

The Evolution of Ecotourism in East Africa: From an idea to an industry



Summary of the Proceedings
of the East African
Regional Conference on Ecotourism
Organised by
The African Conservation Centre,
PO Box 15289, Langata, 00509 Kenya

19-23 March 2002
Nairobi, Kenya

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This publication

Published by: International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), 3 Endsleigh Street, London, WC1H 0DD, UK.

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Citation: Watkin, J. R. (2003) *The Evolution of Eco-tourism in East Africa: From an Idea to an Industry.* Wildlife and Development Series No.15. International Institute for Environment and Development, London.

ISBN: 1 84369 431 0

ISSN: 1361 8628

Edited by Lizzie Wilder

Illustrations by Jared Crawford

Designed by Andy Smith

Printed by Oldacres, London

Note: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and workshop participants and do not necessarily represent those of IIED.

African Conservation Centre

The African Conservation Centre is a regionally focused conservation organisation based in Nairobi. Through constant interaction with people who live with wildlife in areas outside parks, the African Conservation Centre has come to understand and appreciate the critical role of these communities in the conservation of wildlife and other natural resources. The African Conservation Centre aims to link science to conservation and conservation to people through its multi-disciplinary approach to conservation. In order to achieve these ends, the organisation has set for itself three main goals as follows:

- To provide the sound scientific information which is necessary for implementing sustainable conservation programs.
- To work with rural communities and local landowners to enhance the conservation of wildlife and natural resources for the mutual benefit of both people and animals and to provide communities with the skills necessary for the management of wildlife and wildlife-based enterprises through links with the private sector and donors.
- To support the development of human and institutional capacity for applied conservation research within the region.

The African Conservation Centre maintains a multi-disciplinary team of professional scientists and support staff. Professional staff members are attached to specific programs or support activities and include professionals in ecology and conservation, forestry, natural resource economics, sociology, program development and computer science.

Acknowledgements

This publication is based upon the proceedings of the East Africa Regional Conference on Ecotourism, held in March 2002 in Nairobi, Kenya. The author would like to express thanks for the support received for this conference from The African Conservation Centre, The Community Development Trust Fund – Biodiversity Conservation Programme, Conservation International, Eco-resorts, Ecotourism Society of Kenya, The Ford Foundation, Rainforest Alliance, The International Ecotourism Society and United Nations Environment Programme. Thanks also to Wanjiru Macharia, Anne Loehr and Neel Inamdar, who organised and staged the conference and the volunteers who provided invaluable assistance.

The case studies have been drawn from reports by a number of consultants who visited the various projects. Thanks to Richard Hatfield, Agrippinah Namara and Reena Shah. Dr Matthew Walpole of the Durrell Institute for Conservation Ecology, University of Canterbury, UK, reviewed an earlier version of the manuscript and made many positive changes.

The Ford Foundation provided funds to support the writing-up of the East African Regional Conference on Ecotourism and the drafting of this manuscript, for which the African Conservation Centre is extremely grateful.

Finally, thanks to all the African Conservation Centre staff for their support and hard work which enables the organisation to strive to “link science, conservation and people”.

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Preface

Ecotourism has been dismissed as a fad, a marketing tool, even travel industry greenwashing. Yet despite the pundits, ecotourism has begun to affect the entire tourist industry for the better. The unexpected success of ecotourism can be explained by its conservation roots, changing tourist mores and community involvement.

Far from being a new force for conservation, tourism was the main reason for the creation of national parks in the late 1800s. In Africa, tourists and conservationists were thrown together by a common interest in wildlife. The upshot was the preservation of vast tracts of natural land ranging from Kruger to Serengeti.

Over the last century a booming tourist industry around the world has done more to conserve natural areas than any other industry. Put simply, the ‘tourist’ stem of the word ‘ecotourism’ is the main cause of its success. Its durability, on the other hand, comes down to the ‘eco’ prefix and the shortcomings of conventional tourism.

Burgeoning wildlife tourism and a ‘laissez faire’ commercialisation pose a threat to wildlife and, indirectly, to tourists’ enjoyment. Yosemite Valley filled with shopping malls and Amboseli cheetahs cowering from fleets of minibuses is bad for the wilds and tourists alike. The park manager’s response was more roads, hardened trails and tougher regulations. That helped, but at the expense of nature and visitor freedom. A few discerning visitors began to go elsewhere to enjoy the wilds and to help preserve them.

The ‘eco’ in ecotourism took on a deeper meaning when conservationists saw sense in these discerning tourists’ visiting threatened areas outside parks and in promoting their environmental sensibilities as an exemplar of responsible tourism. By the late 1970s, a small sector of the wildlife industry in East Africa was ‘ecotourism’ in all but name.

There was, however, one vital ingredient of ecotourism still lacking: social responsibility. No park is ecologically self-sufficient. Each is hewn from the lands owned by a local community, and therefore the ecology is strongly linked to this community. Various conservationists began promoting policies that made local communities the beneficiaries of conservation on their lands, and therefore partners in conservation, rather than adversaries.

Today, dozens of communities around the world are actively encouraging visitors because they see tangible

benefits from nature conservation. Ecotourism is at the core of these new initiatives. A welter of workshops, conservation programs and academic treaties has evaluated the successes and shortcomings of ecotourism. Oddly, none of them brings together the communities to ask what it will take for them to become a driving force in ecotourism.

The African Conservation Centre's workshop on 'Ecotourism in East Africa: Walking the Eco-Path' fills a critical gap by bringing local communities together with the tourist industry, wildlife agencies and conservationists to discuss how to make ecotourism an enduring part of the rural landscape.

As outlined in these proceedings, the task will not be easy. Conducive national policies must be combined with savvy business skills, social responsibility and sound conservation practices, all in a way that encourages rather than smothers responsible tourism.

David Western, 31st March 2003

Introduction

This publication is based upon the proceedings of the East African Regional International Year of Ecotourism Conference, held in Nairobi between 19–23 March 2002. Over two hundred people participated in this conference. More than half of the participants were community representatives from established ecotourism ventures throughout the region and beyond. The conclusions from this conference and other regional conferences contributed to the World Ecotourism Summit as well as preparing for the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Cairns Ecotourism Conference scheduled for October 2002 in Australia.

The Evolution of Ecotourism in East Africa

"Time had come for a new approach, an approach resting on fairness and local involvement rather than on alienation and enforcement. Why should local communities not become the principal beneficiaries and ultimate custodians of wildlife, as they had always been, without sacrificing the larger interests of society?" Western 1997.

