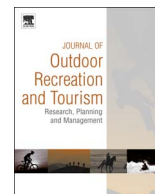


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jort

Ecotourism in the Kakum Conservation Area, Ghana: Local politics, practice and outcome

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Ecotourism
Ghana
Kakum Conservation Area
Protected areas

ABSTRACT

In many rural areas of Africa, creation of protected areas and introduction of ecotourism result in changes in local livelihoods. Yet, despite assurances of improved and alternative livelihood options by conservationists and governments, rural communities often tend to be worse-off following creation of protected areas and introduction of tourism products due to, among others, inequity in the distribution of tourism benefits. This paper examines the outcome of ecotourism in local communities adjacent to Ghana's foremost and most popular ecotourism destination – the Kakum Conservation Area – and its influence on the relationship between local residents and park officials. Using agency consultations, in-depth interviews with residents from four selected communities and document reviews, findings indicate limited ecotourism benefits and widespread ecotourism costs in the local communities in the vicinity of the Conservation Area, despite increasing tourist visitation and revenue from ecotourism to the government and the management agencies.

Management implications: The likelihood to achieve benefits for the local communities in and around protected areas by ecotourism increases,

- If the management focuses on the pro-poor aspects and ensures that the implementation of ecotourism is not only focused on conservation goals.
- If the overall goals go beyond government and conservation agencies interest and include the improvement of livelihood outcomes in the local community.
- If the local community realises its role and participates actively.
- If the participation is associated with local empowerment in, and stewardship of ecotourism activities.

1. Introduction

Ecotourism – i.e. responsible travel to natural areas, which seeks to conserve the environment and sustain the wellbeing of the local communities (The International Ecotourism Society, 2013) – is widely recognised as a sustainable development segment of the tourism industry. It needs therefore to be accountable in terms of delivering socio-economic benefits and environmental conservation outcomes at both local and global levels. Distribution of ecotourism benefits is a major focus in the debate on sustainable development of ecotourism particularly in developing countries. But existing research shows that equity in the distribution of ecotourism benefits is a complex and difficult challenge,

and one that requires more critical analysis and commitment from industry and operators to achieve (Charnley, 2005; Cobbinah, Black & Thwaites, 2015a; Kagarama, Bizoza, & Kayigamba, 2012; Southgate, 2006; Stone & Wall, 2004). Many influential articles have questioned and enhanced the understanding of the highly complex and multifarious issues of distribution of ecotourism benefits, in relation to promoting improved quality of life, and advocating environmental conservation (e.g., Afenyo & Amuquandoh, 2014; Cobbinah, 2015a; Magole & Magole, 2005; Ross & Wall, 1999; Sibanda & Omwega, 1996). It is argued that ecotourism needs to be conceptualised comprehensively and contextualised within a local setting so as to appraise meaningfully the interconnectedness between natural environment and

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2017.09.003>

Received 2 June 2017; Received in revised form 14 September 2017; Accepted 17 September 2017
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local communities, and deliver sustainable outcomes that respond to local community needs and meet environmental conservation targets (Adu-Ampong, 2017; Black & Cobbinah, 2016; Ross & Wall, 1999). In fact, this is also consistent with the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals, particularly those relating to the protection of forests, water bodies and combating climate change, as well as improving living conditions of local people (Nilsson, Griggs, & Visbeck, 2016). In such situations, equity in ecotourism benefit distribution and local feelings and experiences become tenable and necessary as they may address issues of unpredictability of events and uncertainties about sustainability of ecotourism activities.

With abundance of ecotourism resources in Ghana, and research on tourism benefits sharing (see Adu-Ampong, 2017; Afenyio & Amuquandoh, 2014; Appiah-Opoku, 2011; Cobbinah et al., 2015a; Mensah, 2016), this research contributes to the ongoing discussion by focusing on equity issues, feelings and experiences of the local residents in the distribution of ecotourism outcomes. A growing trend of equity in ecotourism benefit distribution in several African countries is that it is defined, interpreted and determined differently by ecotourism operators, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and governments often under the banner of achieving ‘fairness’ in ecotourism activities without making efforts to understand the feelings and experiences of local communities. This, of course, is not to argue for a universal approach or framework for distributing ecotourism benefits, but rather emphasise the several cases where local communities have been neglected in ecotourism activities occurring in protected areas adjacent to them (see Backman & Munanuraa, 2017; Charnley, 2005). Even in cases where there is evidence of local communities’ involvement in the distribution of ecotourism returns, the benefits are sometimes limited in relation to the costs associated with ecotourism in protected areas (Cobbinah et al., 2015a; Munanuraa & Backman, 2017; Sebele, 2010; Spenceley, Habyalimana, Tusabe, & Mariza, 2010).

