

The Hidden Treasures of Kenya's Western Tourist Circuit as Opportunities for Ecotourism Development

Isaac Mamboh Nyamweno

School of Spatial Planning and Natural Resource Management,
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology
P.O Box 210-40601, Bondo, Kenya
E-mail: isaac.nyamweno@gmail.com

Dr. Lorna Grace Okotto

School of Spatial Planning and Natural Resource Management,
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology
P.O Box 210-40601 Bondo, Kenya

Dr. Warkach Kipkorir Tonui

School of Humanities and Social Development
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology
P.O Box 210-40601, Bondo, Kenya

Prof. Stephen Gaya Agong

School of Agriculture and Food Security
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology
P.O Box 210-40601, Bondo, Kenya

Abstract

Kenya's western tourist circuit is referred to as the country's "best kept secret" because of the presence of natural and cultural attractions that have not been exploited for development of various forms of sustainable tourism. The circuit is home to historical and archeological sites; caves, freshwater bodies including Lake Victoria; inland beaches, tropical rain forest, indigenous forest ecosystems, wetland ecosystems, hills and mountains, islands, water falls, national parks and game reserves, nature conservancies, museums and diverse cultures, among others. Despite the presence of these treasures, the destination is one of the least competitive in tourism as most tourists to Kenya prefer coastal beaches and selected protected areas. This study was mounted to explore innovative options for transforming the circuit into a globally competitive tourist destination while improving the welfare of local communities that are currently living in poverty. A total of 9 out of 12 counties in the circuit were randomly sampled for the survey that involved 114 representatives of non-state actors. The cross-sectional survey revealed that the region has huge potential for various forms of sustainable tourism of which only very little has been harnessed. The study established that some non-state actors are already involved in promotion of ecotourism through forest conservation initiatives, provision of tour guiding services, provision of accommodation facilities such as home stays, guest houses and eco-lodges; diversification of tourist attractions; provision of amenities and enhancing accessibility. This paper argues that the circuit's treasures are the foundation upon which community-based ecotourism and other forms of sustainable tourism can be developed for the benefit of local communities and the entire region at large.

Key words: Ecotourism, Hidden Treasures, Kenya, Tourist Circuit

1.1 Introduction

This paper documents various natural and cultural attractions that exist in Kenya's Western Tourist Circuit (KWTC) and the opportunities they provide to development of ecotourism. Ecotourism is described as the fastest growing segment of sustainable tourism. Although ecotourism is still an evolving concept, Weaver and Lawton (2011) describe it as a field of scientific inquiry that has come of age due to the population of books and scholarly articles published on this subject matter and the degree of "speciation" it has undergone since its inception.

Kenya's Western Tourist Circuit (KWTC) is the setting for this study. The circuit is described by the Tourism Board of Kenya as the country's "best kept secret" because it is the least explored by both domestic and international tourists and very little is actually known about the diverse natural and cultural attractions—hence the use of the term "hidden treasures" in this paper. The study is premised on the assumption that if planned and utilized properly, the region can grow into one of the leading destinations for ecotourism and sustainable tourism in line with the principles of sustainable development as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987)

1.2 Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to increased understanding of Kenya's western tourist circuit in terms of natural and cultural/historical attractions and the opportunities the region presents for development of ecotourism

1.3 Objectives

This paper aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- 1) Identify and profile the western circuit's key tourist attractions
- 2) Find out how local communities are utilizing/not utilizing the available treasures for development of ecotourism

1.4 Review of Literature

This section presents a brief review of related literature on tourist circuit and ecotourism.

1.4.1 Concept of Tourist Circuit

A tourist circuit is defined as a route on which at least three major destinations are located such that none of these are in one town, village or city. At the same time they are not separated by a long distance and should have defined entry and exit points (Cullinan, *et al* in Chowdhary, 2014). A tourist who enters at the entry point should get motivated to visit all the places identified on the circuit. The objective of having a tourist circuit is to increase the total number of visits to all the destinations on the circuit and at the same time to provide the tourist the attractions of all the destinations located on the circuit. Circuits can be developed either within the country (intra-border) or between two or more countries (cross-border). Sisodia (2011) observes that cross-border circuit could be based on various themes or on effective transport connectivity.

1.4.2 Origins and Definitions of Ecotourism

The term "ecotourism" was coined by a Mexican architect by the name Hector Ceballos-Lascurain in Mexico City in 1983. Honey (1999) describes ecotourism as having developed within the womb of the environmental movement in 1970s and 1980s. Growing concern for the environment coupled with dissatisfaction with mass tourism led to increased demand for a nature-based experiences of an alternative form. At the same time, developing countries began to realize that nature-based tourism offers a means of earning foreign exchange and providing less destructive use of resources than alternatives such as logging and agriculture" (Honey, 1999).

There are several definitions of ecotourism depending on background of authors and whether they are from developing or developed countries. Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) defined ecotourism as travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in the areas. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (2006) on the other hand generally defined ecotourism as responsible travel to relatively undisturbed areas for purposes of education, conservation and improvement of local people's welfare. While Ceballos-Lascurain placed more emphasis on the motive of the tourist, TIES emphasized conservation and welfare of local communities.