These were Dr David Western's thoughts regarding the Amboseli Basin in Kenya in the late 1960s, as detailed in his book 'In the dust of Kilimanjaro'. His views represented the early ideas emerging in the 1960s about what is now known as 'ecotourism'. In East Africa the colonial legacy of protected areas for the elite did not meet the growing demands of the local population. The disparity between the wealthy tourists admiring wildlife and rural Africans who suffered at the hands of the same had to be reconciled for these areas to exist in the long-term.

Three reasons led to the divergence in the tourism market between the three countries that comprise the East African region. In 1977 the common border between Kenya and Tanzania was closed. At the same time, Kenya instigated a ban on trophy hunting which shut down the sport hunting industry. These factors, combined with the civil conflict in Uganda under the Amin rule, propelled Kenya's tourism industry along a different path to that of the surrounding area.

Photographic wildlife safaris and coastal holidays became the mainstay of the Kenyan mass tourism sector. At the same time 'ecotourism' was emerging. Whilst mass tourism catered for the majority of visitors to Kenya, small-scale environmentally sound lodges began to be established on private land where a savannah wildlife community still survived. These destinations offered a glimpse of 'traditional' Africa, and broke away from the normal vehicle-bound safari, offering a number of alternative activities such as walking safaris, camel and horseback treks.

Whilst tourists and the tourist industry were quick to adopt 'responsible tourism' pertaining to the environment and conservation, the idea of tourism providing benefits to local communities was more difficult to promote. Achieving benefits for the community – a vital component of an ecotourism enterprise – has consistently been a stumbling block of this sector of the industry.

Box 1: Ecotourism as a development tool

In 1996, the Il Ngwesi Group Ranch, located in Laikipia District, Kenya, adopted a new land diversification strategy: wildlife tourism. The main goal of this endeavour was to develop an additional source of income for the group ranch members to complement their normal pastoral livelihoods.

Key to the adoption of wildlife as a livelihood was the encouragement and example of their neighbour, Lewa Downs. This private ranch successfully converted from cattle ranching to wildlife conservation and tourism as its main income, and continues to maintain a high profile in the Kenyan wildlife field.

The Il Ngwesi project consists of two main elements. Firstly, the designation of nearly half the group ranch – 8,000 hectares – as a conservation area, in which habitation is banned and livestock grazing is permitted only times of need, and secondly, the construction of an ‘eco-friendly’ lodge using local materials to create a unique design. The lodge is managed and staffed by the local community, who act as guides to visitors both at the lodge and on bush walks. The main activities include walking, game driving, camel riding and cultural visits. The project has achieved widespread recognition, winning international travel awards, and is a successful pioneer effort in community conservation.

The community consists of some 400 households representing 3,000 people on 16,000 hectares, while. The Il Ngwesi Conservancy and Lodge is run by a board of directors comprising four elected community members and three external members who report to the Group Ranch Management Committee. In addition to the lodge manager and lodge staff, who are all community members, a project manager is also employed, primarily with a professional accounting function.

Benefits from the Il Ngwesi lodge have been realized on several levels. Revenue currently stands at KSh 3 million per year, of which approximately one third is paid to employed individuals in salaries, one third covers ecotourism operating expenses, and one third is available as benefits to the community in the form of community projects identified by the group ranch committee and approved by members. The highest priority is the provision of schools (so far three schools have been improved), followed by school bursaries and provision of health facilities. Funds are also used for road building and providing transport, as well as building cattle dips.

● Richard Hatfield

Despite initial problems, ecotourism has, during the last decade, become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry. The ideas surrounding this area of the industry have evolved gradually throughout its development, and a definition of ecotourism is now necessary. A widely accepted definition is:

“Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local

people.” The International Ecotourism Society

This definition was expanded by Honey (1999) to include seven aspects, as follows:

- Respects local culture.
- Involves travel to natural areas.
- Minimizes impact.
- Builds environmental awareness.
- Provides direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Supports human rights and democratic movements.

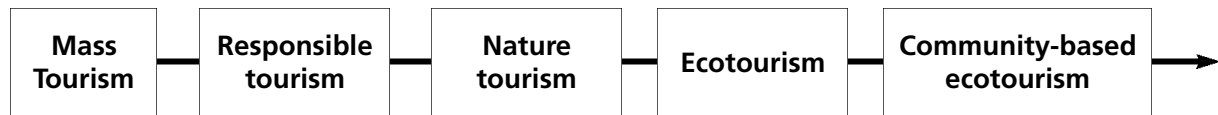
The essential ingredients of ecotourism have been described above. Genuine ecotourism should strive to combine these elements. Ecotourism is a responsible business opportunity, resulting in environmental and community benefits. These aims can be achieved in a number of ways depending upon the landscape, local culture and economy, and conservation needs in the locality.

Ecotourism does not simply consist of environmentally sound ecolodges: it provides a means for rural people to benefit from the wildlife and environment of which they have traditionally been custodians. It also required a change from foreign owned mass tourism facilities to community-based ecotourism.

Initially, pioneers in the ecotourism sector were regarded with suspicion. They were introducing a radical idea that was often beyond the comprehension of local



Ecotourism is for the traveller who wants a different experience



communities. These individuals realised that, without the support of local communities, the natural resource base would continue to be eroded to the detriment of all concerned.

In Kenya the earliest ecotourism ventures were initiated around National Reserves such as Amboseli, Masai Mara and on private ranches. Predominantly, white Kenyans and expatriates, with a broad perception of the future of the tourism industry and the potential of ecotourism, took these initial steps towards ecotourism.

Marketing the idea to communities was not without problems. Essentially, communities did not understand the need to offer a different product to the tourist market, and harboured reservations about the capacity of ecotourism to generate sustainable benefits.

Not only did the communities' perception have to change before implementation of the ideas: a massive shift in thinking and regulation of the tourist industry was also required. This shift would be along a spectrum as illustrated above.

A classic example of ecotourism is Il Ngwesi in Laikipia District, Kenya, a community owned and managed ecolodge and conservancy (see box 1). Many other ecotourism ventures have been established building on the lessons learned in Il Ngwesi, such as the Shompole Lodge above lake Magadi in Kenya (see box 2), the Tarangire

Conservation Company in Tanzania and community campgrounds around Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda (see box 3). These early attempts have shown that, despite initial apprehension, ecotourism can be achieved. However, the evolution from nature tourism, through ecotourism and on to the more inclusive community-based tourism is a long-term and complicated process.

