



# Challenges and Opportunities for Community Based Ecotourism Development in Ethiopia

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## Abstract

Ecotourism is defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. Community-based ecotourism (CBE), on the other hand, is a very specific form of ecotourism which is used to describe ecotourism ventures that are characterized by high environmental considerations, increased control and involvement of the local residents, as well as significant benefits accruing for the host community. Ethiopia, due to its magnificent natural and cultural tourism resources, has a huge potential to become one of the sought after ecotourism destinations in the world. There are some promising community based ecotourism initiatives in different parts of the country such as Adaba -Dodola, Semen Mountains National Park, Wonchi Crater Lake and Adwa. The objective of this review paper was to examine the challenges and opportunities for Community Based Ecotourism development in Ethiopia. By its methodological approach, this review is considered to be a narrative review since the reviewer summarized the findings of empirical research which were conducted in different parts of Ethiopia, and a total of 13 research findings were reviewed. The findings from these studies revealed a poor ecotourism infrastructure and facilities (trekking pass, parking facilities, all weather roads, camping sites, clean water, electricity and health and other facilities), conflicts of interest over resource usage and a severe lack of trained manpower as being the major hindering factors for community based ecotourism development in Ethiopia to flourish. Moreover, the results from the review also identified the presence of an abundant variety of ecotourism resources, good proximity to honeypot areas and enabling policy environments, as the major prospects for community based ecotourism development in Ethiopia to take root.

**Keywords:** challenges, opportunities, community based ecotourism, Ethiopia.

## Introduction

The International Ecotourism Society (2010) has described Ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that protect the environment and enhance the welfare of local communities. Moreover, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) defined the term ecotourism in 1996 as an environmentally accountable travel and visitation to natural places, to experience and admire nature (and any related cultural features, both ancient and contemporary) which encourage conservation, and which invariably also have a minimal visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples, leading to their regional sustainability enhancement.

Community-based ecotourism (CBE), on the other hand, is a very specific form of ecotourism which implies that the community has substantial control of, and involvement in, the ecotourism project and the majority of the benefits remain in the community. It has thus emerged as a valuable



tool for poverty alleviation, wildlife conservation and the delivery of responsible and sustainable tourism offerings (Denman, 2001). Ecotourism has become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry growing three times faster than the industry as a whole (TIES, 2008 as cited in Ambelu, 2011).

Ethiopia is a country which is endowed with the vast array of ecotourism resources including cultural, historical, and archaeological and natural resources which are ideal for the development of sustainable ecotourism ventures. Ethiopia's wildlife is one of the richest and most diversified in Africa with several of its protected areas and wetlands. Out of the total wildlife resources, more than 320 mammals (39 endemic), 918 birds (19 endemic), 240 reptiles (16 endemic), 71 amphibians (30 endemic) and 172 fishes (38 endemic) species are recorded in Ethiopia (Vreugdenhil et al., 2012; Amare, 2015b). The country also has a wide variety of wildlife habitats ranging from alpine moor lands, to lowland savannahs with extensive wetlands. Having evolved in relative ecological isolation from the rest of the African mainland, Ethiopia contains approximately 40% of all land above 2,500m in altitude (EWCA, 1996).

There are some encouraging community based ecotourism initiatives in Ethiopia such as Adaba-Dodola, which is financially and technically supported by the German Agency of Technical Cooperation or GTZ (now GIZ) on the northern slopes of the Bale Mountains in Oromia National Regional State and a pilot ecotourism project on Semen Mountains National Park (Sisay, 2004). In addition, there are some Community Based Tourism initiatives in other parts of the country such as Wonchi Crater Lake (in Ambo, Oromia Region), Adwa (Tigray region) and Meket in north Wollo (Amahara region). The Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has initiated what is termed the Climate-Resilient Green Economy (CRGE) initiative to protect the country from the adverse effects of climate change and to help build a green economy that will help the country realize its ambition of reaching middle income status before 2025 (MoFED, 2013). Hence, Community Based Ecotourism could be one of the best choices to ensure a green economy as well as to realize the second Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP).

