ksh 500 has been introduced for a gunny or plastic bag with the promise of a full refund if the bag is returned full of litter at the end of the expedition. These regulations have so far been effective. In most of the park's entrance gates, there are pits for disposing of waste and litter from the descending mountain hikers and their guides.

Responsible ecotourism

Even though the manner of delivering social benefits to local people remains contentious and varies from one organisation to the next, the drive to create a socially responsible ecotourism among the various interest groups is taking root. Various methods are being used by the interest groups to ensure that local people get a share of the benefits of ecotourism activities generated from the use of their local natural and cultural resources.

In general terms, some of the perceived benefits of ecotourism by residents of the locations include

employment as security personnel in lodges and camps, guiding and hospitality services. The locals also benefit from the social support of development projects like schools, hospitals and cattle dips in the Maasai areas. Many young people have also benefited from training on nature and culture conservation which enhance their employment chances in the tourism industry at the local level. Unique delivery of the different types of benefits has been noted in certain ecotourism enterprises like Basecamp in the Maasai Mara (**see boxed text**). Other conservation organisations like Africa Wildlife Foundations facilitate ecotourism enterprise initiatives such as Elerai Ecolodge near the Amboseli parks, which aims at generating income as incentives for conservation of environments and cultures by the local people. In both of these examples, the community generates income through bed fees, land rents charged to the eco lodges, visits to cultural *manyatta* as well as from the sale of handicrafts made by women.

Ecotourism best practices: A case study

The eco-rating scheme of ecotourism initiatives by Ecotourism Kenya (formerly Ecotourism Society of Kenya) is by far the best local initiative to evaluate best practices among ecotourism enterprises through an environmental conservation and socio-economic and cultural sensitivity to local community needs. Even though there has been scepticism and criticism of the scheme as a green marketing ploy by some tourism organisations, an analysis of some of the winners of the award reveals ecotourism leads worth emulating by other organisations in the industry. The case of Basecamp Camping and Lodges at Telek, Maasai Mara is illustrative. One of the very first three winners of the gold award⁴ in 2007, the facility is a study in social-cultural and environmental responsibility by a tour operator successfully meeting environmental conservation and community development needs.

Environmentally, it is a leader in adoption of eco-friendly practices such as meeting all their energy needs from solar panels. The camp has excellent waste disposal practices with a unit for sorting of plastics from bio-degradable materials. Kitchen waste and other bio-degradable wastes are converted into composite manure which in turn is used to plant trees in the neighbourhood. As a result, a succulent patch of forest is developing in the neighbourhood of the lodge. Dry composite toilets are used, facilitating the separation of solid and liquid human wastes.

Socio-culturally, they provide best practices in generating benefits to local people. This is achieved through:

- training of unskilled local Maasai and graduating them into professional staff
- offering employment with 85% of the workers at the camp being locals
- local support on enterprise development where handicrafts are sold abroad by the camp on behalf of the locals
- improvement of social amenities in the neighbourhood through support to health centres and schools
- training of the community on ecotourism interpretative programmes involving environmental and cultural conservation through tour guiding in the Maasai Mara.

These practices are further buttressed by the interpretative programmes on wildlife and culture which are key driving forces of ecotourism in the area. The camp also supports research on the Maasai Mara through the cheetah project.

Enhancement of visitor experiences

Interpretation is an important aspect in the ecotourism experience. A trend is emerging where ecotourism hospitality providers, conservation organisations like African Wildlife Foundations and tour operators are enhancing the realisation of this goal through educational programmes and lectures on local natural and cultural environments. The role of tour guides in passing on environmental conservation and biodiversity information is being emphasised. The overall idea is for the guide to use these skills and knowledge to enlighten visitors and inform themselves on the impact of their behaviour and attitude on the environment.

Professional guiding services are offered using local people who are knowledgeable about local natural and cultural landscapes as guides. In the Maasai destination areas, locals are preferred for giving cultural lectures to visitors, especially in the villages. However, some operators and *safari* camps prefer to use tour drivers from outside the destinations to act as tour guides. In both cases, additional training by the tour operators is undertaken to enhance the interpretative services and enhance the tourist experience. Interpretation facilities and services are becoming an important feature in most of the destinations. In the Mount Kenya area, environmental education and interpretative aspects are being enhanced by the setting up of an eco-

resource centre which is to act as a one-stop-shop community centre for information regarding the entire Mount Kenya ecotourism circuit. The centre also serves as a centre for preparing interpretation training programmes for local tour guides and couriers/porters with whom tourists visit the mountain. In Maasai areas, education and interpretative work seems to be the initiative of individual organisations. However, in the Maasai Mara, the Koiyak guiding school serves as a vital centre used by different lodges and camping enterprises in training local guides.

Concluding remarks

In Kenya, most mass tourism destination areas are, spatially speaking, the same as those considered for ecotourism. Ideally, ecotourism areas should be exclusive from those of mass tourism in order to claim real ecotourism practices for the destinations. In Kenya, there is no clear distinction between mass and ecotourism. As a result, unsustainable mass tourism practices exist alongside those of ecotourism, with mass tourism gaining the upper hand. This spatial interdependence of mass tourism and ecotourism areas sends out confusing images and conflicting messages of Kenya as a destination that practises sustainable ecotourism. The eventual scenario that emerges from the practices in various destinations is one which could result in Kenya being regarded a mass ecotourism destination.

Endnotes

- 1 This article is based mainly on field observations and interviews between April 2005 and September 2007 on ecotourism practices in the Maasai Mara, greater Amboseli and Mount Kenya destination areas.
- 2 The Kenya Safari code for responsible travel was developed collaboratively by organisations in tourism and nature conservation including Friends of Conservation, the Ecotourism Society of Kenya, the Kenya Association of Tour Operators, the Kenya Wildlife Service, and the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association.
- 3 The eco-rating is a certification scheme of tourism facilities that meets certain environmental and social cultural standards in their operations. Certification started in 2002 when the first level bronze certification was done. In March 2003, the first three gold rated certification awards were won by Kampi ya Kanzi camp (in Chyulu hills near Amboseli), Basecamp Maasai Mara in Talek, and Malewa Conservancy and Camp near Naivasha.

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IFRA news

In September 2007, the directorship at IFRA changed. The new director is Professor Bernard Calas, a geographer from the Université Michel de Montaigne, in Bordeaux. He is deputized by Dr. Jérôme Lafargue, a senior political scientist from the Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour.

Editor's note

Mambo is a Kiswahili word, which strictly speaking, means "news" or "information". However, current usage, and specifically colloquial speakers will recognise the word as a form of greeting, loosely translated as "what's up?"

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