

The Contribution of Vocation Hotels to Ecotourism Development in Rwanda: A Case of Musanze District

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Abstract: According to Honey (2008), Ecotourism refers to responsible tourist activities that conserve the environment, the local culture as well as fostering the social- economic propensity of the local population. Given that the vision of Rwanda in the sector of tourism is to become a leading ecotourism destination in the East African Region, this study was carried out with the intention of examining the extent to which the Vocation Hotels in Musanze district which is the leading tourism destination in Rwanda were putting into practice the principles of ecotourism in their daily operations. Eight four and five star country lodges were used in this study. The data was collected through documents and records review as well as observation. The Vocation Hotels in Musanze district are contributing to ecotourism development in different ways. They are designed in a way that promotes environment conservation because their cottages and rooms nestled in Eucalyptus trees forests .The Vocation Hotel are also committing to extensive reforestation initiatives in the district by providing indigenous forest shrubs, bamboo shoots and trees for an extensive reforestation initiative. The design and furniture of some lodges depict the culture of Rwanda. For example, many of them comprise of cottages which are designed in stone and grass thatch both of which are cultural materials that were used in construction of houses in Rwanda. Others are designed with handmade bamboo tree stems which is an architectural and interior design is borrowed from Rwandan building tradition of the Royal Palace. The vocation hotels in Musanze district also make provision of financial benefits to the local communities through financing different socio-economic development projects.

Keywords: Vocation Hotel, Tourism, Ecotourism Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ecotourism rose from the fact that the continual flux of tourists is not always beneficially for the environment since human activities slowly down grade the ecosystem (Evans et al, 2003). The ecotourism concept aims at managing the business of tourism so that an equitable share of the cash gains remain in the local host community while lessening the environmental ramifications *and* providing the eco-tourists with an upgraded nature based experience. Ecotourism is firmly connected and associated to conservation and interpretation of the natural world, which makes it distinguished from the common concept of sustainable tourism (Clerk and Achen, 2007).

According to Honey (2008), Ecotourism pertains to responsible tourist activities that conserve the environment and assist the local population. It demands for protecting the natural environment as well as empowering the

people dwelling inside a particular ecosystem. Kiprop (2019), contends that since the late 1980s, Ecotourism has come to be a well-liked option for many people to travel the world because it endeavors to reduce and alleviate unfavorable effect of tourism on the environment.

Ecotourism also has become a famous form of tourism because it fosters to empower the communities, finance conservation efforts, and provide cultural and educational knowledge to tourists (Sharpley (2009). Sharpley (2009), further states that Ecotourism is concerned with linking up nature, wildlife, conservationists, tourists, and local communities to create a sustainable ecosystem and develop long-term sustainability programs rather than short-term profit-making industries. The objective of ecotourism is therefore, to develop tourist activities, attractions, and accommodations that benefit every stakeholder.

According to Kiprop ((2019), the intention of ecotourism is to advance tourist accommodations, activities, and attractions that give without exception an advantage to all parties associated with ecotourism development. The parties referred to are the local flora/fauna, the local people, travel industry stakeholders, and tourists. Besides this, the ecotourism industry has conjointly advanced a number of key guiding principles over the past few decades which provide a broad design for responsible tourism development. (Sharpley, 2009).

Vacation hotels are the lodging of choice for people wanting to experience nature and support ecotourism. The characteristics of a vacation Hotel is that it's located in a natural area, or in a rural area within a short distance to a natural area, and is not significantly impacted by a town site, noise, traffic, smog or pollution. A vacation hotel is an accommodation establishment located within or near a holiday attraction area and in which the majority of clients are holiday makers. (Black, 2015).

The other characteristics of the country lodge are that it often employs energy saving tactics and possibly renewable energy technology, employs, or has access to, interpretive nature guides who are either trained in biology or have significant local knowledge of the habitat. It also provides books, posters, maps, photographs, orientation talks or other ways to inform guests and visitors about the biology of the area (Black, 2015).

A country lodge also helps train and employ local people at fair wages, helps inform guests, staff and visitors on the importance and value of a healthy ecosystem and describes how to best enjoy the area without impacting it, contributes to the local economy and helps demonstrate that ecotourism is a more sustainable long term way to earn income than destroying or altering habitats for short term gains (Hunt et al, 2014).

