



# Sustainable Tourism Initiatives in Western Uganda: Driving Economic Growth and Enhancing Quality of Life

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## ABSTRACT

This comprehensive analysis delves into the multifaceted impacts of sustainable tourism initiatives in Western Uganda, focusing on the social, economic, and educational dimensions. Through 29 interviews conducted between January 2013 and March 2016, insights were gathered from various stakeholders, revealing both the opportunities and challenges posed by tourism activities in the region. While tourism presents significant potential for economic growth, job creation, and cultural preservation, it also brings forth complexities such as unequal distribution of benefits and environmental concerns. The study underscores the importance of leveraging tourism for community empowerment, academic enrichment, and sustainable development. By understanding and addressing these dynamics, stakeholders can harness tourism as a force for positive change in Western Uganda.

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism, Economic impact, Social impact, Community empowerment and Cultural preservation

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the social, economic, and educational impact derived from 29 tourism-related interviews conducted in the western part of Uganda from January 2013 to March 2016. The insightful interactions focused on the immediate community, academic, and entrepreneurial environs and revealed that business, academic, and social opportunities from certain tourism activities can be substantial. However, the study also established that the apparent absence of business opportunities from tourism forces entrepreneurs into endeavors less favored by economic growth prospects, and thus negatively influences students' choice of academic programs [1, 2]. Moreover, the research indicates that the significant impact does not directly translate into meaningful community engagements. This knowledge could be employed to seek business opportunities, encourage the student community to embrace and develop critical tourism-related programs, and, ultimately, stimulate sustained economic and social growth in this part of the globe, where the youth admit to opting for an immediate "escapist" lifestyle [3, 4]. The continued development of tourism is considered essential for alleviating poverty and for achieving the eight United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the immediate value of tourism endeavors is often viewed as underwhelming, particularly by the communities expected to be the key drivers of tourism activities. This widespread disillusionment with tourism initiatives has led to missed opportunities for communities, tourism entrepreneurs, and regional tourism destinations to grow. It has also spawned, especially in emerging destinations like Uganda, a cottage industry of "anti-tourism" movements; these opposition movements make subjective claims aimed at misrepresenting tourism as a facilitator of environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and social decay. Despite this tide of disrespect for tourism endeavors, the number of travel and tourism research reports published on Western Uganda, where the majestic Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Mountain Rwenzori National Park, and Queen Elizabeth National Park are located, is measly. The tone generated by the knowledge vacuum has, inadvertently, perpetuated the tourism challenges experienced by the region and has enticed the youth to opt for an "escapist" lifestyle often resting on the periphery of social and economic engagements [5-8].

### Economic Impact of Sustainable Tourism Initiatives

Many NGOs have been funded by governments such as Japan, the USA, and others to promote tourism. The NGO's focus was on branding "Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park" and the conservation

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efforts of the Batwa (also known as the pygmies). Emerging from these initiatives was the community-based ecotourism (CBET) association, Buhoma Community Rest Camp (BCRC), and then the Uganda Community Tourism Association (UCOTA). The World Bank has a conservation mission in Uganda with an over \$11,000,000 budget through 2020, and tourism is a potential funding source for conservation. Unfortunately, the NGOs moved on, and the private company that built Uganda's largest indigenous travel company association (ACTAG) was no longer, so an in-depth understanding of the customer tourism companies returning to the conservation area was lost. It was then unclear to the traditional conservation communities what the tourist companies wanted [9-11]. According to the World Bank, opportunities to develop tourism (and to benefit economically from tourism income) are considerable, particularly for developing economies. Tourism in Uganda is often seen as a travel destination for ethical purposes, for instance, to visit conservation areas or to experience the local culture. Many of these popular conservation areas in Uganda (and about 60% of wildlife species) are found in Western Uganda where the economic benefits (from traditional communities living in and around tourism attractions) are currently in foreign businesses. Many economic benefits from traditional communities are such that funds are received from tourism long after a visit through the purchase of conservation area souvenirs. Because the businesses sell mostly imported items (made by those not in the conservation area), the community monetary benefits (from the region being a source for importation) are few [12-15].