Sectors Involved in Ecotourism

During the conference the participants agreed that to be successful, ecotourism endeavours must be approached from a business perspective with a "for profit" ethos. This method is dependent on the development of a business plan that includes an assessment of the potential market, the commercial viability, and the potential conservation and economic benefits.

This business plan must state the roles of individual partners and the extent of their involvement. It must also make clear the management system that is responsible for the organization of the enterprise. All partners, including communities, must be fully involved in each stage of the development. This involvement will improve the communities' understanding of the aims of the project and ensure that their expectations are realistic.

The management system is responsible for disbursing funds in an equitable and transparent manner to all

Box 2: On Shompole

As pastoralist communities seek to diversify their livelihood strategies, and as the international ecotourism market continues to grow, communities stand a greater chance of receiving benefits from wilderness and wildlife. A recent example is the Shompole Group Ranch near Lake Magadi: an area of spectacular scenery and abundant wildlife where local Maasai pursuing a traditional lifestyle decided to develop their own conservation project.

The group ranch established three goals of the conservation project: to realize benefits from wildlife use, to develop benefits from other natural resource use e.g. landscape, raw materials, bird shooting, bee-keeping, and to preserve their culture and way of life.

The community specifically did not wish any business enterprise to impact land issues, which are protected by the formal agreement. The community's concerns that they may be alienated from resources within the conservation area were countered by a clause allowing grazing during times of drought. In order to enhance the overall transparency of the project, the Project Management Committee holds public meetings in each sub-location to inform about new developments, benefits accruing, and the community's involvement, and the accounts of the joint venture are freely available to members.

As the lodge was newly opened in December 2001 it is too early to reflect on the practical impacts of the project's design. However, one issue still to be agreed upon is the distribution of benefits. Thus far, no formula exists for determining distribution of revenue, but discussions are taking place within the community, through the GRC. The approach currently favoured is to divide the revenue equally among the ranch sub-locations, to be spent on community projects such as schools and clinics. Project priority and fund disbursement would be decided at the sub-location level.

● Richard Hatfield

Box 3: Buhoma Rest Camp, Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, Uganda

Buhoma Rest Camp, located near Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda, was established in 1993. This community camp provides accommodation, food, entertainment and sale of local handcrafts to tourists, and uses the income to fund community infrastructure projects and to support education activities and community groups engaged in income generating projects. Members of the local community have received training in aspects of the tourist industry and are employed by the local tourist operators. Aside from the revenue generated from tourism there were few alternative sources of income, partly because the community had no means to transport visitors and supplies for the camp or send handcrafts to market.

The infamous 1999 massacre of eight American tourists in Bwindi affected overall visitor numbers. Before the unfortunate incident, the community had acquired a pick-up vehicle by hire/purchase after some part-payment. However, when tourist numbers slumped, they failed to raise money to complete the payments. The owner threatened to sue them for non-payment and the only solution was to sell the vehicle at a loss in order to pay the balance.

Since 1990, the Rest Camp has a good occupancy rate, capturing the low class tourist market comprising over-landers, back packers, local visitors and sometimes mid range tourists. However, they have not been able to market their services widely, especially the handcrafts made by the local people. They still lack international connections to export crafts, and lack of transport has prevented them from establishing a shop in a more strategic location to access more customers.

● Agrippinah Namara

partners. The benefits accrued from ecotourism must be focused on improving livelihoods as well as conserving biodiversity. A process of monitoring and evaluation should be incorporated into the business plan to assess changes in environmental factors and conservation goals in relation to other emerging factors and conditions. Within the monitoring programme, controls and baseline data on social and economic standards and environmental aspects should be integrated to allow comparisons to be drawn.

Ecotourism has several distinct features. The community must be involved as partners in the ecotourism enterprise, as opposed to superimposing a tourism enterprise upon them. With the expansion of this sector of the tourism industry, and the recognition of its potential positive impact on community development, this community involvement has become an increasingly important aspect of successful ecotourism initiatives.

Other potential partners can combine to undertake an ecotourism enterprise, including:

- Communities and landowners.
- Business community.
- Private individuals.
- Development agencies.
- Donors.
- Industry.
- Government.

During the conference, ten steps that help ensure effective implementation of an ecotourism enterprise were developed (Table 1). Each step is the responsibility of one or more of the partners involved in an ecotourism enterprise, and contributes to the development of the business and land-use plan and the management

structure. The steps also help promote accountability and establishment of a system of monitoring and evaluation as well as the legal agreements that hold the enterprise together.

Individual partners do have specific roles to undertake within the ten steps highlighted above. These have been broken down as follows.

Communities and landowners

Communities or landowners must initially decide whether ecotourism is the best landuse option. Ecotourism is only one of a number of ways to generate benefits from natural resource management, and other options should be quantified and compared with anticipated returns from ecotourism. It must also be accepted from the start that ecotourism is a long-term and alternative land-use, which may challenge their established perception. Only by making this commitment at the start will the enterprise return benefits.

It is virtually impossible to ensure that any development satisfies the needs of all members of the community. A committee or community-based organisation, that represents the aspirations of the majority of the members of the community, must be established to act on behalf of the community as a whole. There are potential problems with such a community-based organisation, such as corruption, and systems must be established to manage these problems at the community level.

The community-based organisation should act as the community representative to external partners as well as to reporting progress back to the larger community. For ecotourism enterprise to be successful is it vital

Step	Description	Parties responsible
1	Identification of product	Investors and Community
2	Feasibility study (including analysis of preliminary market demand, capital required at Environmental Impact Assessment)	Investor
3	Identification of stakeholders/potential partnership Action Plan	Investor, Community and Other Stakeholders
4	Sensitisation and mobilization of stakeholders (community focused)	Investor, Community Leaders, Community
5	Environmental Impact Assessment Community	Investor is responsible. Involvement of the Leaders and Experts is also required.
6	Formalise partnerships and legal requirements Other	Investor, Government, Community Leaders and Stakeholders
7	Implementation and mobilization of resources	Investor is responsible but Experts, Community Leaders Community and Other Stakeholders are involved
8	Marketing	Investor has primary responsibility Experts, Travel Agents, Ecotourism services, Community Leaders, Community and Other Stakeholders
9	Reaping the fruits	
10	Living up to your agreements/contract	

that the community appreciates the interests of the private sector partners, and informs the rest of the community about developments.