The researcher was motivated to undertake this study because the vision of Rwanda Tourism Policy states that Rwanda will become an eco-tourism destination with the private sector like the investors in Country lodges playing a critically important role in the development and promotion of ecotourism (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2009). This study examined the extent to which

the country lodges were putting into practice the principles of ecotourism in their daily functioning. The country lodges used in this study were those of four and five star rated which were eighty in number. The names of the studied Vacation hotels were Sabyinyo Silver back Bisate , Mountain gorilla view and La Bamboo Gorilla view hotel. Others were Mountain Gorilla nest , Kwitonda and Kazana House, Singida and One and Only Gorilla net hotel. The study adopted qualitative survey of secondary data and observation as the major source of information.

THE PRINCIPLES OF ECOTOURISM

Building environmental & cultural awareness.

According to (Sharpley, 2009), education is an essential feature of ecotourism development for locals and visitors alike. The purpose of education is to improve understanding and to stimulate people on environmental issues as well as motivating them to be aware of their effect on the places they visit. Some country lodge operators generate conservation education programs for local schools. Many of such lodges offer interpretative guides, naturalists, and guest lecturers to assist strengthening travelers' comprehension of their travel encounters. Enticing tourists' interplay with local cultures are also becoming increasingly repeated in several ecotourism sites. These encounters frequently stress inter-linkages rather than a normal performer-audience relationship with visitors (Evans et al, 2003)

Operating low-impact practices/facilities.

The focal point of ecotourism is all about sustainability, keeping down and neutralizing the carbon footprint which tourists time and again leave on the natural sites that they visit. Using alternative energy sources is a key consideration at ecotourism sites and at facilities like country lodges. The alternative energy used at such sites are mainly solar energy, biogas and rather than using hydroelectric power, firewood or charcoal which damage the environment. The design of buildings largely utilize local construction techniques, materials and the interior furnishing is often done with local materials.

While designing ecotourism sites, deliberate considerations are also put together to guarantee manageable and tolerable impact at every phase, from development to execution. Ecotourism projects highlight sustainability and keeping down the carbon traces of the tourism industry. The aim of ecotourism initiatives is to use renewable sources of energy and ensure that construction materials of ecotourism facilities like country lodges are sourced locally to benefit the local population. Construction of tourist facilities should not influence the behavior of animals or damage the environment by polluting For example, Site lighting should be limited so as not to disturb nocturnal wildlife feeding it (Sharpley, 2009).

Provision of financial benefits for conservation.

Sharpley (2009), contends that Ecotourism aims at generating revenue to fund the conservation of wildlife and their habitats. The United States National Park Service has made use of the scheme of using ecotourism to raise funds utilized in wildlife conservation since it was setup more than 100 years ago. Also over 6,000 national parks in more than 100 countries across the globe have instituted this perspective. Honey (2008), asserts that the right administration of these funds can benefit conservation endeavors such as restocking and introduction of animals, construction of fences, better anti-poaching programs, and fund development in local communities. Goodwin (2011) attested that when handled in the right way, ecotourism can give a revenue-generating substitute to urbanization, deforestation, unsustainable agriculture, and poaching. And though critics claim ecotourism often fails to deliver on its promise, recent scientific studies continue to illustrate its conservation benefits.

Provision of financial benefits for local people.

Evans et al (2003), revealed that accurate ecotourism produces financial gains to inhabitants, whether through direct (tours, admission fees, and donations) or indirect means (such as taxes on travel or accommodation). It broadly works best when there is smaller scale, slower growth, and greater involvement by local communities in all stages of the tourism evolution proceedings. Hunt, Durham (2014,) attest that Ecotourism tries to empower the local people by giving them a different source of revenue to poaching and degradation of the natural ecosystem. Responsible ecotourism must have an economic impact on the local people directly through admission and tour fees or indirectly through accommodation and taxes, In addition to increasing awareness about sociopolitical and environmental issues facing a given destination, ecotourism initiatives support local businesses and the rights of indigenous inhabitants to control their land and assets (Sharpley, 2009).