#### **Creation of Job Opportunities**

From the different findings, stakeholders talked about people's perception that reasonable money is earned from the created opportunities to engage in sustainable tourism initiatives. This is through selling locally made crafts, salads, fruits, and puffing up traditional dances. However, the different tourism project managers admitted to also paying people to construct tourist cabins, offering security services, and clearing ways meant for tourists. Nonetheless, respondents also indicated that these funds, just like the needs they satisfy, are very minimal compared to those that are achieved by growing forest products like honey harvesting, forest road constructions, and many others. It is important to state that a report by Nabaii et al. on sustainable tourism in Uganda, indicated that the primary concern of entrepreneurs is the length of time it takes before benefits (financial) start. This is compounded by high start-up costs and few options for capital investment [16-18]. Most people living in western Uganda will admit that the rate of access to jobs is low. The most reported challenges are lack of jobs (with the county experiencing an increasing human population), job relevance, remote locations, poor working conditions, and job stress among others. However, under sustainable tourism projects, opportunities are availed to several individuals and groups. These range from managers, researchers, craft makers, security guides, local people involved in the production of items, transporters of goods, and laborers. Some of the jobs, like those of researchers, face the challenge of being seasonal, with only peculiar posts availed for the different species of animals and plants. Findings indicate that tourism-linked jobs were a result of visitors wanting to observe or participate in the protected areas' specific activities of nature walks, bird watching, local traditional dances, camping, and board and lodging [19, 20].

#### **Increase in Local Income**

Our research team has chosen a similar denominator, with an average total cost of 180 USD per day (which includes lodging, meals, and activities for 2-3 persons per day, excluding transportation) and the same distribution as 70% of local expenses. Spain is located in the top 10 countries that annually receive the highest income from tourism, and Uganda is a paradox, being one of the most visited countries in the world, yet its inhabitants remain poor. Consequently, countries with more than 95 million arrivals spend around 40 USD on services and local products (100 USD on the purchase of packages and 100-200 USD daily on additional expenses) during their vacations [21, 22]. It is well documented that tourists spend money that circulates in the local economy, either directly (accommodation, meals, transportation) or indirectly by purchasing local products that tourists consume during their stay, such as souvenirs, clothing, or even luxury products. To evaluate the increase in local income due to the money spent by tourists during their visits, the team of researchers based their findings on the estimation that a Mandalay tour can cost up to 200 USD a day, of which 30% is directly spent on services (accommodation, vehicle, meals), and 70% of visitors' expenses comprise local products. These authors calculated the additional income created for the local community, taking into account two other estimates: first, Ugandan villagers annually receive 120,000 UGX (about 40 USD) per person in the north and south of the country, where tourist activity is scarce. Secondly, mountain gorilla tracking generates 15 to 25% of direct benefits for the local community [23, 24].

#### **Development of Small and Medium Enterprises**

SMEs are indeed the tourism industry's backbone. Tourism has become the driving force of the global economy and small businesses are viewed as the sector's most common form. In other countries, for

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example, SMEs account for about 80 percent of industrial establishments in Greece; 90% of Canadian firms, 87% of South African companies, and 99% of German companies. In addition, tourism has been described as a mechanism for the development of local businesses in most developing countries by encouraging the establishment and growth of local businesses that are ethnic. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have been recognized to be critical in the development of national economies. SMEs are engines of poverty reduction by producing goods and services that society utilizes. A recent study by the United Nations University-WIDER (UNE-WIDER) noted that integral growth, better standard of living, and reduced unemployment for women could be boosted through SME support. SME ecosystems were also found to be micro-magnet fields that enable the retention and sustaining of local talents in the business environment. Uganda ranks fourth in terms of frequency of SME services about the frequency of SME in the world surpassing the average frequency of SMEs of 36.8 in Kenyan, Moroccan, and Dutch according to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC, 2019). They also play an important role in the production of goods and services that are essential to society. It was projected that in 2018, African SMEs in arts and culture, catering, and productive businesses created many job opportunities [24-27].