Donors and non-government organisations

Although other partners, especially communities, often perceive these two types of organisations as acting in tandem, there are distinct differences that should be clarified at an early stage. However, there are basic principals that apply to both of these organisations. Firstly, donors and non-government organisations need to maintain a neutral stance between the partners that come together to undertake an ecotourism enterprise. Their actions must be complementary, rather than contradictory.

Secondly, because of the perceptions above, the activities of donors and non-government organisations must be transparent and accountable throughout the process of developing an ecotourism enterprise. These activities must focus on outcomes and results that will ensure the sustainability of the project before their involvement comes to an end.

Private Investors

As partners in an ecotourism enterprise, the private sector must consider the goals of the community together with the communities' existing attitude towards ecotourism. Communities often fear that on entering

partnerships with the private sector they will be exploited. To overcome this, investors must be transparent and accountable and explain or interpret the agreements or contracts that the communities enter into. They must also adhere to established agreements and contracts.

Government

There is a dichotomy between the tourist industry, which wishes to regulate ecotourism internally, and the other partners and the government who would to see an independent body to oversee the development and maintenance of environmental standards and practices.

The government's role in the development of the ecotourism sector is detailed further on page 16. Essentially, governmental support is vital to the development of the ecotourism sector. Governments should strive to create an institutional framework policy, laws and procedures that encourage ecotourism as a means of rural development. This includes: tax and other financial incentives; promoting conservation and livelihood objectives of ecotourism; and ensuring safety and security.

Finally, governments must develop and implement a system that regulates and controls ecotourism enterprise and ensures suitable returns for the partners involved.

Diversifying the Ecotourism Sector

A typical ecotourism venture in East Africa comprises a luxury lodge that targets small numbers of high-end tourists. Whilst this ensures the maximum return with the minimum impact, it is an exclusive and finite market.

Alternative sources of revenue generation and contingency plans should be established to ensure that the business plan is sustainable.

As the rewards of ecotourism become increasingly realised there is also a need for the sector to diversify in order to benefit from all potential sectors of the market. There are two main areas that can be broadened.

- The sectors of the tourist market targeted by the facilities aim.
- The activities offered to clients as excursions from established lodges and hotels.

As well as the high-end clients, there are several other echelons within the tourist market. As ecotourism becomes more broadly understood and demanded by tourists, less exclusive clients will also choose facilities that satisfy the requirements of ecotourism, and fall within their price range.

There is also a perception that ecotourism must involve constructing an eco-lodge. However, many of the objectives of ecotourism can be achieved by offering alternative activities to tourists. This is especially true of communities neighbouring protected areas.

Although within protected areas activities are limited, often extending only to game drives and bird walks,

communities living outside the protected area can offer a range of activities to guests staying locally. Such activities should aim to educate or improve the understanding of the local culture.

Environmental interest groups

Clients interested in nature and environment benefit from exploring an unspoilt wilderness, which often holds rare and endangered species in a variety of landscapes. Local guides can enhance their understanding of the traditional importance of the elements that make up the landscape.

Adventure seekers

They are dependant on the landscape, but potentially ecotourism can provide a range of thrilling experiences from rafting, rock climbing, mountain biking and snorkelling to camel trekking and bush craft. Hunting and fishing may also be considered suitable activities to offer guests.

Cultural activities

Tourists looking to know more about different cultures gain a great deal through ecotourism as they have an authentic and honest exchange with local people. They also have opportunities that are not often available to mass tourists such as experiencing traditional customs at close hand. Clients also benefit from knowing that their proceeds are being returned to the community.

Table 2: A list of pros and cons of ecotourism developed during the regional conference on ecotourism in East Africa

	Pros	Cons
Economic	Revenue generation	Uneven benefit sharing between partners
	Employment	Low percentage of community employment
	Promotion of local micro enterprise	Risk of failure in small businesses
Environmental	Low environmental impact	Risk of environmental degradation
Developmental	Provision for the development of the community	Failure to meet the community's perception of development
	Capacity building within the community	Advantages open to abuse by community members
	Provision for health and family planning	Controversy about the motivation of such programmes
Conservation	Enhancement of conservation objectives	Disturbance to habitats and species
	Monitoring of habitat and species	Threats posed by dangerous animals
Cultural aspects	Awareness of the local cultures	Misrepresentation and degradation of cultures
	Low cultural impact	
Education	Awareness increase, both for the community and for the guests	Erosion of traditional values



Successful ecotourism offers a diverse range of activities

Cultural activities could include ethno-botanical lessons, tool making and use, traditional crafts and jewellery, hunting techniques, preparation of food and construction of traditional dwellings.

Domestic tourism

The local market should be considered as a viable alternative to international tourism, especially during low season when incentives or resident rates encourage business.

Pros and Cons of Ecotourism

There are obvious conflicts with the ecotourism development project that were identified during the East African Regional International Year of Ecotourism Conference. These are highlighted in Table 2 and pertain to economic aspects, impacts on culture, environmental concerns and development. This chapter expands upon these issues and attempts to suggest ways and means to mitigate the potential conflicts.

To address these benefits, threats and means to alleviate conflicts, the categories established by Honey (1999) are used.

Respects local culture

Communities often claim that the presence of tourists



Ecotourism offers an opportunity for cultural exchange but communities must decide which parts of their culture they wish to share

degrades the local culture. This is a double-edged sword. Many tourists may well have inappropriate perceptions of individual cultures based upon media interpretations. However, communities can use tourism as a means to promote their culture and explain aspects that engender understanding and sympathy.

Raising awareness of the local cultures by providing opportunities to explain the traditions and practices to visitors can form a major part of an ecotourism experience. Education about the local culture should start before the guests arrive in the ecolodge so that both sides understand as much as possible about each other before they meet. The main threat to this aspect of ecotourism is the potential for such exchanges to become voyeuristic or invasive.

In order to offset this, communities must decide which aspects of their culture they are willing to share and explain, and what specific tourist behaviours they will not accept. Just as agreements relating to the use of the available landscape can be established to avoid offence through disregard of cultural icons and sanctified areas, so can their culture be “mapped” to avoid conflicts stemming from tourists’ disrespect. Community based organisations can act to protect the community and cultural practices that are considered most sacred.

Involves travel to natural areas

For ecotourists, having the opportunity to experience remote, unspoilt locations and learn more about the people who live there is the primary reason for choosing an ecotourism destination. Witnessing and enjoying pristine wilderness areas in the knowledge that their stay will be beneficial rather than detrimental is the main motivation behind ecotourism.