THE ECO- TOURISM ATTRACTIONS IN MUSANZE DISTRICT

Volcanic mountains viewing

Musanze is Rwanda's most mountainous district, accommodating the largest part of the Volcanoes National Park, and its head office. Five of the eight volcanoes of the Virunga chain (Karisimbi, Bisoke, Sabyinyo, Gahinga and Muhabura) are inside the district frontiers. The ecotourism activities done on the five volcanoes is scene viewing, photography and mountain climbing (Spenceley, 2008).

Mountain Gorilla tracking

The district of Musanze is a leading tourism destination in the country because its home for the prominent and distinctive mountain gorillas that live in Volcanoes National Park. Before the outbreak of the Corona Virus pandemic,

the gorillas used to attract on an annual attract nearly a 30.000 tourists from all over the world who enjoyed tracking gorillas (Republic of Rwanda, 2012)

Twin lakes eco-activities

In Musanze district is found Lake Bulera and Ruhondo which are close to each other. Being geographically near each, they are repeatedly alluded to as twin lakes of Rwanda. In and around these lakes , different eco-tourism activities are done by the visitors of Musanze district. These activities are village walk, canoeing, camping and birding. There are various birds which are found on two rivers, Mpenge, and Mukungwa the flow out of the twin lakes of Burera and Ruhondo. In addition, Rugezi swamp in which the two lakes are found is a huge wetland which is a habitat for over 100 bird species which attract bird watchers. Cyuza Island in Lake Burera is especially used for tourists camping (Face 2 Face Africa, 2019).

Musanze Caving

Another key eco-tourism attraction in the district is Musanze Cave which is a sequence of vast egg-shaped chambers, some of which are connected to each other. The cave which are believed to be over one million years old were formed during the creation of volcanoes in the area by lava flow from Bisoke and Sabyinyo volcanoes. The Musanze caves are believed to have been used as shelter by Kings of Rwanda during war with neighboring states. The two kilometers cave has 31 entrances which are used for caving which is an ecotourism activity in which tourists walk through it for recreation purposes (Green Global travel, 2018)

Musanze cave was developed for tourism in 2013 by the Rwanda Development Boards' Tourism and Conservation Department and since then, it has turned out to be a great tourist attraction, attracting big numbers of foreign travelers and investors in mostly country lodges. Since it was officially recognized as tourism products, the Rwanda Development Board, the agency responsible for attracting investments to the country, and the country's military embarked on considerable restyling by constructing walkways, trails and stairs, as well as, paved floors to easy tourists' movement. These caves are currently traversed by tourists for 3 hours using a torch, helmet and gloves (Mudingu, 2017)..

Golden Monkey tracking

Golden Monkey tracking is also a famous tourism activity that is enjoyed by tourists who visit Musanze District. The Golden monkeys, just like mountain gorillas are endangered primates which are tracked by tourists who visit Musanze district and they are comparatively easier to find compared to mountain gorillas because they live on the lower slopes of the volcanoes (Kutesa, 2019).

Cultural experiences

Rwanda Cultural experiences which is one of ecotourism activity is displayed at the gorilla Guardians village in Musanze district. The village was started as project to help former poachers benefit from tourism as an alternative source of income but has expanded to embrace many numerous tourism products. Most tourists who go to visit the Volcanoes national park stop at the Village for a cultural experience before departing the country. Most of the exhibits show how a Rwandan homestead looked like before the arrival of colonialism. The tourists catch site of ancient huts, spears, bows and arrows. There is also a local medicine man at the Centre who is all the time ready to exhibit how normal ailments can be cured using natural solutions. The imitation of a royal palace as well as a royal regalia can also be seen in one of the center wing (Goodwin, 2011).

After touring different parts of the Village, visitors also watch traditional dance performances and can take part in playing local music instruments (drums and flutes). Local beer is also put at tourists' disposal for those who are curious about traditional beer. The Gorilla guardian village is also place to buy local souvenir because close to this cultural center, there is an art gallery, the Inshuti Arts and Culture Center where handcrafts are made and sold to tourists (Goodwin, 2011).