#### **Social Impact of Sustainable Tourism Initiatives**

Following a change in provisional research design to place business impacts as a major input to testing hypotheses, the collective interviews led the research to decide on 3 interviews with leaders who together would establish such internal and external consistency, in order then to proceed to obtaining academic, economic, and business test data. In this case subsequently, the three main themes of academic, business, and social impact are briefly how and why new, capitalist market efficiency maximization and macro-economic production of public goods principles and practices do best protect and nourish the interests and rights of the long-term poor. Key findings show that rapid increase of broad social and business outputs under capitalism in any diverse economy like that of Uganda's can measurably reduce poverty space of growth of GDP. Recent and emerging entrepreneurial academic research, here led by Dr. Wiklit at the Marymount Institute for African Studies, Uganda, documents how small private enterprises can generate rapid business, quality of life, and broader, market-based social outcomes, rarely equitably achieved through government programs or NGO activities [27-32].

#### **Preservation of Cultural Heritage**

Tourism has become the fastest-growing and developing industry in many countries, including Uganda. According to the World Tourism Organization, the 2003 tourism demand is connected to the sustainable growth of several key global market economies, suggesting that the desire for long-haul travel shows no sign of abating. However, the management of the tourism industry should maintain a balance between the economic growth of the tourist destination (local area) and the protection of the natural and ecological environment. It is also crucial to maintain tourist satisfaction in the scenic beauty which led them to choose Uganda as a tourist destination and the resources which the locals need for their livelihood. Western Uganda is trying to develop a tourist destination as a means of driving the local economy. The importance of the tourism sector for the economy has been published by the World Tourism Organization, stating that the industry's spending worldwide is expected to reach US\$ 7.3 trillion in 2007. The data also reflect the industry's long-term strength, with current forecasts indicating that international tourist arrivals worldwide are expected to increase by an average of 4.1% a year to 1.6 billion by the year 2020. Tourism draws many travelers to a destination because of its attractions, such as nature, beautiful atmosphere, special events, and places of interest. Due to the tourism products being offered, tourism is a business sector that is closely related to the basics of products, human resources, and the environment. The development of the region of tourist destinations not only aims to achieve development in the field of tourism itself but also for the optimization of various impacts [33-36].

#### **Improvement of Infrastructure and Services**

In the case of the QENP, we note that most of the tourism infrastructure and services investments are located within a short distance from Kasese, Rubirizi, and Kabale. For example, the Buffalo, Elephant, and Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation (ITFC) camps are powered by solar stations implemented in the respective areas in or around the park. In the valleys of the strategic Muhokya River, where the Jackfruit mobile lodges are located, two micro-hydropower stations were installed. As mentioned earlier, two community business ventures structured to support the Bugoma forest area are operational. These projects sell their services to customers who stay for the night at the borderline between the QENP and the forest. Additionally, the Roughtime Industry Company has installed a public 3/4G close to the Nyakalengia equity at the Trailhead of the Central Circuit in the Rwenzori Hills, which is fed by water from the equatorial snow top of Rwenzori [37-39]. During the past several years, potable water supply systems and sustainable energy initiatives have mushroomed in the major tourist localities in western Uganda, such as Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP) and the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest (BIF) area.

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The most significant progress was seen along the Buhoma-Ruhija corridor, which, to a large extent, hosted the first wave of travelers attracted by BIF gorillas. Painted amazing new infrastructure and services against the backdrop of a relatively low initial level of supply. The Buhoma Community Rest Camp (BCRC) and the energy station at Buhoma have now become the most recent noteworthy investments in that area. The Uganda Communication Commission, together with commercial telecommunications operators, installed 3/4G service along the Buhoma-Ruhija and Buhoma-Kihihi corridors. In the Bwindi National Park, a solar power station was installed as a public-private partnership consisting of the Nkuringo Walking Safaris (NWS) and a commercial consultant company. Sustainability energy interventions were also implemented along the Rushekye estate, which will soon be serving visiting guests, and the installation of a solar water heater system by NWS. However, the bulk of investments in the Buhoma-Ruhija area were led by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) or commercial companies [40, 41].