As a result, it is rational to conduct a review on the various studies which have been conducted in different corners of the country regarding challenges and opportunities of Community Based Ecotourism Development. It is hoped that this will help provide a multifaceted input for policy makers, the Ministry of Culture and tourism offices, Ngo's, the Ministry of Finance and Development, environmentalists and any other concerned bodies.

The reviewer has not come across with any paper related to the topic described, except a review paper by Asfaw (2013) which investigated the contribution of ecotourism for livelihood diversification and sustainable natural resource management from a purely eco-development paradigm point of view. Hence, it was considered pertinent to conduct this research in order to fill the gap in reviews, regarding the challenges and opportunities of Community Based Ecotourism development in Ethiopia.

### **Objective of the review and methodology**

As stated earlier, the core objective of this review paper was to examine the challenges and opportunities for Community Based Ecotourism development in Ethiopia. By its methodological approach, this review was a narrative review, since the reviewer summarized the findings of empirical research which was conducted in different parts of Ethiopia regarding challenges and opportunities for Community Based Ecotourism. According to Philip (2009), in a narrative review methodology, selected studies are compared and summarized, and results are based on a



qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. Hence, the findings of the reviewed studies were paraphrased, narrated and presented thematically.

The reviewed studies included both published and unpublished research works. The published research articles were collected from the internet by entering the search terms and phrases such as 'Ecotourism in Ethiopia', 'Challenges of Community based Ecotourism in Ethiopia', 'opportunities for ecotourism development in Ethiopia' into the Google search engine and other sites of interest.

Only Full length and open access research articles were considered for the review. Consequently, a total of six (6) published research articles were accessed from different journals such as the Journal of Environmental Science and Water Resources, the American Journal of Human Ecology, and the Journal of Hospitality and Management Tourism. Moreover, unpublished research was also accessed from two renowned universities in the country i.e. Addis Ababa University and the University of Gondar which had post graduate programs in Tourism during the review period, and six(6) theses works with an academic rating of very good and above were selected for this review. In addition, one unpublished research thesis was accessed from Madda Walabu University Research and Publication Directorate Office. Hence, a total of 13 research works were reviewed. The small amount is somewhat of a limitation in a narrative approach, but the researcher is happy that important areas were covered.

The reviewed studies were conducted between 2011-2015 in different parts of Ethiopia and the regional distribution of the reviewed studies indicated that six researches were conducted in Amahara Regional State (Semen Mountains National Park in North Gondar, Borena Sayint National Park in Wollo, Meket Woreda Wollo, Lake Zengena in Awi Zone, Choke mountains in east and west Gojjam, Alatish National Park in north Gondar); Four researches were conducted in Oromiya Regional State (Wonchi Crater Lake in Ambo, Bale mountains National Park in Bale, Awash National park and Adaba –Dodola in East Arsi); one research was conducted in Addis Ababa ,and the last one was conducted by taking Ethiopia on the whole, as a case.

## **Findings**

In this section, the findings from reviewed studies regarding constraints and opportunities of Community based ecotourism in Ethiopia are briefly discussed.

## **Challenges of Community Based Ecotourism**

### **Conflict of interest over resource usage and Ownership Problems**

Conflict of interest among different stakeholders who live around valuable ecotourism resources were one of the frequently stated constraints for community based Ecotourism development. For instance, Bires (2014) in his study about the challenges and opportunities for community based ecotourism in Lake Zengena, Amhara region revealed that there was a serious ownership problem between the church communities and the government, particularly the Banja Woreda Culture and Tourism Office. Similarly, Ketema (2015) also found that there was a conflict of interest on the ownership of Wonchi Crater Lake which is situated in Oromia Regional State, in central Ethiopia.