Canoeing at the Mukungwa River

This Mukungwa River which is located outside the town of Musanze is place for relaxation and adventure where tourists move on the river in hand propelled small boats called Canoes. While going to the river from Musanze town, the tourists are able to tour and overlook the landscape, local people and birds (Hales, 2005)

Buhanga Eco-Park eco- experiences

This park is found in the sacred Buhanga forest where the Kings of Rwanda would be crowned after going through several ceremonies and rituals. The chosen king would be taken to the forest in a carriage all the way from the Royal palace in Nyanza. On reaching the forest, the king would be showered in the spring water and then quest for the blessings of the elders and gods. The site has been revamped with more trails to let visitors tour all the caves, ditches and boulders with easy. While on a guided tour, tourists can learn about the history and myths surrounding the place. A key attraction of the park are three trees that have grown to form one known as "Inyabutatu". These trees symbolize the three different tribes in Rwanda that were united under one King (Muriithi, 2017).

THE PRACTICE OF ECOTOURISM BY VACATION HOTELS IN MUSANZE DISTRICT

Promotion of environment & cultural awareness by Vacation Hotels

The Mountain Gorillas' Nest Hotel design promotes environment conservation because the lodge offers two family cottages nestled in Eucalyptus trees forest (Kipror, 2019). One and only Gorilla's Nest lodge is home to 14 luxury rooms and 7 suites, all encircled by trees. Kwitonda Lodge and Kataza House is supporting the conservation of endangered mountain gorillas by committing to extensive reforestation initiatives in the region. It has provided approximately 250,000 indigenous flora from its on-site nursery. Kwitonda Lodge and Kataza House in Rwanda lodge's on-site nursery, Akarabo (which means "little flower" in Kinyarwanda) has to date provided approximately 250,000 indigenous forest shrubs, bamboo shoots and trees for an extensive reforestation initiative (Ngabonziza, 2018).

Singida Lodge has also established an on-site nursery that already holds more than 60,000 plants, with exponentially more specimens to be added in the next phase of the project. Many of the plants have been purchased from neighboring communities, including nursery cooperatives run by locals that have been established and are actively supported by Singita Lodge in the form of skill and knowledge sharing, as well as through ongoing procurement (Ngabonziza, 2018).

The design and furniture of some lodges depict the culture of Rwanda. For example, Mountain Gorilla View Lodge comprises of 30 cottages which designed in stone and grass thatch both of which are cultural materials that were used in construction of houses in Rwanda. Le Bambou Gorilla Village lodge which is a safari accommodation situated in Volcanoes national park is designed with handmade bamboo tree stems and Bisate lodge's architectural and interior design is borrowed from Rwandan building tradition of the Royal Palace (Kutesa, 2019).

The Mountain Gorillas' Nest lodge Traditional Imigongo art and craftsmanship fill each space with rich Rwanda culture, as expansive glass opens onto breathtaking views of Pyrethrum farmland, lush gardens of traditional crops and Eucalyptus forest (Mudingu, 2017). Kwitonda Lodge and Kataza House in Rwanda design has an ode to the local culture and the beauty of gorillas. The lodge the suites have striking interiors, with a vivid palette inspired by the natural landscape of mountains, volcanoes, and lakes. Local artisans were also engaged to craft its volcanic walls, woven ceilings and hand-fired terracotta brickwork (Ngabonziza, 2018).

Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge comprises six cottages, two suites, one family cottage. All are stone buildings with Rwandese terracotta tile roofs. Bisate lodge built near a small town is made up of six 91-square-meters villas in an eroded volcanic cone. The villas are shaped like chestnuts or weaver birds' nests

and local materials made of local Blackwood, black volcanic brick and woven walls have been used throughout the floors (Hunt et al, 2014).

Providing economic and social benefits to the local communities

From 2015 to 2017, Sabyinyo Silverback lodge spent approximately USD2.5 million on socio-economic development projects. The money given by the lodge has been used to the following projects. On the side of social development, five schools providing education to 3200 students have been refurbished. The money has also been used to reconstruct a local primary school of 71 class rooms housing 2500 pupils, providing school fees for 120 children from the poorest families and constructing and equipping a computer laboratory for the community. Sabyinyo Silverback lodge also has facilitated the community of Musanze district to get clean water. Water tanks and water collection points have been constructed in addition to protecting water dispersal systems and erosion control. The above country lodge has further more constructed a healthy center, 91 houses for survivors of genocide and for other poor people including ex-poachers and has been paying money for medical insurance of 4000 needy people in the area where its located (Black, 2015)

