



The link between poverty, environment and ecotourism development in areas adjacent to Maasai Mara and Amboseli protected areas, Kenya



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 May 2015

Received in revised form 3 June 2015

Accepted 11 July 2015

Keywords:

Ecotourism

Poverty reduction and environmental conservation

ABSTRACT

Over the years, Wildlife Protected Areas (WPAs) have been promoted for ecotourism. However, declining agricultural productivity, rising population and a third of Kenya's land surface area being arable; there has been an encroachment on WPAs. This paper assessed the nature and state of the poverty–environment–ecotourism relationship in Maasai Mara and Amboseli protected areas, Kenya. A significant ($\chi^2 = 44.01$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$) majority (67%) of the community were poor; in spite of ecotourism enterprises' continued support for conservation, education, employment and healthcare initiatives. Ecotourism enterprises had not adequately addressed access to credit, grazing pastures and capacity building on entrepreneurial skills. The protected areas were facing the challenge of encroachment exacerbated by rapidly rising human needs for land, food and income. It is recommended that ecotourism practitioners should not only establish micro-credit and entrepreneurial skills training initiatives but also initiate fair and long-lasting economic partnerships with local communities.

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1. Introduction

Kenya, like many other developing countries is refocusing its development policies towards poverty reduction. This emphasis is a response to the fact that, despite many efforts to improve the well-being of the poor in the past, the majority of the people still live in poverty (Masila *et al.*, 2013). Currently, degradation of natural resources is worsening as levels of poverty increase. Besides, there has been a growing notion that sustainable conservation of the environment and economic development are competing priorities. Economists and social scientists profess that a causal link exists between the states of the environment vis-à-vis the levels of income in any population. For example, Kenya's chances of realizing its vision 2030 depend increasingly on the way it manages its natural resources. This connotes that the environment should be regarded as a core component of socio-economic development and not a competitor.

In attempts to conserve the environment, many governments have designated wildlife protected areas. This has been characterized by the government identifying an area based on resource endowment, displacing the host people and resettling them outside their ancestral

land and outlawing human settlement (Wishitemi, 2008). As a result, wildlife protected areas are covering about 13.25 million km² of global land surface. The declaration of protected areas denies indigenous people the right to live on their ancestral land inside the designated areas and this has made such communities poorer than they originally were (Wishitemi, 2008).

It is estimated that there are 14 to 24 million 'environmental refugees' as a result of exclusionary conservation in Africa alone. In 2004, for instance, 500 people were removed from the Nechisar National Park in southern Ethiopia and resettled outside its borders by the government of Ethiopia. Bushmen were also evicted from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve by the Botswana government (Adams & Hutton, 2007). In Kenya, most national parks and reserves were carved out of lands previously occupied by the Maasai and other pastoral communities immediately after the Second World War. As a result, Kenya's land under protected areas accounts for 8% or 7,194, 000 ha consisting of 10 million acres of over 65 national parks, reserves and private sanctuaries (Wishitemi, 2008).

Currently, there are debates among academicians, researchers and human rights activists about the place of people on land set aside for conservation of nature. The debate revolves around the questions: For whom are such areas set aside? By whose authority? And at what cost? These issues are central to the growing public and policy debate about the social impacts of conservation.

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The debate is much broader than just the question of displacing people from parks. It embraces the whole relation between biodiversity conservation and human welfare. Considering that, community displacement from protected areas has a direct impact on livelihoods. Forced resettlement exposes displaced people and those in receiving communities to a wide range of risks that enhance impoverishment. These include landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, economic marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, loss of access to common property and services and social dislocation (Adams & Hutton, 2007).

In spite of the recommendation that indigenous people's aspirations, rights and needs should be integrated in the conservation planning agenda, conservation benefits have been unequally shared. Moreover, a large proportion of the income from ecotourism taking place in protected areas never reaches the majority of the indigenous people. As long as their standard of living remains low, no amount of argument or persuasion is likely to stop poaching entirely while the incentive of securing cash from animal trophies is high (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). It is important to note that the African national parks and wild-lands yield a greater return in their natural form than if they were used for cultivation or grazing. In economic terms, the marginal loss of food from declaring Serengeti out of bounds to agriculture is more than compensated for by the gain in utility in having the animals conserved (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) and tourism has been largely responsible for this. On the other hand, African natives require food for survival and are forced to seek areas on the margins of national parks for cultivation and grazing since benefits of tourism never reach these people and their attitudes towards conservation are swamped by their attempts to survive (Mathieson & Wall, 1982).