Weaver (2001) explains ecotourism as a spectrum ranging from soft ecotourism on one extreme end and hard ecotourism on the other extreme end as shown on table 2 in this paper. Soft ecotourism is described as passive and shallow while hard ecotourism is described as active and deep is for those eco-tourists who are determined to explore challenging areas. Blamey (2001) identified four dimensions of ecotourism as: nature-based, sustainably managed, education/interpretation, small groups/personalized. Various forms of ecotourism exist including: celestial tourism, community-based tourism, among others.

Table 1: Ecotourism spectrum

Ecotourism Spectrum	
Hard (active, deep)	Soft (passive, shallow)
Strong environmental commitment	Moderate or superficial
Enhance sustainability	Environmental commitment
Specialized trips	Steady state sustainability
Long trips	Multi-purpose trips
Small groups	Short trips
Physically active	Physically passive
Physical challenge	Physical comfort
No services expected	Services expected
Deep interaction with nature	Shallow interaction with nature
Emphasis on personal experience	Emphasis on mediation
Make own travel arrangements	Rely on travel agents and tour operators

Source: Weaver, 2001

1.4.3 Ecotourism-Sustainability Nexus

Ross and Wall (1999) summarizes how ecotourism contributes to sustainability. Tourism Western Australia (2006) observed that ecotourism goes beyond sightseeing to enhancing visitors’ understanding of the scientific and ecological features of our natural attractions. This means that ecotourism must: recognize the intrinsic value of nature and accept that National Parks are primarily for conservation of fauna, flora and landscapes; promote and develop ecologically and culturally sustainable travel and tourism; promote and foster the conservation of and investment in the natural and cultural resources used for tourism; develop ethics and standards for ecotourism; educate and inspire tourists through participation to enjoy and appreciate the importance of natural and cultural assets (Tourism Western Australia, 2006).

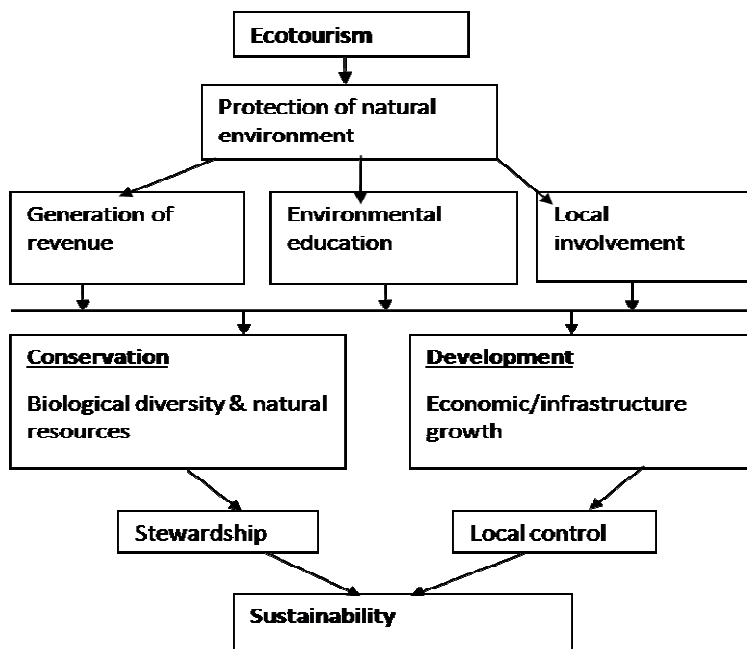


Figure 1: Ecotourism-sustainability Nexus

Source: Ross and Wall, 1999

1.4.4 Principles of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is based on the principles of sustainability according to The International Ecotourism Society. These include: Minimize impact; built environmental and cultural awareness and respect; provide positive experience for both visitors and hosts; provide direct financial benefits for conservation; Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people; raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental and social climate

1.5 Research Methodology

This section provides a detailed background of the study area- the Western Tourist Circuit of Kenya (WTCK) as shown in figure 1. For purposes of this study, the western tourist circuit consists of twelve sub-circuits (equivalent of counties) including: Trans-Nzoia, Bungoma, Kakamega, Vihiga, Busia, Nandi, Kisumu, Siaya, Homa Bay, Migori, Kisii and Nyamira. The extent of the circuit is defined by latitudes 1°20' 37" N and 1° 3' 13" S and longitudes 33° 55' 10"E and 30 35°25' 13" E and occupies an estimated area of 26,301Km² (4.04 %) of Kenya’s total land mass (582, 650Km²).