On the economic promotion side, Sabyinyo Silverback lodge has done a lot to promote the economic wellbeing of the community. The lodge has financed a rural electrification project covering 3500 houses, set up a tourist community walk activity enhancing local crafts and business and built a community cultural center. Other community income generating projects that have been supported by Sabyinyo Silverback lodge are providing financial and technical support to local bee keepers, establishing and supporting a local pig and sheep rearing project. Furthermore, the lodge has purchased land for a poultry project for widows of genocide, set up carpentry and micro enterprises for the community, set up a vegetable garden the community farming project.

Sabyinyo Silver back lodge has also donated 48 cows to the poorest community members, constructed/repared the buffalo wall along volcanoes national park's edge to protect farmers crops from marauding buffalos. Lastly but not least, Sabyinyo Silverback lodge employs 50 staff, 90% of whom are from the local community (18% female and 82% male) and 97% of its procurement is locally produced. (Black, 2017)

Lodges usage of low -impact facilities

Bisate lodge harvests rainwater and reuse it as grey water for toilet and shower usage. The waste water (sewage and grey water) is treated in a sewage plant to ensure that water is clean before entering the natural system. In order to reduce use of bottled water reverse osmosis, filtration is done on site to provide guests with high quality drinking water. The lodge also avoids plastic at the lodge as much as possible by offering guests reusable drinking bottles. The lodge further tries to save energy used by using long-lasting LED lights to reduce electricity used and has installed skylights in common areas to use more natural

light during the day. In addition, a solar water heating system is used to heat swimming pool water (Muriithi, 2017) Water conservation is important for all business sustainability initiatives, but especially for country lodges and resorts that host numerous guests throughout the year. Using water in excess can also lead to groundwater contamination if sewage systems overflow. Conserving water also reduces energy use, thus saving lodges business money. In consideration of this, Sabyinyo Silverback lodge, Mountain Gorilla view lodge and La Bambou Gorilla village lodge have all installed low-flow shower heads and toilets, as well as sink aerators in hotel rooms to reduce water waste on a daily basis (Mudingu, 2017)

Some room amenities such as shampoo, soap, lotion, and coffee can all wreak havoc on the environment. To avoid damaging the environment, Mountain Gorilla nest lodge and Kwitonda lodge and Kazana house have switched to natural and organic toiletries in biodegradable or recyclable packaging and are using these items in bulk dispensers to cut back on needless waste. Another great way to reduce waste in guest rooms has been swapping plastic and paper cups used for coffee and drinks with reusable glasses and mugs (Pizam, 2015).

Linen reuse programs for hotels and resorts are another great idea in terms of reducing water and energy waste. All country lodges in Musanze district have linen and towel reuse program which offers guests the option to reuse their towels and linens more than once. Guests are encouraged to reuse their towels, sheets, and bedding so housekeeping can cut back on how many times they need to use the washing machines and electric dryers every day. These lodges provide pillow cards, towel cards, do not disturb signs so that guests can easily let the staff know when they plan to reuse their linens With this initiative, lodges can significantly reduce the amount of water and electricity needed to launder linens and towels on a daily basis, which help conserve natural resources (Ramsey and Ingram, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The vision of Rwanda Tourism Policy states that Rwanda will become an eco-tourism destination with the private sector like the investors in Country lodges playing a critically important role in the development and promotion of ecotourism. In consideration of the tourism policy vision, the researcher examined the extent to which the Country Lodges in Musanze district, which is the leading tourism destination in Rwanda were implementing ecotourism in their design and daily operations.

The study found out that the design and operations of country lodges in Musanze district was based on key eco-tourism principles which are conserving environment, culture and promoting social economic development of the community, For instance, most of the lodges were supporting the conservation of volcanoes national park by planting trees in its buffer zone and have adopted

power and water saving practices in their daily operations. The architectural design of each of lodges depicts the culture of Rwanda.

These country lodges are also supporting the socio-economic development of the community in different ways. For instance they have by initiated and are financing different projects like constructing schools, health centers, residential houses, water reservoirs and financing electricity distribution in the district. The lodges also are directly involved in providing technical and financial support to different income generating community projects.

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