In addition, Ambelu (2011) in his study in Meket Wollo, Amhara Region in Northern Ethiopia, identified that land ownership issues were a challenge for the development of community lodges in some of the ecotourism sites, and that conflict over farming land borders is sometimes raised



by communities where the trekking routes passed adjacent to their farming land. Ambelu further stated that unless the resource ownership questions are solved through a series of hastily arranged village meetings, discussion and negotiation, there is the ever-present risk that tourism will not be adequately supported (or will be resisted) by the local communities who need it most. Moreover, according to Eshetie (2012), locals display huge resentment towards the direct competition of sheep with the wild life resources of the park. The direct competition of sheep with the wild life of the park is leading to predation which in turn causes diseases, especially at Mehal Sayint woreda. Eshetie stated that *Festuca gilbertiana* is a thin-leaved species which is in high demand by the local communities because of its multipurpose functions, and it is used by locals to make thatch, rope, mattresses and also serves as fodder. However, due to the current policy of the park, the locals are prohibited from utilizing this grass which has created great resentment among the local communities. Furthermore, Alemayehu (2011) in his study in Awash National park also reported the existence of inter-ethnic conflict between the Kerreyu, Ittu and Afar pastoralists over resource ownership rights of dry-season grazing lands and vital access to water points, and conflict between the park scouts and the local Pastoralist is also a common occurrence.

### **Lack of Cooperation among Stakeholders**

Lack of stakeholders integration is one of the repeatedly mentioned challenges for Community Based Ecotourism development in different parts of Ethiopia and also globally. For example, Ambelu (2011) stated that a lack of cooperation and a solid formal relationship between the community tourism enterprises and other stakeholders was identified as a 'bottleneck' in the study area which conceivably emanated from a lack of capacity and the failure to legally register community tourism enterprises and also a deficiency of support from government offices. Berhanu (2013), in his study at Alatish National Park, revealed the existence of weak integration among different stakeholders and the park office. Berhanu stated that the buffer zone of the park was managed solely by the North Gondar Natural Resource Management office with no collaboration with the park office, and moreover, the Justice Office considers criminal cases such as illegal hunting, fishing and other unsustainable resource utilization as minor cases and sometimes such cases are left to lapse without either any formal sanction or penalty in evidence. In other studies, Alemayehu (2011) and Aynalem (2013) have also reported a lack of stakeholder cooperation as a challenge for community based ecotourism development in their respective study areas.

### **Lack of awareness and limited participation**

It is obvious that community based ecotourism development encourages a local community's participation and they also benefit in sharing in activities, and also enhance their understanding about the natural and cultural resource conservation initiatives. Nevertheless, most of ecotourism destinations in Ethiopia are not in line with the principles of community based ecotourism. For instance, according to Alemayehu (2011) most of the local people in his study area had no awareness about either ecotourism or community-based tourism, and they did not participate at any stage in park management decisions. Similarly, Demeke and Verma (2014), in their study in the Bale Mountains National Park, found that 71% of study respondents did not participate in any ecotourism activities although they wished to participate, which could be attributed to the limited flow of tourists in the study area.



### **Lack of basic ecotourism infrastructure and facilities**

Basic ecotourism facilities such as accommodation, transportation, health services and other support facilities are essential to enhance the satisfaction of eco tourists and to maximize the length of stay of tourists to any area. However, the findings of this review indicated that most of the ecotourism destinations in Ethiopia are devoid of these facilities and services. For instance, Ketema (2015) stated that there is a dire absence of well-designed trekking passes, parking facilities, camping sites and effective land use planning alongside the lake. Ketema has also mentioned that there is a lack of transportation and comfortable roads, and there are no eco-lodges and catering facilities around the lake. Similarly, Eshetie (2012) also stated that a lack of basic facilities such as electricity, an effective road network to and from Borena Sayint National Park and health stations, are other major problems encountered. Bires (2014) in his study of Lake Zegena in Amhara Regional state, revealed a shortage of sufficient potable water, a lack of electricity, toilets and other important facilities that tourists require to make their trips memorable.

Furthermore, Berhanu (2015) has also reported that poor health and accommodation services, very limited shopping, banking and postal services, the absence of all-weather roads, and no telecommunication service in all kebeles of Quara wereda except Gelegu town, are all huge problems requiring urgent support. Demeke and Verma (2014) and Alemayehu (2011) also identified limited transportation and accommodation facilities as a challenge for CBET in their study area. Alemayehu (2011) asserts that the community has an acute shortage of clean water and local people who reside adjacent to the park are forced to use the irrigation canal for themselves and for their livestock. Ayinalem (2013) also revealed that tourism infrastructure like accommodation establishments, road transportation, and other destination facilities and services are very poor and limited in number in his study areas.