1.5.1 Study area- Kenya’s Western Tourist Circuit

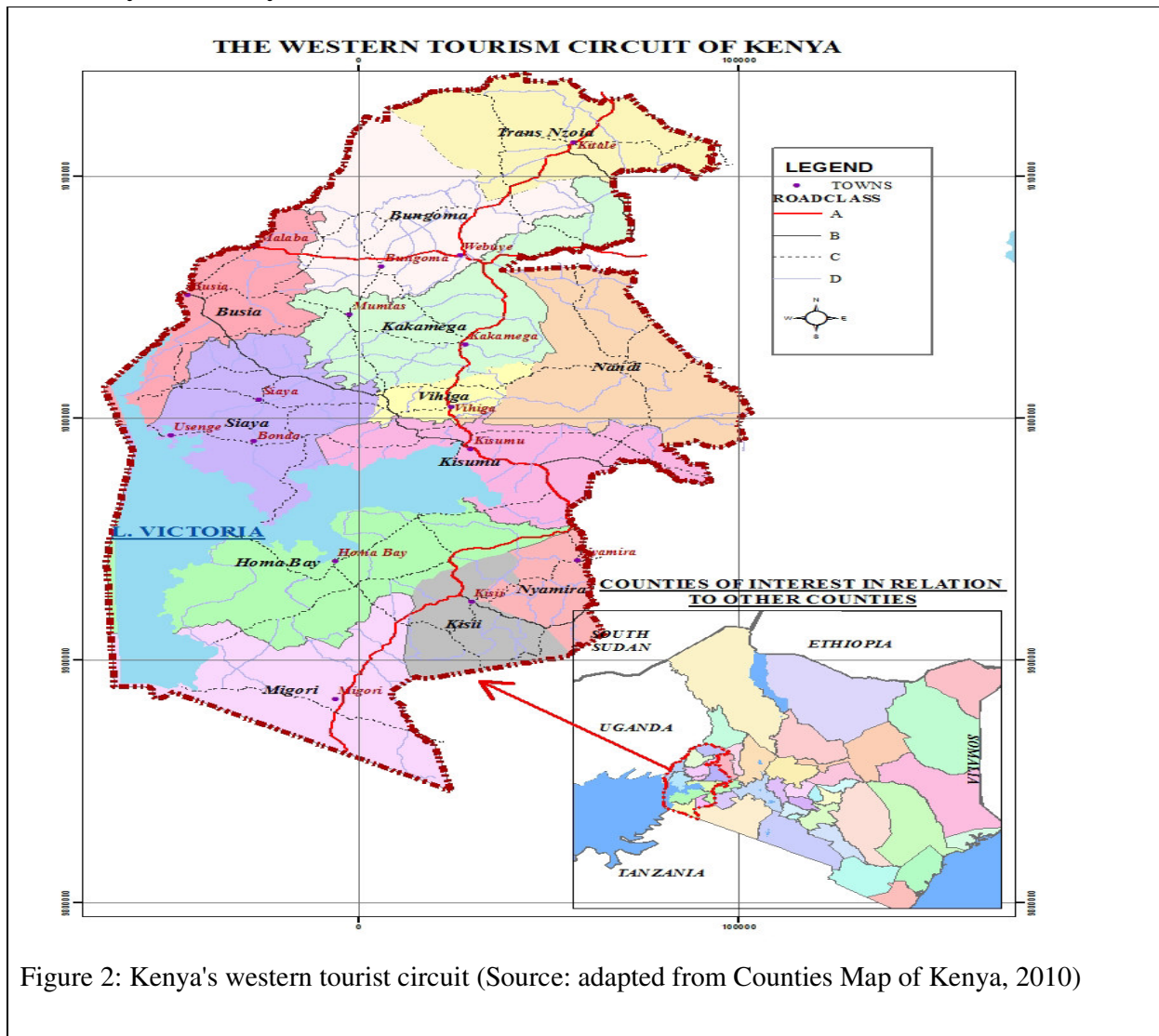


Figure 2: Kenya's western tourist circuit (Source: adapted from Counties Map of Kenya, 2010)

Nine out of the twelve counties were randomly sampled for this study and a total of 114 non-state actors were purposively sampled from the 9 counties with the help of informed officers from line government agencies (Kenya Forest Service, Department of Tourism) and Nature Kenya. Nature Kenya is an environmental Non-Governmental Organization (E-NGO) that works closely with various actors involved in conservation of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) across the country. Most of the natural attractions (treasures) are found outside protected areas where they are both managed and threatened by the local communities. Non-state actors (NSAs) utilize these attractions for development of ecotourism. Additional information about the circuit's treasures was obtained from a total of 15 key informants from both private and public sector. Primary data was obtained with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire. Secondary data was obtained from various sources including internet and published scholarly articles. Key tourist attractions were captured with the aid of digital cameras and video coverage.

1.6 Results and Discussions

From the definitions of ecotourism given in this paper, it is logical to argue that existence of pristine sites with diverse attractions and hospitable local communities are critical elements for development of ecotourism. The survey conducted in 2015 revealed that Kenya's western tourist circuit is home to several natural and cultural/historical attractions. However, most of these attractions are not known to potential domestic and international visitors and therefore they are hardly visited for purposes of enjoying and learning. Some of the attractions that are least known include: Thim-Lich Ohinga archeological and cultural site, Got Abindu Caves and Rock, Tiriki Community Forest Shrines, the Elephant "Maternity" Ward, Kitale Nature Conservancy, among others. Table 4 presents a detailed account of those hidden treasures and how they are currently being utilized/not utilized for development of ecotourism.