A major task which must be faced by the ecotourism industry is the justification of national parks as a means of meeting the needs of the local community, as well as tourists and nature lovers. A major challenge is therefore to provide land, food and work for a growing population while conserving the wildlife heritage. There are no easy answers. Policies of outright protection of parks have served well enough to date but, given the pressures on the land and wildlife of Africa, such policies may not be in accord with the legitimate needs of the people of the region. Any strategy which threatens the existence of the parks is not acceptable, but if the lives of local community are in jeopardy because of inadequate supply of land and food, then policies of strict protection seem equally deplorable (Momanyi, 2013).

Managing the interface between ecotourism development, the conservation of wildlife as a tourism resource and the needs of local inhabitants residing in or near wildlife tourism areas have been the subjects of three decades of debate. Sustainability of wildlife resources is the core goal of conservation practice and this depends upon the roles of and support from host communities. Host communities interact with the wildlife tourist and the wildlife resource and the nature of this interaction will have implications on the long-term viability of wildlife tourism (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). The perceptions and attitudes of the host communities towards wildlife tourism and the wildlife resource itself are central to this discussion. These attitudes vary as host interactions with the wildlife tourists and wildlife also vary. However, they cover a wide continuum ranging from care, concern and conservation to open hostility.

Most authors among them Sindiga (1995), Akama (1996) and Wishitemi (2008) have questioned the viability of this three-way interface and have drawn pessimistic conclusions concerning host communities: displacement or relocation from their home environment and subsequent reductions in standard of living, competition and conflict over land use with wildlife, lack of access to

natural resources and conflict over the distribution of tourist revenues (Mvula, 2001). Without addressing the foregoing challenges, as well as issues pertaining to socio-economic benefits accruing from conservation for communities living adjacent to parks and reserves, wildlife and other natural resources could in the long run not be managed in a sustainable manner. Further, should the economic benefits not reach the local people, the very basis of ecotourism will be put in jeopardy (Sindiga, 1999). To avert this, local people in the neighborhoods of protected areas need to see meaningful improvement in their standards of living and economic fortunes if they are to continue participating in biodiversity conservation (Sindiga, 1999).

Despite the immense potential that eco-tourism has on the creation of wealth, its development has yielded mixed signals as it relates to poverty reduction and conservation of ecosystems. The link between the environment (Maasai Mara National Reserve and Amboseli National Park and their ecosystems), eco-tourism and poverty reduction has not been clear with the majority of the host communities; given the fact that they suffer the highest levels of poverty of between 50 and 60% (Manyara & Jones, 2007). Besides, as much as ecotourism has been hailed as a key advocate for responsible travel which aims at improving the welfare of the local people, there is inadequate statistical data to support this assertion.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the link between poverty reduction, environmental conservation and ecotourism development in areas adjacent to Maasai Mara and Amboseli protected areas. Specifically, the study investigated the state and causes of poverty in the study areas; whether or not ecotourism development had contributed to poverty reduction and environmental conservation and the community's aspirations for ecotourism development.

2. Study area and methodology

2.1. Study areas

This research was conducted in two protected areas: Maasai Mara National Reserve and Amboseli National Park in Kenya (Fig. 1). Maasai Mara National Reserve (MMNR) is situated within the Great Rift Valley in the southern part of Kenya. Maasai Mara derives its name from the indigenous people – the Maasai community – and the Mara River that cuts through the Reserve. The Reserve is located at 1 30'S and 35 0'E in Narok County. Measuring approximately 1510 km² in size (Cumming, Du Toit, & Stuart, 1990), this unfenced savannah grassland reserve is approximately 200 km southwest of Nairobi. The reserve forms the northern portion of the Serengeti/Mara ecosystem (Dublin, 1991). It is bounded on the north-east by Loita Plains, on the east by Laleta Hills, on the west by Siria Escarpment, and on the south by the northern Serengeti National Park. For animals, landscape and sheer beauty, Maasai Mara National Reserve is the most spectacular of all Kenyan protected areas (Wishitemi, 2008). It is considered the jewel in Kenya's wildlife crown in which is found the annual spectacle of wildebeest migration. According to Wishitemi (2008) MMNR accounts for 25% of Kenya's wildlife. It is home to elephants, black rhinos, lions, leopards, cheetahs, crocodiles, hippos, buffaloes, different bird species, plains zebras, hartebeests, wildebeests and other herbivores. The reserve hosts an annual migration of wildebeests, zebras and Thomson's gazelles from the adjoining Serengeti National Park. The main tourism activities undertaken in the reserve are: safari and cultural tours, camping, bird watching, balloon safaris, bush dinners and horseback safaris. In addition, MMNR accounts for 12% of the lodges, 16% of bed capacity, 67% of camp-sites and 74% of camping capacity in Kenya.

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