To maintain the area set aside for ecotourism in a healthy state, partners in ecotourism must agree upon and implement a land-use management plan. This should include a system of controls, and monitoring and evaluation procedures to ensure that both tourist activities and the management practices are achieving the established goals.

Minimizes impact

The environmental standards of an ecolodge must be of the highest calibre for it to qualify as environmentally sound. This includes:

- Effective treatment of sewage.
- Reusing and recycling waste and water.
- Using renewable energy for heating and lighting.
- Ensuring activities have minimal impact on the environment.

There are increasing numbers of environmentally friendly methods and practices to achieve these ends.

Environmental responsibilities should also be incorporated into the activities offered to clients. Off-road driving has been shown to have long lasting impacts on grasslands, leading to erosion. Tourist behaviour whilst game viewing should also not have adverse effects on the animals being observed. Safety measures should be put in place to minimise these impacts.

A monitoring and evaluation programme can provide data to quantify environmental impact. This programme should be included in the land-use plan and be acceptable to all parties.

Builds environmental awareness

Awareness and education of all aspects of ecotourism is not simply a priority for the tourists visiting an ecolodge: this issue applies equally to the business partners and community members themselves.

Development of clients' awareness of these issues should start before they arrive at the ecolodge. Tour operators should encourage clients to become ac-

quainted with cultural and environmental aspects of the location. The ecolodge itself should prepare and distribute materials and a recommended list of suitable publications that guests can access prior to departure for the holiday.

Likewise, business partners should attempt to learn more about the environment and culture with which they are involved. By improving their understanding and asking for clarification of issues, business partners will be able to pre-empt many potential problems. This includes aspects such as the harvesting of plants and animals in the area for traditional medicinal or religious purposes, which may be interpreted as violation of the land-use plan.

Finally, communities should also be assisted to improve their understanding the environment from a conservation perspective. Frequently, these ideas and practices are not sufficiently well explained and lead to conflicts between the parties.

Provides direct financial benefits for conservation

There are many ways that ecotourism benefits conservation both directly and indirectly. Setting aside areas as 'conservancies', which are managed for conservation, benefits biodiversity and provides natural areas for tourists to see wildlife.

These areas need appropriate management, which requires financial investment. Ecotourism is frequently promoted as a means to assure the existence of dispersal areas outside established protected areas. This effectively increases the conservation area and, therefore, the costs of ensuring management and security.

The protection and ultimately the increase of wildlife numbers in areas set aside for ecotourism can also result in greater human-wildlife conflict, which will undermine the efforts of ecotourism. Again, contingencies need to be built into the business plan to alleviate such problems.

Ecotourism enterprises can share revenue with wildlife and protected area authorities to improve their efficacy, whilst providing funds for training and equipping community scouts to improve security of the area for both people and wildlife. Protection of wildlife by the community themselves represents a major positive change in attitudes of communities towards wildlife and the environment.



Legal agreements are necessary to support ecotourism projects, but be careful to present all information in a locally acceptable language

Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people

Ecotourism should act as a vehicle to enhance the communities' capacity through training, education and awareness to improve the human resource base. Other tangible benefits from ecotourism include:

- Employment of individuals from the community.
- Development of market for selling artefacts produced by the community.
- Share of the profits from revenues generated received by the community.
- Generation of revenue for community development: education, health care and family planning.

Some communities believe that ecotourism represents an alternative means to achieve rural development and economic gain. However, unless it is explained from the outset, many communities misinterpret the philosophy underpinning ecotourism which leads to concerns over the true motivation of the venture.

Other threats to ecotourism being perceived as an appropriate means to achieve its aims include:

- Uneven benefit sharing between partners, leading to jealousy,
- Small percentage of the community being employed.
- Risk of failure of micro enterprises.
- Exploitation of community members.

Just as communities have to realise and accept that ecotourism is a long-term process, so do the other partners. There is a 'snowballing' effect as communities gradually develop capacity to understand, and want to be more involved in the day-to-day management of the ecolodge. The communities' expectations and anticipations of benefits will shift through time. An attempt should be made to predict these changes that accompany increasingly education and capacity and these changes should be accommodated in the business plan.

Supports human rights and democratic movements

There are many interpretations and misconceptions of how people live throughout the world. A situation that allows discourse and an opportunity to experience other

cultures can lead to improved understanding between different cultures and comprehension of issues they face.

This aspect is largely indefinable in the short term, and cannot be forced, but results from a slow and steady exchange between the host community and guests.

Management of Ecotourism Enterprises

The management of ecotourism enterprises have had to evolve alternative approaches to meet the special requirements of community involvement in the initiative.

For ecotourism ventures to be successful the first step is understanding of the communities' current level of development. This will determine the extent to which specific areas require focus to create a sense of ownership of the initiative. Understanding the initial starting point will determine priorities for capacity building within the community.

As communities become increasingly aware of the potential that ecotourism has to improve their livelihoods they have demanded a greater level of involvement in the overall conception, design and management of the ecolodge.

Full involvement of all partners in ecotourism can only be achieved with complete transparency on all sides. To ensure this is it essential that a common language is used in all dealings. Communities frequently say that they feel excluded from discussions and decision-making because the lingua franca used to debate issues is not their mother tongue. The level of formal education amongst communities is often very limited, which further compounds the situation. In contrast, business partners cite the problems of trying to comprehend aspects of local culture and beliefs.

Compromises in the management of an ecotourism enterprise must be made so that none of the parties develop a feeling of isolation and disenfranchisement. In practise, this means that minutes of meetings and agreements must be translated into an agreed language that can, if required, be read out to the community to ensure that all parties understand developments.

Such an inclusive approach is vital, especially when developing the business plan, defining land-use management issues and forming legal agreements between all parties involved. The respective contributions by all partners involved have to be fully understood and agreed upon for the ecotourism venture to work in the long-term.

Individual partners present distinct skills and capacities, which can be harnessed for the benefit of the ecotourism development. These can all be described as inputs, whether on a practical or financial level, and represent an investment in the initiative. Such investments include the contribution of the land on which the ecolodge is based as well as providing labour and allowing access to materials required to construct the ecolodge.

Partners can also offer technical expertise in areas such as planning and developing policies. Highly skilled areas such as marketing of the facility often fall under the jurisdiction of one partner, but in many areas contributions from all partners can ensure the over-all success of the ecotourism initiative.