Table 2: Tourist attractions in Kenya's western circuit

Category of Tourist attraction	Specific Examples and County	Type of tourism	Current level of utilization for ecotourism development
Wetlands	Yala Swamp and L. Kanyaboli (Siaya); Kingwal Swamp (Nandi), Saiwa Swamp (Trans-Nzoia), Dunga Beach and wetland	Wetland ecotourism, research tourism	Low
Forests	Kakamega Forest (Kakamega), Malava Forest (Kakamega), Kibiri Forest (Vihiga); Gwasi Hills Forest (Homa Bay), Wire and Koderia Hills Forests (Homa Bay); Cherangany Hills Forest, Mt Elgon Forest (Bungoma and Trans-Nzoia); Mbaga Hill Forest (Siaya), Tinderet Forest (Nandi), Kimondi Forest (Nandi), Nandi North and South Forests (Nandi)	Forest-based ecotourism, Avitourism, Nature tourism Adventure tourism	Low
Lakes and Major Rivers	L. Victoria (Kismu, Homa Bay, Siaya, Busia) L. Kanyaboli (Siaya), L. Simbi Nyaima (Homa Bay), L. Sare (Siaya), Nzoia River (Bungoma, Busia, Nandi, Trans-Nzoia) Yala River (Nandi, Vihiga, Siaya), River Sondu Miliu (Kisumu, Nyamira), River Kuja (Nyamira, Kisii, Migori)	Freshwater-based ecotourism	Low
Mountains, Hills and Escarpments	Mt. Elgon (Bungoma, Trans-Nzoia), Homa Hills (Homa Bay), Usenge Hill (Siaya), Sega Hill (Homa Bay), Maragoli Gills (Vihiga), Nyabondo Plateau (Kisumu), Chelangany Hills (Trans-Nzoia), Gwasi Hills (Homa Bay), Nandi Rock (Nandi), Got Ramogi and g Got Abiero Hills (Siaya), Riat and Kisian Hills (Kisumu), Kaptumek Nandi Escarpment	Mountain and hills ecotourism	Low
Caves and Rocks	Mungoma Caves (Vihiga), Got Abindu Caves and Rocks (Kisumu), Kapsetany Community Caves (Trans-Nzoia), Mwibale Rock, Menjeywo Caves (Nandi), Kiti-Mikay Rock (Kismu), Mt. Elgon Caves (Trans-Nzoia), Sangalo Twin Rock (Bungoma), The "Crying" stone of Ilesi (Kakamega)	Rocks and caves ecotourism	Low

Historical/Cultural/Archeological sites/Museums	Thim-Lich Ohinga (Migori), Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Mausoleum, Koitalel Museum, Kisumu Museum, Kitale Museum, Tiriki Community Shrines, Nganyi Community Shrines (Weather forecasting)	Cultural Ecotourism	Low
Beaches	Several beaches on shores of L. Victoria beaches including: Dunga, Kanyagweng, Usenge, Miyandhe, Asat, Bao, Asembo Bay, Homa Bay Beach, Wich Lum, Ogal, Usoma, Muhuru Bay , among others	Beach ecotourism	Low
Protected areas (National Parks, Game Reserves, Sanctuaries)	Mt. Elgon National Park (Bungoma and Trans-Nzoia), Ruma National Park (Homa Bay), Ndere Island National Park (Kisumu), Impala Sanctuary (Kisumu)	Wildlife tourism/Ecotourism, nature-based tourism	Moderate
Water falls	Webuye Falls (Bungoma), Tindinyo Falls (Nandi), Sidindi Water Falls (Bungoma), Chepkiit Water falls, Gogo Falls (Migori)	Ecotourism/nature tourism	Low
Islands	Mfangano and Rusinga Islands (Homa Bay), Migingo Island, Ndere Island (Kisumu)	Island Ecotourism	Low
Tea plantations	Tea plantations (Nandi County)	Agro-ecotourism	Low
Nature Conservancies	Kitale Nature Conservancy (Trans-Nzoia), Chep-Kitale Conservancy (Trans-Nzoia), Kingwal swamp conservancy	Ecotourism Nature tourism	High

Source: Field studies, 2015 (Note: Parentheses contain names of counties where the attractions exist)

1.6.1 Selected Attractions

This section presents a more detailed account of selected tourist attractions in Kenya's western tourist circuit.

1.6.1.1 Thim-Lich Ohinga

Thim-Lich Ohinga is both an historic, archeological and cultural site found in Nyatike Sub-County of Migori County. "Thim-Lich" refers to a frightening forest in Luo dialect and the place was named so because of there existed a thick, dark and frightening forest inhabited by wild animals. The Luo community who are were mainly livestock herders settled here over 500 years ago and in order to protect themselves and their livestock against enemies and wildlife, they constructed the historic site using locally available but unique stones. They applied indigenous knowledge while planning the settlement and built it using unique architecture which no one knows to date. The walls are about three metres thick and about 4-5 metres high with especially designed entrances and watch towers. The space inside was divided into three large blocks each of which is zoned into various users including: human settlement, livestock area, industrial area (black smith) and recreational area (games included, *ochua*, among others). The site is home to a thick indigenous forest and wildlife (e.g monkeys, snakes), birds and insects. The site was taken over by the National Museums of Kenya in 1982.



Plate 1: Thim-Lich Ohinga

Source: Field studies, 2015

1.6.1.2 Lake Simbi Nyaima



Plate 2: Lake Simbi Nyaima

Source: Field studies, 2015

L.Simbi Nyaima near Kendu Bay Town is a major geographical feature and tourist attraction. Simbi Nyaima is categorized as a Crater Lake according to the Chairman of Simbi Nyaima CBO but there is a myth associated with the lake too. The Chairman narrated the myth as follows: a certain ugly-looking woman with skin conditions who visited the local area looking for someone to take her in and give her food and rest. However, due to her looks, nobody accepted to host her but instead the people chased her away. Angry and desperate, the woman unleashed her hanger and ordered the entire village to sink with all houses leading to the formation of the lake. All the people present in the village perished as she went her way. The myth about L. Simbi Nyaima is of great interest to tourists. The depth of the lake is not known and it is configured in such way that one cannot see all the edges from any one view point and no one has ever managed to through a stone across the lake to the other end successfully. The lake with clear waters is home to many species of birds and occasionally even flamingoes from lakes in Kenya's Rift Valley regional migrate to the site to take advantage of certain foods. The lake is frequently patronized by both international and domestic visitors. Students from high schools, universities and colleges normally go there for studies/research.