### **Lack of trained manpower**

Tourism professionals play significant roles in the development of ecotourism since they are capable of planning and organizing ecotourism initiatives or activities effectively, which will in turn help increase the satisfaction of eco-tourists in the destinations. However, most of the findings from the reviewed empirical studies suggest that the ecotourism destinations have been challenged due to a great shortage of tourism/ecotourism professionals. For instance, Alemayehu (2011) has pointed out that there is no ecotourism expert or consultant who is in charge of ecotourism or community based ecotourism activities in Awash National Park. In addition, in Alatish National Park, there are only 31 scouts which is very small group to keep and monitor the park which covers an area of 2665.7sq/km. To manage the park effectively, there should at least be well trained 100 scouts, and one marketing and promotion expert, one natural resource management expert and two additional wildlife experts (Berhanu, 2013). Ambelu (2011) also reported that at District/woreda level, culture and tourism offices have only three staff where the manager is possibly working on the political issues while the rest, namely two employees, are responsible for a collection of works found in the office and the poor qualifications of the staff is also a big challenges for CBET development of the study area. Moreover, Bires (2014) also stated a shortage of tourism professionals in his study area. According to Aynalem (2013) majority of the personnel serving in many culture and tourism offices are not experts in tourism at all, which tends to diminish their value as far as CBET is concerned.



### **Inadequate Financial Allocation**

Conservation of wildlife and park management is an expensive task, and lack of adequate financial resources for such activities is one of the most profound difficulties facing park managers (Berhanu, 2015). Aynalem (2013) also states that a dearth of finance is one of the major setbacks for community based ecotourism which is in early stages of development in Choke Mountain and its environs.

### **Other Factors**

Apart from the aforementioned major challenges, there are also other constraints which are specific to diverse study areas. For instance, global warming, desertification, and the prevalence of malaria are mentioned as major constraints for community based ecotourism development in Alatish National Park, north west Ethiopia (Berhanu, 2015). Kassahun, et al., (2015) have indicated that problems encountered from non-ecotourism members are the greatest challenge in the Adaba-Dodola community based ecotourism project. On the other hand, Asteray (2011) reported that a number of issues are problematic, such as *inter alia*, the existence of a main road within the boundary of the Semen Mountains National Park, human induced pressures such as human settlement, overgrazing, and deforestation, and epidemic diseases of the flag species are the most challenging issues for CBET in the park. Asteray stated a rabies virus and Foot and Mouth Diseases (FMD) are threatening the lives of Ethiopian Wolves and the Walia Ibex respectively. A rabies virus is transmitted from dog to Red foxes and FMD from goats and sheep to Walia Ibex, which could have a long run negative impact on the park's tourism. This would lead to a reduction in the number of tourist arrivals for those keen to view the flagship species associated with the park.

Ketema (2015) identified unfair benefit sharing, the inability of ecotourism to substitute traditional agriculture, illegal land marketing, plantation of eucalyptus trees on the shore of Wonchi Lake, and other institutional constraints as the primary challenges for community based ecotourism development in Lake Wonchi crater and its surrounding areas. Gemechu (2014) in his study in Addis Ababa revealed that the fast growing construction industry in city and its surroundings, the dependence on forests for livelihood, the lack of clear budget and weak formal institutions to organize ecotourism at sub-city level, the very low income of parks and poor economic benefits for locals, low levels of awareness of the locals on environmental protection issues, weak implementation of environmental protection law, deforestation, pollution and the presence of Eucalyptus trees in Addis Ababa and its surrounding areas are all major constraints for CBET development. Asfaw (2014) identified other issues such as the shortages of forage/fodder and grazing land, soil fertility reduction, the absence of a buffer zone, the absence of off-farm activities, and expensiveness of agricultural inputs as factors which hinder CBET development in Borena Sayint National Park, north Wollo, Ethiopia. A lack of operative promotion and marketing (Kassahun, et al., 2015; Berhanu, 2013), the elongated shape of the park (Eshetie, 2012; Asfaw, 2014), the forced relocation of residents and the small size of the park (Eshetie, 2012), the demand for agricultural land (Asteray, 2012; Kassahun, et al., 2015; Asfaw, 2014) were all critical negative aspects which adversely affect community based ecotourism development in different parts of Ethiopia.