A decision-making process that is acceptable to all partners must be developed to allow effective exchange and the transfer of knowledge and skills between all parties. Exchanges between other ecotourism projects can provide lessons on decision-making processes. Once established, this management system should be used in planning and priority setting throughout the initiative, including appropriate mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

Currently, many of the existing ecotourism enterprises in East Africa are located in arid or semi arid pastoral areas. These are the existing models for ecotourism and consequently impose a bias on the conference discussions.

Management of the landscape is a joint responsibility of the partners in an ecotourism enterprise. Fire is an efficient tool which many cultures have used for hundreds of years to promote or improve the quality of grasslands for grazing. This dictates the composition of the wildlife community that can exist within the landscape. Cattle grazing can also be used to manage areas, changing the composition of grasslands.

The land-use plan should include agreements upon the use of fire and grazing to achieve desired results. The plan should be dynamic, responding to environmental fluctuations and including mechanisms to cope with environmental extremes such as periods of drought. The land-use plan should also define consequences for infractions of the established plan by both sides. This would include malicious burning and grazing of domestic stock and compensating individuals for damage caused by wildlife. As ecotourism expands to

include other habitats and landscapes the land-use plan should evolve to be appropriate to the respective habitat.

Ecotourism developments require a secure funding base to develop the infrastructure required. Infrastructure development should be environmentally sound and use local materials where possible.

All of the above require a significant amount of time for completion, as well as readiness of the community to be part of an ecotourism initiative. Government policies, political stability and security all contribute to the development of the ecotourism sector.

Key Restrictions on Ecotourism Enterprise

Community involvement in the development and implementation of the initiative is of primary importance. All genders, age groups and hierarchies must be involved in some way.

The second thrust of the ecotourism activity must be to support conservation. Much of this can be achieved through instigating appropriate planning and management procedures. These need to encompass environmental aspects such as assessments as well as defining monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Education, capacity building and training opportunities for community members should also be included in the development of ecotourism. All of these can be considered as benefits of the communities' involvement in ecotourism.

Guidelines for ecotourism establishments, tourists and communities should be established so that all parties have a clear idea of the aims of the facility. These guidelines should also define the mechanics of benefit sharing and carrying capacity of the initiative, explaining that these conditions try to achieve the optimum balance to ensure sustainability.

The conditions above should all have a legal basis as well as provision for the resolution of any conflicts that arise.

Promoting Ecotourism

As a young sector within the tourism industry, awareness about ecotourism must be raised to ensure that the value of this sector is understood. Promoting this sector is not simply a one-way process, targeted at tourists, but must include all partners in an ecotourism development in order to gain acceptance. This will eventually lead to im-

proving the marketing of the endeavour.

Firstly, communities have to agree that the ecotourism is a business venture that they are prepared to endeavour to make successful. This includes assessing, at the community level, whether ecotourism is the best land-use practice for their demands that they are prepared to accommodate the compromises required. Communities must also accept that investment in ecotourism is long-term and that benefits – both tangible and intangible – can take a considerable time to accrue.

As with all partners, communities have a vital role to play in the successful implementation of an ecotourism initiative: they should not be bystanders in ecotourism development. One means to achieve this is to include the community as an equal partner in all stages of 'conception', 'design' and 'implementation' of the initiative. Communities need to become fully informed about the ethos behind ecotourism in order to understand the motivation of both the investors in ecotourism initiatives, and why tourists wish to visit a particular location.

Likewise, investors need to develop a full understanding of the reasons why communities are willing to "open up" to host tourists and tourists themselves must become more informed about the area and culture that they wish to visit before they arrive in order to fully appreciate the location and culture they will be immersed in.

Marketing Ecotourism Enterprises

The participants agreed that marketing ecotourism is a specialist niche requiring professional input, and that marketing must be undertaken simultaneously with the development of the product in order that the tourism industry and clients are aware of the new destination and activities. This should be based upon a feasibility study that includes a preliminary analysis of the market and the demand for the product, as well as the capital required.

Such professional input could focus on the development of brochures, e-cards, complimentary trips for journalists and alternative media, and opportunities to generate publicity about the destination and activities available. Communities and other partners do have a role in facilitating the marketing of the enterprise with obtaining the correct material. This includes allowing journalists and photographers unhindered opportunities to best promote the initiative.

Our new ecotourism project will give us many sources of income! Just you wait!

Wonderful, but you'll have to show the same patience and commitment that you have with me



Ecotourism requires long term commitment

Time – The Essential Ingredient

Above all, during the conference, the one aspect that was cited frequently was the need for all partners to realise that communities would require a significant amount of time to understand, at a society level, the philosophy underpinning ecotourism. This time allows communities to change their attitudes and incorporate ecotourism into their traditional land-use.

Financing Ecotourism

The level of investment required to establish a successful ecotourism enterprise and the long-term nature of such a venture means that the conditions surrounding commercial loans from banks are out-of-reach to all but a minority. Many ecotourism enterprises simply cannot meet the repayments required by such loans. Essentially, banks do not have the patience to accommodate ecotourism as a viable option.

However ecotourism, which combines community returns, enterprise development and environmental benefits, is an activity that many international donor organisations support. Many of the high-end ecolodges and ecotourism destinations have been established and supported by international donors prior to becoming independent. Without the support of such donors, ecotourism is not sustainable due to the specialist investment required to ensure that ecolodges are environmentally sound.

Yet there are still shortfalls. Many donor time-lines, which are typically up to three years, are too short for ecotourism to achieve its full potential. Donors, failing

to understand that an ecotourism enterprise has to develop gradually into a sustainable business, will fund proposals that would not be considered by banks and other financial institutions. This includes supporting proposals that promise unrealistic returns to communities leading to the partners involved becoming disenchanted with the development.

Role of government

For the ecotourism sector to fulfil its potential and make a significant contribution to rural development, it must have governmental support.

At present, in the East African region, governments appear to have been paying only cursory attention to ecotourism. There are few – if any – policies that focus on ecotourism as a major sector of the tourism industry. Again, this is largely due to the lack of understanding of ecotourism and the specialised needs of this sector of the industry.

Ecotourism also challenges traditional systems of central natural resource management by the government. Governments have stated that they agree in theory with devolving management of natural resources to communities. However, this presents obvious threats to the government such as decreased income and loss of control over these areas.