1.6.1.3 Homa Hills

In-depth discussions with the chairman of Huma Hills CBO during the month of May 2015 revealed that the local name for Homa Hills is "Huma" which means "great" in luo dialect. The Homa Hill is therefore considered a great geographical feature and natural resource for the people of Homa Bay County. It has a wide base and serves to influence the climate of the area. At the top is a gazette forest while its foothills are occupied by rural farm households who practice small scale farming, livestock production and fishing. It has a table at the top and therefore suitable for ecotourism and sustainable tourism. It is currently managed by the Kenya Forest Service in partnership with the community. The plateau on top of the hill forms a suitable site for an eco-lodge and its extremely exciting for hills climbers and picnic goers.



Plate 3: Homa Hills

Source: Field studies, 2015

1.6.1.4 Yala Swamp and Lake Kanyaboli

Yala Swamp in Siaya County is one Kenya's most important wetlands and therefore a natural resource for wetland ecotourism. It is Kenya's third largest wetland covering about 200 KM² of land in both Yala and Busia Counties of Kenya. Both River Nzoia and River Yala empty their waters into L. Victoria at Yala

Swamp. It is an Important Bird Area according to the classification by Bird Life International and is also home to the endangered semi-aquatic antelope animal by the name Sitatunga. However, this fragile ecosystem is under heavy threat from anthropogenic activities such as land conversions to agricultural farms, industries and human settlements, among others (Olima *et al.* 2015)

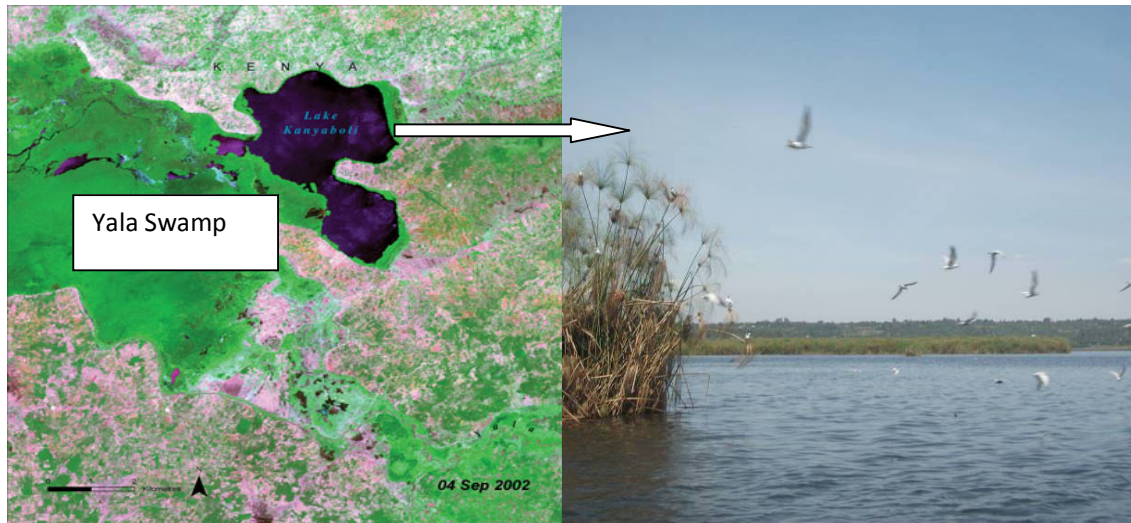


Plate 4: Google Image of Yala Swamp

Plate 5: Lake Kanyaboli within Yala Swamp

Lake Kanyaboli on the other hand is a unique geographical feature and tourist attraction within the greater Yala Swamp Complex. It is an ox-bow lake about six metres deep. The Lake is home to rare species of fish that some of which are extinct in the main Lake Victoria. Lake Kanyaboli is an Important Bird Area (IBA) managed by Kenya Wildlife Service as a National Reserve. Unlike the main Lake Victoria, Lake Kanyaboli is not inhabited by dangerous animals like Warthogs and Hippopotamus. This makes it a suitable site for ecotourism activities such as boat riding, boat racing and bird viewing. The riparian reserve and immediate surrounding of the lake is suitable for lake-side camping. However, the area has remained largely underdeveloped save for recent attempt by private investors to invest in tourist resort and viewing points.