In such situations, it is unsurprising that rural communities endowed with rich ecotourism resources often remain among the poorest and most deprived in Africa. Regrettably, the voices and feelings of these rural communities are rarely heard and expressed. This paper seeks to address this gap using the Kakum Conservation Area (KCA) in Ghana by:

- i. analysing the benefits and costs of ecotourism in the local communities adjacent to the Conservation Area, Ghana;
- ii. examining equity issues in ecotourism benefit distribution; and
- iii. appraising the feelings and experiences of local communities towards tourism and conservation.

This research is distinctive in different ways. First, few studies have examined community ecotourism benefit distribution and local feelings and experiences in protected areas in Africa (e.g., Charnley, 2005; Gezon, 2013; Southgate, 2006). Second, it builds on previous ecotourism research in Ghana (e.g., Adu-Ampong, 2017; Akyeampong, 2011; Appiah-Opoku, 2011) by examining costs and benefits of ecotourism, and local feelings and experiences of tourism and conservation.

1.1. Ecotourism and its potential in Ghana

Attempts to develop the tourism industry in Ghana started in the 1970s. Between 1970 and 1978, studies (Ghosh & Kotey, 1973; Obuarn

Committee, 1972) were conducted to evaluate the various tourism resources, with the primary objective of classifying tourism resources in Ghana. Several tourism policies were developed and implemented over the past four decades. For example in 1973, the Ghana Tourist Control Authority Act, 1973 was passed. Based on this legislation, the first tourism plan was prepared (15 Year National Tourism Development Plan 1975–1990). In addition, a medium-term plan was introduced in 1993 (Medium-Term National Tourism Development Plan 1993–1995). The Integrated Tourism Development Programme was initiated in 1992 by the government of Ghana with the support of the UNDP and UNWTO, and provided a planned approach to tourism development in Ghana.

The tourism industry in Ghana has developed from a home-grown, craft-run business into a contemporary industry with considerable involvement of multi-national enterprises (Akyeampong, 2011). As shown in Fig. 1, tourism development in Ghana has been facilitated by the existence of huge environmental and cultural resources, including the World Heritage listed castles and forts, national parks and traditional festivals. These resources continue to serve as the basis of tourism development in Ghana, providing an all year experience for both international and domestic tourists. Focusing on ecotourism, the major destinations in Ghana include Bia, Bui and Mole National Parks, Kakum Conservation Area, Shai Hills, Ankasa, Kogyae and Bomfobiri Resource Reserves, Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary, Buabeng Fiema Monkey Sanctuary, Lake Bosomtwi and several coastal wetlands (Asiedu, 2002; Cobbinah et al., 2015a). Recent research (Adu-Ampong, 2017; Akyeampong & Asiedu, 2008, 2002; Akyeampong, 2011; Bediako, 2000; Cobbinah, Thwaites & Black, 2015b) has identified multiple challenges facing Ghana’s ecotourism sector. According to Bediako (2000), the ecotourism sector is accorded low priority in the national development framework, particularly by the Ghana Wildlife Division, the organisation responsible for managing protected and natural areas in Ghana. This situation has resulted in poor quality and inadequate provision of tourist services and infrastructure facilities, and lack of interpretation, which has in turn limited both the level of tourist visitation, and employment and income generation at the local level (Afenyio & Amuquandoh, 2014; Asiedu, 2002; Bediako, 2000; Cobbinah, 2015a).

In addition, the low commitment to destination development in rural communities, in Asiedu’s (2002) view, means that ecotourism has not achieved its potential to reduce poverty in those local communities. Asiedu (2002) asserts that the development of these ecotourism destinations and associated tourism activity has the potential to spread direct and indirect benefits across the country, which could result in improvements in the living conditions of the poor. A further challenge identified by Bediako (2000) arises from the limited level of community involvement in ecotourism development in Ghana. Bediako (2000) finds that local communities adjacent to ecotourism destinations are dissatisfied by their limited involvement in ecotourism development, and disappointed by the outcomes. Haligah (1998) and Asiedu (1998) argue that local disillusionment, resulting from limited benefits from, and community engagement in ecotourism, could threaten environmental conservation efforts in Ghana. According to Asiedu (2002, p.8), if such local disillusionment is not resolved, this “could endanger the very principles upon which ecotourism is founded leading to local disinterest in it”. From this it can be inferred that there would be a likely consequence for improving livelihoods, conserving environment, and achieving sustainable development.

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