### **Empowerment of Local Communities**

The eco-tourism company that most of the participants worked with is committed to achieving substantial community empowerment both through direct employment opportunities as well as in-species farming agreements that emphasize broad, community-based development and shared resource ownership. Beyond rendering obvious benefits, such as money, jobs, and other economic opportunities, the firm empowers individuals and communities to stand up for themselves and, in doing so, foster healthy, secure environments that are essential to the success of local regional tourism initiatives. Ecotrails conducts a wide range of programs and initiatives designed to progressively empower the local communities with which it collaborates. Central to their community development is the granting of full operational control of all their conservation-based initiatives to local community members – both the permanently settled Batwa people and the large group of small-scale farmers that live at the edge of the forest [42-44]. Empowerment, defined as "the ability of local community members to make their own choices and influence decisions affecting their lives," was frequently discussed by the stakeholders. Through this avenue, community members gain control over their communities, their resources, and the institutions affecting them. Empowerment strategies allow local community members to access and control information that is essential to making informed choices about community resources and to act on this information to improve social, economic, and political conditions. According to the stakeholders interviewed, empowerment was facilitated concretely through education and awareness training programs, economic opportunities, and community engagement [45-48].

### **Academic Impact of Sustainable Tourism Initiatives**

However, little research has focused on comprehensive assessments of the integrated sustainability impacts of tourism initiatives. The following section will outline how the value of tourism initiatives in the FSARS and the broader area of unemployed can be assessed based on the best available ecological, cultural, and socio-economic data. It is through final research methods of ecology, socioeconomic environment, and social heritage that will encourage practitioners and researchers to understand and present the comprehensive impact of conservation or tourism programs, further improving field sustainability. A single case study, which highlights the FSARS conservation, ecotourism, and social initiatives of global success in the last 15 years, expects a model where comprehensive sustainability impact can be reviewed in two world patterns, with the associated knowledge acquired from investments in research in a learning network that supports the process to standardize in this research strategy, which aims to global model dimensions. Sustainable tourism initiatives can also drive academic research activity that is of scientific and social benefit [49, 50]. Research that has been conducted in the context of FSARS and the border collie programs indicates links between tourism, biodiversity conservation, and the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for poverty eradication, school education, civil society capacity, biodiversity conservation, and partnerships for sustainability. Additional academic direction suggests that partnerships such as FSARS Stool will be able to enhance environmental education, create micro-enterprise opportunities in a variety of areas such as improvements in the production and sale of food items, gifts, and clean energy, educational activities, and other areas from income increase, transfer potential tourism expectations and improve the network capacity for sustainability, education, and climate change adaptation. New studies focus on accessibility and potential participation barriers, tourist perceptions; and anti-poaching [51-53].

### **Research and Knowledge Generation**

The impetus for this arose when the research was conceptualized during an academic visit to a tourism site. Analyzing some legal and institutional aspects, the institution was not in principle effectively allowing some business organizations specifically tourism and hotels to run. However, through a top-bottom approach, the government institution which is the Uganda Wildlife Authority tried to sensitize



the local people and other individuals about ecological systems, and the people later started advocating for the project implementation after directly seeing the benefits of the business. In one way or another, previous empirical studies, for example, showed that "Though tourism brings opportunities for financial gain for businesses and entrepreneurs, poverty and disparity may remain or even intensify amongst communities". Also, the Uganda Government, expressed in the National Development Plan II, that despite the benefits deriving from foreign direct investments, tourism sector development is faced with mainly domestic challenges [54]. Several studies have looked at the economic, social, environmental, as well as policy, academic, and other related factors concerning tourism as well as business benefits. Similarly, other studies have looked at challenges related to community development and tourism in different dimensions. According to the communities' understanding, "a community is a group of people who form some kind of social unity, around a set of shared values, preferences, and beliefs. Community is also often thought of with a geographic dimension. People who live in the same geographic area often form a community". However, not much has been done taking a single country or region as a case study involving business/corporate, academic/researchers, institutional, and social structure [55].