1.6.1.5 Abindu Sacred Site

Abindu is a Luo word that means many caves in one place. Abindu shrine has five caves with connecting paths. It is a sacred shrine located about 12 Km North-East of Kisumu City. Abindu sits on a hilly rugged terrain which extends from Kajulu to Ojola and is part of the extension of Nandi Escarpment (Hayombe *et al.* 2014). They are considered to be a sacred place with unique inscriptions on the rock that are believed to be Biblical verses. The shrine is used for spiritual, cultural and ecological functions. In-depth discussions with officials of Got Abindu CBO (Jeremia Obiero and Gilbert Ochieng, December 2015) revealed that the shrine is frequented by members of several denominations including but not limited to Legio Maria, Adiness Gospel Church, Pentecostal, ACK. Golgotha, Rohoo Israel, Jesus Prince Life, End Time Revival Services, African Inland Church, End Time Mission, Catholic, among others faith who retreat to the sacred site for prayers and fasting. It is also visited by several people from various parts of Kenya, Eastern Africa, other African countries, USA, and the rest of the world (Visitors to the site are required to remove their shoes as they enter the “holy” place and they camp there for several days or weeks. Local politicians vying for various elective positions are said to also visit the shrine for blessings



Plate 5: Worshippers in a cave at Got Abindu

Source: Field survey, 2015

The shrine provides ecological services too as visitors enjoy a panoramic view of Kisumu County and others parts of neighbouring counties. The shrine is also a source of medicinal herbs and the rain water collecting in natural tree reservoirs is believed to have medicinal and spiritual benefits. The site is home to monkeys, baboons, birds, butterflies, Monitor Lizards, snakes (three big snakes- black, reddish and greenish are occasionally seen)

The land on which the shrine is located was set a side as community land but there is evidence of encroachment from neighbouring smallholder peasant farmers.

1.6.1.6 Ndere Island National Park

Ndere Island National Park is a small island (4.2Km²) in Winam Gulf of Lake Victoria. The local people call it “Chula-Rabour” (Chula means island and rabour means red) which means Red Island. The name is derived from the abundance of *Themeda thriandra* (red-hot) grass whose mature flowers are red-hot in colour and when concentrated in a particular area they make it look reddish. It is home to abundance of fauna and flora including several species of birds. it is covered by grassland and provides a panoramic view of the Homa Hills. The park is accessible by boat ride from Bao Beach and other beaches on the shores. Services available include boat riding, bird watching, game viewing and sport fishing. The Kenya Wildlife Service works in the spirit of partnership with local beach management units to provide services to tourists.



Plate 6: Ndere Island National Park

1.6.1.7 Kit-Mikayi

Kit-Mikayi Rock is a major tourist attraction in Kisumu Sub-Circuit. In-depth discussions with the caretaker and tour guide stationed at the site revealed that Kit-Mikayi, a contraction of two words *Kit* which means rock and *mikayi* which means first wife in Luo dialect. The story goes as follows: the Luo ancestor settled and lived in the caves within the rock. The elderly man who had many wives used to sit outside the rock enjoying the morning sunshine. He liked the place so much that he decided to give it a name. After consulting his wives, they all unanimously agreed to name it after the first wife (Mikayi) who was the first to live with her husband in the caves within. The rock has a lot of significance to the Luo community. They used to give sacrifices to the gods whenever bad omen befell the community such as prolonged drought. Freshly married women also used to take their vows here that they will live with their husbands till death did them part. The rock has spiritual significance especially to the Legio-Maria sect who spent quality time living in the caves while communicating with their god.



Plate 7: Kit Mikayi Rock

Source: Field studies, 2015

1.6.1.8 Cultural Attractions

The western tourist circuit is home to diverse cultural attractions including: bullfighting, cockfighting, traditional music and dances, traditional circumcision, traditional foods such as fish, traditional dresses, making of handcrafts, wrestling, among others. Discussions with the key informant revealed that Bullfighting is one of the most celebrated events in the region and takes place at various levels just like sports activities. The winning Bull is usually rewarded handsomely



Plate 8: Bullfighting in progress in Kakamega County

Source: Field studies, 2014

1.6.1.9 The “Rain Makers” of Ebusiekwe Village



Plate 9: One of the 3 shrines for traditional weather forecasting

Source: Field studies, 2015

Ebusiekwe village in Vihiga County is the home of the famous “rain makers”. In-depth discussions with the key informant Mzee Nganyi revealed that the Nganyi Family received powers to make rain from an old, ugly woman with skin conditions as a reward for their hospitality to her. The woman arrived from luoland where nobody agreed to take her in due to her skin conditions and ugly-looking nature. The Nganyi family is said to have taken her in, fed her and built a house for her where she lived till her death and burial. The extended family has maintained those powers handing them over from generation to generation till the current one. They have maintained three indigenous forest shrines where they conduct their rain-making activity. The shrines are protected with the aid of strictly observed taboos. For instance No body is allowed to collect even dead wood from the shrines otherwise one will be met with far-reaching consequences such as death (Mzee Nganyi- Key informant, 2015). They are said to predict weather patterns with such high level of accuracy and this has attracted tourists from all walks of life including high profile researchers from Harvard University and the Germany’s Metrological department. Local universities such as Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology (JOOUST) and Maseno University are also involved in collaborative research with the rain-makers. Kenya’s Metrological Department has since established a

weather station and radio station (Radio Ranen) at Ebusiekwe hill and works hand-in hand with the traditional weather predictors.

1.6.1.10 Kapsetany Community Cave



Plate 10: Kapsetany Community Cave in Mt Elgon Sub-County
Source: Field studies, 2015

The community cave is located about 7 KM from Endebes trading center. The cave has various compartments, some section has remains of old bones trapped inside, an indication that the cave may have collapsed. The cave is characterized by the presence of a unique waterfall falling off the cliff of the cave and a natural dam inside the cave.