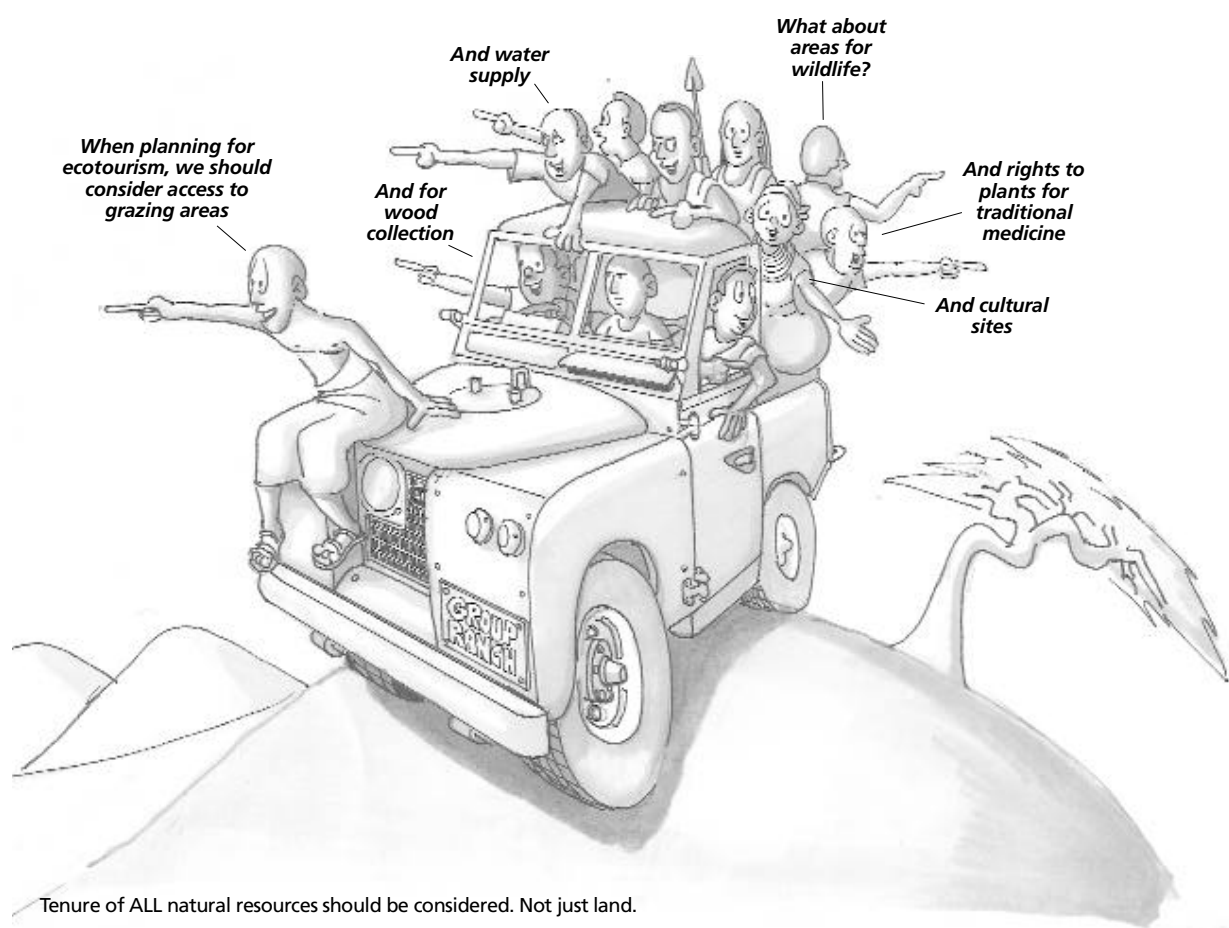
Tenure of all natural resources, not just land, must be reviewed, and policies developed in consultation with communities that address issues pertaining to the community ownership and use of forests, wildlife and cultural icons.

At a national level, an institutional framework needs to be established to define ecotourism and support to the sector as a whole. To achieve sustainability, this national framework would include legal and policy aspects of ecotourism and support for the development of these areas. This may well require a review of the existing wildlife acts.

Governments should provide technical assistance and advice to ecotourism ventures in order to achieve these changes. Relevant issues include:

- Definition of the partners in ecotourism.
- Description of benefit-sharing mechanisms.
- Proposal of infrastructure development.
- Development of an outline of landscape management.

This will provide guidelines for standards within the ecotourism sector as well as means for an independent



assessment of the efficacy of individual ecotourism ventures.

The traditional dictatorial approach by governments was highlighted as inappropriate, particularly in developing capacity at implement ecotourism at the community level. This can be overcome if governments promote a “bottom-up” approach and involve communities as equal partners in discussions relevant to ecotourism. In order to achieve this, governments should support an advisory body to coordinate the development of ecotourism, which could provide assistance on land-use planning, legal arrangements and monitoring and evaluation procedures.

This body should also raise awareness within government about ecotourism, and foster understanding of the distinction between ecotourism and general tourism. The body must lobby for support of ecotourism through policy review, and be responsible for marketing eco-

tourism nationally and regionally.

With respect to funding, governments can show their commitment to the ecotourism sector by providing tax incentives that would encourage the expansion of ecotourism. Governments can also support alternative funding arrangements, such as through charities and foundations.

Role of Government at Regional and International Scale

The nature and location of many ecotourism facilities means that cross-border wildlife movements are important to ensure wildlife presence. As a minimum requirement, wildlife corridors must be identified and their existence promoted. Ecotourism is a means to achieve this goal. However, governments need to improve infrastructure and security to ensure that ecotourism remains a viable option for rural development.

Finally, cross-border agreements supported by Regional and International conventions that promote co-operation must be honoured.

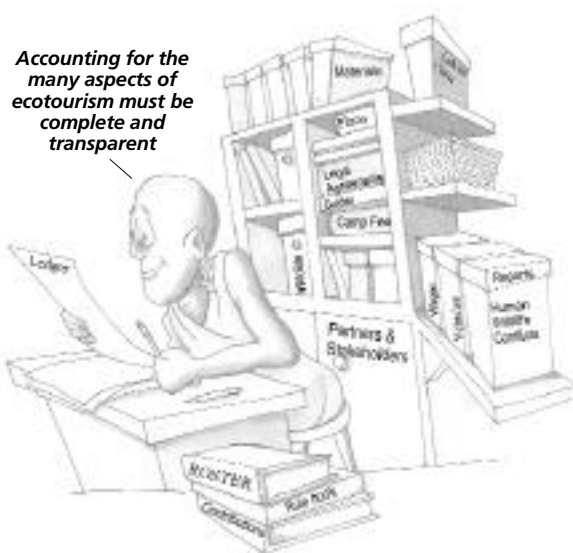
Conclusion

Ecotourism is at a crossroads in East Africa. This document illustrates that the growth of the ecotourism sector will be subject to demand and supply. If current trends continue increasing numbers of tourists will demand true ecotourism as opposed to “responsible” and “nature tourism”. This will, in turn, require the ecotourism sector to diversify the range of products and the type of locations available.