#### **Collaboration with Educational Institutions**

One example from PFAS' operations is the MKiddey Aspen Guest House in Fort Portal, which is housed at the Mountains of the Moon University Staff quarters. The guest house is formed as a laboratory to train students from the university. Students learn all about guest house operations, including reservations management, housekeeping, different management styles, guest services, and sustainable practices such as waste separation and renewable energy use. The guest house provides jobs for 6 students as cleaners, housekeeping staff, chefs, as well as managerial roles. In addition, PFAS annually sponsors a graduation section, which aims at graduating students to pass out practical training and begin their own desired businesses. At least one of the interns who started a small business is still deeply involved in the internship programs, visiting and keeping in touch with the management for informal company and life guidance [56, 57]. "What PFAS is doing with students is great," explained Mr. Wanzusi, Ageratu and Tororo Country Hotel Manager. "Our students need a lot of practical skills in the work environment, and that's what PFAS has given them, which is going to make the company end competitive and benefit from their wide range of knowledge." One way to mentor talented students and help their campuses towards their own sustainability goals is to support interns from local universities at our properties. PFAS collaborates with four major universities in Uganda, namely Makerere University, Mountains of the Moon University, Uganda Christian University, and Bishop Stuart University. PFAS has already taken at least two students as interns in a year. The students are mostly from the Tourism faculty, with others being from Environmental Science, Economics, Business, and Family and Consumer Sciences. During their internship period, PFAS provides the students with accommodation, meals, a staff messenger/caretaker, and an operations supervisor. This allows the intern to be in-house and participate in anything possible [58-60].

#### **Capacity Building and Skills Development**

Capacity building is defined as a long-term, continuing process to upgrade levels of knowledge capital, entrepreneurship and cooperative coordination, and organizations' operational efficiencies to enable them to compete effectively in given industrial regions or market niches. In contrast, skills development focuses on training the internal business stakeholders—usually managers, employees, and volunteers in the application of various technologies expected to maintain the first stance of current industrial standards. It has globally become a theme with high prominence as demonstrated by the initiation of themes such as 'Innovating for Sustainable Development'. This theme is particularly designed to drive sustainable industrial development thereby reducing poverty, and safeguarding environmental resources whilst adapting to the dynamic world of work that demands advanced technology [61]. Over the past two decades, there has been a significant impact on capacity building and skills development as a result of effective sustainable tourism initiatives. Eco-tourism, as promoted in these African safari holidays, is a major measure by countries to reach their societal development goals. Many tourism operators are enhancing their corporate image and competitiveness. For instance, Silverback Lodge's reputation was internationally enhanced, and the cooperation was strong on the framework of their sustainable operation and high on providing value to the customers and the respective societies. Similarly, in the case of CTPH, their partnership and local knowledge brought biodiversity and societal benefits, e.g., improved livelihoods, and increased local support. In summary, the spirit of partnership between the two organizations was an effective measure in reaching their common societal objectives. Therefore, capacity building and skills development are vital innovations for tourism development in local and global society [62].

## CONCLUSION

Sustainable tourism initiatives in Western Uganda have the potential to drive economic growth, create job opportunities, and preserve cultural heritage while empowering local communities. However, realizing these benefits requires concerted efforts to address challenges such as unequal distribution of benefits, environmental degradation, and limited access to resources. By fostering collaboration between stakeholders, promoting community involvement, and implementing targeted interventions, Western Uganda can unlock the full potential of tourism as a catalyst for sustainable development.

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