1.6.1.11 Lake Victoria

L. Victoria is the second largest freshwater lake in the world only second to L. Superior in the United States of America. It is the largest trans-boundary freshwater lake in the world. Only 6% of the lake lies on the Kenyan side and by extension within the western tourist circuit of Kenya

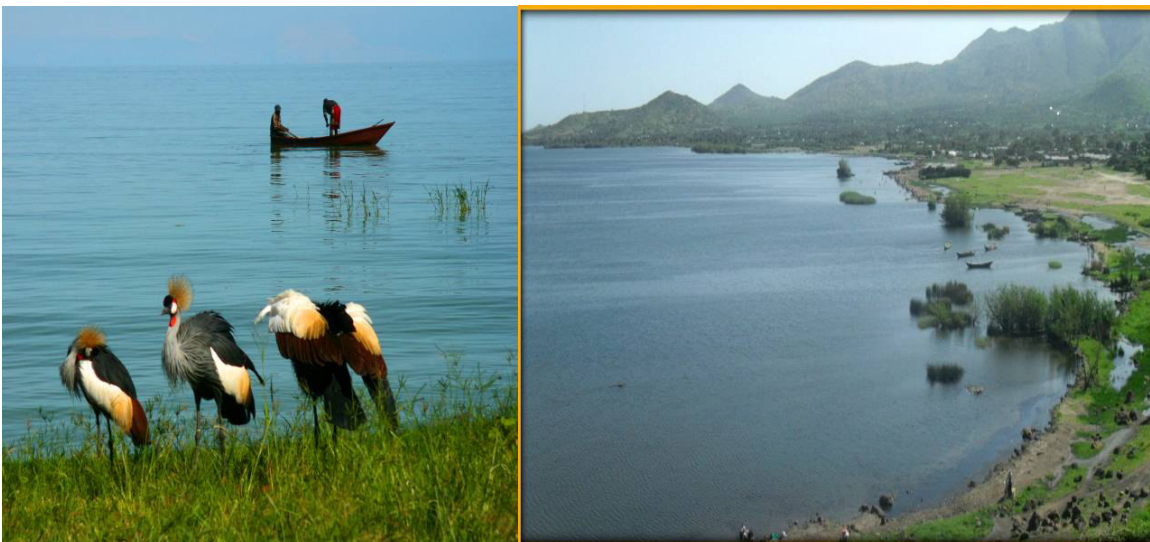


Plate 11: A Section of L. Victoria with attractive birds
Source: Christoph-grandt.com, 2004

Although the lake is a major tourist attraction, its is severely threatened by existence of water hyacinth, pollution, encroachment, conversion of riparian areas into farmlands and human settlements, construction of industries, among others.

1.6.1.12 The Elephant “Maternity Ward”

The Elephant “Maternity Ward” is one of the leading tourist attractions in Mt. Elgon Sub-County of Bungoma County/Sub-Circuit. The destination is named an Elephant “Maternity Ward” after the unique phenomenon or behavior exhibited by female elephants that that come to this particular site to calf-down. Some come from as far as Trans-Nzoia County. Both local and international tourists patronize the destination for purposes of learning and enjoying. It is particular interesting for ecologists and particularly elephant ecologists.

1.6.1.13 Mt. Elgon National Park

Is a solitary extinct volcano straddling between Kenya and Uganda. National Parks exist both in Kenya and Ugandan side of the Mountain. It is said to be eight-highest mountain in the world and has the largest base area of any freestanding volcano in the world (Boy and Allan 1988). It is a trans-boundary ecosystem managed by governments of Uganda and Kenya. In Kenya, the mountain is shared between Bungoma and Trans-zoia counties.

1.6.1.14 Webuye Falls



Plate 12: Webuye Falls

Source: Field studies, 2015

Webuye Falls (formally called Fredrick Falls) on Nzoia River near Webuye Town are a natural tourist attraction and potential site for generation of hydro-power. The site has been identified by the County Government of Bungoma for development into a leading tourist destination.

1.6.1.15 Kakamega Tropical Rain Forest

Kakamega Forest is the only remaining eastern-most patch of Gunea-Congolian tropical rainforest (Kambona, 2013) that exhibits rarity-sanctuary for remarkable biodiversity of animals and plants biodiversity (Kambona, 2013). The forest habitat is central to the conservation of rich biodiversity in the county and the region due to location and previous links with the central Africa bio-region (NEMA, 2012). The main habitat types that are central to supporting the biodiversity within the Kakamega County include: indigenous and exotic grasslands, riparian systems, wetland systems and rock outcrops (NEMA, 2012).



Plate 13: A Section of Kakamega Forest with wide nature trails

Source: Field studies, 2015

The forest developed about 10,000 to 12,000 years ago is considered to be young in comparison to the forests of Central Africa (NEMA, 2012). It is designated as an Important Bird Area and hosts Turner's Eremomela (*Eremomela Turneri*) and Chapin's Flycatcher (*Muscicapa lendu*) (NEMA, 2012) both listed as globally threatened. The Great Blue Traco and the Black-and white casqued Hornbill are some of the ornamental birds is found in the forest. The forest is home to a wide range of mammals including but not limited to African Forest Rat (*Praomys cf. jacksoni*), Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*), the de Brazza's monkey. Elephants, buffaloes and hyenas used to exist in the forest in the early twentieth century but they are no more due to hunting (NEMA, 2012)

1.6.1.16 Kumfunje Bridge across Nzoia River



Plate 14: Kumfunje Bridge

Source: Field studies, 2015

The bridge across Nzoia River connecting Bungoma and Kakamega Counties is a major tourist attraction located in Mungonye village, Webuye Location of Bungoma East Sub-County was constructed in 1991 with the aid of indigenous knowledge. Mr. Kafunja, a Munyala old man is the architect of the bridge which is owned and managed by a family as a source of income. Anybody crossing the bridge must pay ksh 10.00 per day and can cross as many times as possible till midnight. Local and international tourists are also required to pay pocket-friendly fee.

