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Community-based Ecotourism as a Sustainable Development Option. Case of the Taita Hills, Kenya.


Since the 1980s, ecotourism has been promoted as a way to harmonize nature conservation goals with socio-economic development; however, in many cases ecotourism fails to bring real benefits to local communities. Community-based ecotourism emerged during the past decade as a new type of business (WWF, 2001) that empowers local communities and encourages their active involvement in planning and management of local resources. Sharing in the benefits helps motivate local communities to contribute to conservation efforts.

This book discusses the opportunities for community-based ecotourism development in the Taita Hills, South-Eastern Kenya and demonstrates the potential of ecotourism to contribute to both ecological and social sustainability of local communities. While various aspects of ecotourism in protected areas of Kenya have been extensively studied, the present research is highly original in its focus on community-based ecotourism in the Taita Hills, an area “off the beaten tracks”.

In the introduction, the author briefly states the interdisciplinary aims of the study: first, to identify the opportunities for development of community-based ecotourism in Taita Hills and second, to demonstrate the role ecotourism could play in the conservation of local environment and in the revitalization of local communities.

The study is guided by two main theoretical approaches. The first is the inter-dependence between ecosystem conservation and community viability, which calls for community-based natural resource management. The second is the ecotourism potential analysis, which allows an evaluation of the compatibility of local resources with the development of community-based ecotourism and the assessment of the potential role of ecotourism in economic development and conservation.

After a brief review of the methodology used in the research in the second chapter, the author makes an inventory of both physical and human geographical features of the study area in the following chapter. Taita Hills (Taita Taveta District) cover approx. 1000 square kilometers and are home to indigenous mountain rain forests, rich in biodiversity (including many endemic species) but severely degraded. Environmental degradation is the result of steady population increase and growing human pressures on local natural resources. 78% of the population relies on small-scale subsistence farming and farmland expansion has been the main driving force of deforestation and forest degradation.

Kenya remains Africa's most popular wildlife tourism destination, due to the diversity of its natural resources and an extensive network of protected areas. In chapter four, the author examines Kenya’s tourism policy which has seen a shift towards more sustainable forms since the 1980s. Ecotourism is being promoted as a sustainable form of management of local natural resources (forest, water, farmland) and for its benefits to local communities: alternative employment and incomes, revitalization of local traditions, conservation of natural environment.

However, many such projects have failed to involve local communities; excluded from the planning and management of ecotourism businesses and cut from the benefits, local communities are not motivated to participate in conservation efforts.

Taita Hills and their forests are not yet a popular destination. While diversification of local economy is needed, the author warns that development of ecotourism in the area should be carefully planned, ensuring involvement of local communities.

Chapter five reviews experiences of community based natural resource management and ecotourism projects from Africa and Central America. There are examples of both successful and failed projects, and the most important lesson learned is that local people should have a central role in planning and management of local
resources, an approach that can benefit both nature conservation and local community development (Rutten, 2004).

After a brief evaluation of the compatibility of ecotourism with protected areas in chapter 6, the author proceeds, over the next two chapters, to make an assessment of ecosystem and community viability of the research area, demonstrating their interdependence and the need for community-based resource management.

Ecosystem viability in Taita Hills has been negatively affected by deforestation, land degradation and water scarcity. Investigations reveal that local communities are affected by an array of social problems: reduced access to farmland, water and energy resources, unemployment and poverty, limited access to education and health care. With 95% of household revenues coming from farming, there is an acute need for alternative employment and incomes.

The author notes that dealing with the social and economic concerns of the local communities is essential for the success of conservation actions and recently such steps have been initiated. Government development projects in the area give priority to the economic diversification and creation of ecotourism businesses; community participation in forest resources planning and management has been recently introduced. By providing tangible benefits to local communities, projects initiated by the government and various international NGOs aim at creating a pro-conservation attitude.

National agricultural and land-use policies recently promote sustainable agricultural production and agroforestry, as a source of alternative rural income and environmental protection. The author also praises the National Tourism Master Plan and new tourism policy (since 2000) and the recent shift toward sustainable forms of tourism (mainly ecotourism).

In the following chapter, the author makes a multi-layered assessment of the ecotourism potential of Taita Hills; thoroughly documented, it represents the most original contribution of this book, both in terms of methodological approach and results.

Recent market trends point to the increasing demand for ecotourism and the author finds that Taita Hills have the potential to capitalize on the new opportunities. Recent diversification of demand could be a chance for community-based ecotourism ventures in the area.

An exhaustive inventory of natural and cultural tourism assets of Taita Hills, based on 4 case studies (one village and three indigenous forests) reveals the area’s high tourism potential. The three indigenous forests investigated scored well in terms of natural and cultural potential for ecotourism (biodiversity, landscapes, local traditions, human resources). In the near future, community management of the forests will make possible forest-connected ecotourism activities.

In the village, investigations showed the acute need for alternative employment and revenues. Locals welcome the idea of tourism development and are aware of the existing natural and cultural potential, but remain concerned about the lack of suitable infrastructure and tourism facilities. Locals view their lack of management skills and investment capacity as huge handicaps in implementing community-based ecotourism projects, and welcome outside investors/operators.

All four case studies show good natural potential for ecotourism development, but the area’s overall infrastructure lags behind both in terms of basic networks such as transportation, electricity, water, as well as specialized tourism supporting infrastructure such as tourist information centers and sign posts.

In the concluding chapter, the author appreciates that Taita Hills have good potential for ecotourism development (location in the proximity of two well visited national parks, natural and cultural assets and local peoples’ positive attitude towards ecotourism). For the successful implementation of community-based ecotourism businesses, the author notes that there are three main issues that need to be addressed. One is the creation of new infrastructure and upgrading of the existing one. The second one is the environmental education component; the author proposes the creation of an environmental education center (for both visitors and locals alike), which could contribute to raising awareness of and enhancing commitment to conservation. The third issue is outside funding and guidance (capacity building for planning and management). National and regional authorities, NGOs and other international bodies active in the area could make an important contribution in addressing these issues.

With this well-documented study, the author convincingly demonstrates that community-based ecotourism has the potential to become the best option in dealing with the apparently incompatible goals of conservation and local development, to safeguard both the ecological sustainability and local communities’ viability in the area.
References


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