For this to occur, all partners in ecotourism will be required to assess their involvement in the development of ecotourism carefully. This can be summarised in five points:

- Governments must understand how ecotourism differs from mass tourism, and implement policy incentives that encourage the development of ecotourism.
- Donors and other investors in ecotourism must be realistic about the long-term nature of an ecotourism enterprise and ensure that expected returns are met.
- Commercial operators must honour the community benefits and environmental returns that define ecotourism to ensure the success of the development.
- Communities must realise that ecotourism is not a panacea to their aspirations and have realistic expectations of the inputs required to ensure success.
- Tourists have an obligation to gain an understanding of the culture and environment they are visiting.

If the five points above are addressed, ecotourism will be practised and match the – often theoretical – definitions. Ultimately, this will ensure that the people who have traditionally managed the region’s wild-lands receive just rewards for their stewardship.



Statement from the East African Regional Conference To the World Ecotourism Summit

The 200 participants, mostly from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, who attended the East African regional conference considered the five themes to be addressed by the International Year of Ecotourism and have proposed the following statement to be considered at the World Ecotourism Summit.

International, Regional and National Policies need to be developed to address issues affecting the development of ecotourism. These policies must harmonise legislation within the various sectors, which can be contradictory. Most importantly, such policies must address issues of tenure of all natural resources, not simply land.

These policies should include the guidelines, codes of conduct and best practices that define ecotourism. Policies must address the conservation of biodiversity and environmental sustainability through ecotourism and should also include monitoring and evaluation processes of ecotourism developments. Governments in the region should offer support and financial incentives in developing the ecotourism sector as well as improving communities’ access to funds.

However, ecotourism initiatives need to be managed in line with business and market principles, as well as considering social and environmental obligations for sustainability. Contracts between the partners in ecotourism initiatives must be legally sound and outline

mechanisms of transparency and accountability from all sides, ensuring equitability. Where necessary, ecotourism partners should work together to improve awareness and education of all parties including training in business skills needed for ecotourism.

Most importantly, to be successful, all of the aspects above must be developed with the full involvement of the community. Adopting this “bottom-up” approach creates awareness, enhances skills and engenders a sense of ownership amongst the community toward ecotourism. Ultimately, this will ensure that the people who have traditionally managed the region’s wild-lands receive just rewards for their stewardship.

Aside from the statements above there were some specific points within each theme that also need to be emphasised.

Theme I – Ecotourism Planning in Protected and Natural Areas: Areas targeted for ecotourism developments should be zoned, taking into consideration the needs of the ecotourism partners and should be environmentally sound.

Theme II – Community Involvement and Community Based Ecotourism: Communities have specific strengths and should be allocated responsibilities within ecotourism developments. Ecotourism should also promote respect for the local culture and indigenous knowledge.

Theme III – Ecotourism as a Business Activity: Development agencies should act as brokers in ecotourism developments between communities and the business sector. They should emphasise the long-term nature of such initiatives and that benefits will be accrued both directly and indirectly to partners in Ecotourism developments.

Theme IV – Ecotourism Policies at the National Level: National Policies need to define the roles and relationships of Ecotourism partners (Communities, community based organisations, non-government organisations, business sector, government and Donors) and their responsibilities.

Theme V – Ecotourism Policies at the Regional and International Levels: National and Regional Ecotourism policies must be integrated across countries. Policies should also be dynamic and able to respond to the findings of monitoring and evaluation procedures.

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Due to the overall quality of the product, ecotourism is the fastest growing part of the tourism industry

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The Evolution of Ecotourism in East Africa: From an idea to an industry

The Wildlife and Development Series is published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) to highlight key topics in the field of sustainable wildlife use. The series is aimed at policy-makers, researchers, planners and extension workers in government and non-government organisations world-wide. The series arises from two sources. First, by invitation of IIED to others working in this field, and second, from IIED's own work.

Tourism is the world's largest industry, and, in both developed and developing countries, ecotourism is now the fastest growing sector of this industry. Being such a powerful economic force, particularly in developing countries with little other industry, ecotourism has been able to prevent environmental destruction and, when managed correctly, promote community development and empowerment.

However, development of an ecotourism enterprise is complicated and involves many distinct parties, all of whom aspire to gain from the process. All parties involved must collaborate to ensure that not only are the wildlife and habitat protected, but that the venture is beneficial to the local communities who traditionally manage the wild-lands.

This report is based on the proceedings of the East Africa Regional Conference on Ecotourism, held in March 2002 in Nairobi, Kenya and organised by The African Conservation Centre. The conference explored possible ways to ensure that all parties involved in an ecotourism enterprise benefit, and concluded that, through communication, sensitivity, transparency and realism, such an enterprise can become sustainable.

The African Conservation Centre is a regionally focused conservation organisation based in Nairobi. Through constant interaction with people who live with wildlife in areas outside parks, the African Conservation Centre has come to understand and appreciate the critical role of these communities in the conservation of wildlife and other natural resources. The African Conservation Centre aims to link science to conservation and conservation to people through its multi-disciplinary approach to conservation. In order to achieve these ends, the organisation has set for itself three main goals as follows:

- To provide the sound scientific information which is necessary for implementing sustainable conservation programs.
- To work with rural communities and local landowners to enhance the conservation of wildlife and natural resources for the mutual benefit of both people and animals and to provide communities with the skills necessary for the management of wildlife and wildlife-based enterprises through links with the private sector and donors.
- To support the development of human and institutional capacity for applied conservation research within the region.

The African Conservation Centre maintains a multi-disciplinary team of professional in ecology and conservation, forestry, natural resource economics, sociology, program development and computer science.

John Watkin was born in Zambia and raised both there and in Vanuatu. Since 1992 he has been working as an ecologist and conservation project manager in East and Central Africa. He currently provides field support to conservation activities in Garamba National Park, Okapi Wildlife Reserve and Virunga National Park – North in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

ISBN 1 84369 431 0. ISSN 1361 8628. Printed by Oldacres Ltd, London EC1. Printing funded by IIED. Edited by Lizzie Wilder. Cover design by Andy Smith. Cover illustrations by Jared Crawford.

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