1.6.1.17 Maragoli and Bunyore Hills Ecosystems



Plate 15: Maragoli Hills

Source: Field Studies, 2015



Plate 16: Mungoma Caves and rock outcrops

Source: Field studies, 2015

The Maragoli and Bunyore hills are some of the hills located at the southern end of the sub-circuit and a major tourist attraction especially for hill/rock climbers. They are the highest points in Vihiga County and visitors at the top enjoy panoramic view of L. Victoria and greater Nyanza region, Rift Valley region and the western part of Kenya. They are fragile ecosystems though and require to be managed sustainably. The famous Mungoma Caves are located within Maragoli Hills. The Mungoma Caves are said to be the original home of Moragooli-the ancestor of Maragoli community. The Maragoli community and people of Vihiga County hold an annual cultural event at this point every December which also includes the welfare of the community.

1.6.18 Ruma National Park

The park formally called Lambwe Valley Game Reserve was established in 1966 to protect its indigenous population of rare roan antelope which exists nowhere else in Kenya. It was gazette as a National Park in 1983. Its entire perimeter is fenced with electric wire to avoid human-wildlife conflict



Plate 17: A lioness with her cubs at Ruma National Park

Source: Safari Yako, 2014

1.7 Conclusions

This paper concludes that:

The western tourist circuit of Kenya is home to a variety of attractions including but not limited to: freshwater-based attractions including L. Victoria, L. Simbi Nyaima, L. Kanyaboli, L. Sare; mountains, hills and escarpments; indigenous forests; caves and rock outcrops; national parks and national reserves, freshwater beaches, waterfalls; hot springs; islands, cultural shrines, wetlands; among others

These hidden treasures provide a lot of opportunities for development of various forms of sustainable tourism in general, and ecotourism in particular

However, the natural and cultural capital has not been optimally exploited for the development of ecotourism and therefore the entire circuit is still lagging behind in various types of tourism.

The circuit has not been adequately branded and marketed as a destination for ecotourism and sustainable tourism

There is therefore urgent need to make the circuit visible to local communities and the international community with a view to stimulating various forms of sustainable tourism

Both public and private sector agencies have major roles to play in promoting ecotourism and other forms of sustainable tourism in the region. Both national and county governments are expected to play facilitative roles while private sector agencies and the local communities are expected to implement actual programmes and projects that are informed by feasibility studies

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About the authors

Mr. Isaac MambohNyamweno is a Ph.D candidate and Assistant lecturer at the School of Spatial Planning and Natural Resource Management, JaramogiOgingaOdinga University of Science and Technology. He holds BSc in Range Management and a Master's Degree in Urban and Regional Planning, both from the University of Nairobi. He has a broad knowledge base in both natural and social sciences and therefore capable of working in a multi-disciplinary setting. He is a registered and Practicing Planner and also a registered and practicing EIA/EA Lead Expert. He has co-authored two book chapters and two journal papers focusing on planning for physically disabled, urban agriculture and ecotourism. His current research interest **Ecotourism in developing countries** with specific focus on the role of non-state actors (NSAs). He is the corresponding author of this paper.

Email: isaac.nyamweno@gmail.com

Dr. Lorna Grace Okotto

Dr. Lorna Grace Okotto is a holder of an earned Ph.D from the University of Surrey (UK) and currently serving JaramogiOgingaOdinga University (School of Spatial Planning and Natural Resource Management) as a Lecturer. She has researched and published widely in environmental sustainability-related issues including: water and sanitation, policy and legislative aspects of water and sanitation, groundwater potential and utilization in urban and peri-urban areas, community participation, among others. She is also serving the government of Kenya in various Boards including Water Resources Management Authority (WARMA). Her current research interests include: Ecotourism in developing countries, Potential and Utilization of Underground Water, Sanitation and Health.

Email: lgokotto@yahoo.com

Dr. WarkachKipkorirTonui is a holder of an earned *Ph.D* and an expert in Environmental Modelling BIAS Statistics. He is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, JaramogiOgingaOdinga University of Science and Technology. He is an experienced researcher and writer. His current research interest include: Ecotourism in developing countries, malaria mobility and control, mortality determinants, sexual behaviors along major highways in Kenya.

E-mail: kwtonui@yahoo.co

Prof. Stephen Gaya Agong' (Ph.D)

Prof. Stephen G. Agong' is the Vice-Chancellor of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology (Kenya). He is a seasoned researcher and writer in a wide range of fields including: horticulture, urban and peri-urban agriculture, ecotourism, rural development. He has over 40 publications to his name. He is currently the Director of Kisumu Local Interaction Platform (KLIP) which brings together academic and research institutions, the industry, National and County governments, private sector and the local community in development planning and management.