## **Opportunities for Ecotourism Development in Ethiopia**

### **Abundance of Potential Tourism Resources**

Most of the researchers who conducted their study in different parts of Ethiopia revealed the existence of abundant cultural, historical and natural tourism resources as an opportunity to develop community based ecotourism development in Ethiopia (Ambelu, 2011; Alemayehu, 2011; Berhanu, 2013; Aynalem, 2013; Bires, 2014; Ketema, 2015; Eshete, 2012; Gemechu, 2014; Asfaw, 2014).

### **Proximity to Honey Pot areas and major highways**

Alemayehu (2011) in his study, mentioned the proximity of Awash National Park to Addis Ababa and to the paleo-anthropological and geological tourist destinations deep in the rift valley of the Afar region, as an advantage for CBET development in Awash park. Furthermore, the proximity to the honey pot attractions, such as the historic route in northern Ethiopia which includes Lalibela, Bahir Dar and Gondar, was also identified as a potential strategic opportunity for the access to the market (Bires, 2014; Aynalem, 2013; Ambelu, 2011).

However, all the findings of the aforementioned studies are in stark contradiction with the concept of ecotourism which is defined as a travel to relatively undisturbed and uncontaminated remote natural areas.

### **Policy Environments**

It was also found that there are various policies in the country which support and create favorable conditions for ecotourism development as such. For instance, Eshetie (2012) states that ecotourism development is a priority in the Ethiopian Tourism Development Strategy and is also important in Ethiopia's Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP) which has laid some solid foundations by establishing relevant strategies and policies to address issues on the wise use of natural resources and an integrated approach for achieving rapid and sustainable growth to end poverty. In addition, the Federal and Regional Government Policy and commitment's towards Infrastructure Development (Eshetie, 2012; Berhanu, 2013), the Tourism Policy and the new Community Based Ecotourism guideline (Gemechu, 2014); the Environmental Policy of Ethiopia (Ayinalem, 2013; Alemayehu, 2011), Ethiopia's anti-natalist population policy (Eshetie, 2012) and the Investment policy of Ethiopia in the travel and tourism industry (Asfaw, 2014), are all stated as policy environments which could offer positive opportunities for developing effective community based ecotourism in Ethiopia.

### **Other Opportunities for Community Based Ecotourism**

The potential for cross border tourism is considered to be a good feature of CBET (Berhanu, 2013). The construction of roads offers some useful opportunities for this as well (Asfaw, 2014). There is also a global increasing demand for ecotourism (Berhanu, 2013, Gemechu, 2014) and the potential benefit of ecotourism as a source of employment and income cannot be understated (Berhanu, 2013; Eshetie, 2012; Gemechu, 2014). All these aspects offer good prospects for community based ecotourism development in the respective study areas.

Gemechu (2014) identified the presence of Culture and Tourism Offices, Environmental protection offices, tourism promotion clubs and organizations, a strong desire to plant indigenous trees, and the political will to develop ecotourism, as opportunities to develop Community Based Ecotourism Tourism in and around Addis Ababa. Alemayehu (2011), in his study in Awash National Park,



identified the existence of some community based initiatives in the Awash Falls Lodge, such as the positive attitude towards community-based ecotourism, the presence of sugar plantations as aspects which have created alternative sources of employment for locals and traditional institutions. This would be in areas such as the Gada system of the Kerreyu Oromo, and the Belaadas of the Afar, which present opportunities for community based ecotourism initiatives. Ayinalem (2013) mentioned in his study, that the area is unsuitable for agriculture, mainly due to the fact that it is a water tower of the upper Nile basin, and with the existence of various Ngos and conservation projects in place, this is an advantage for community based ecotourism development in the Choke Mountains and its environs. Eshetie (2012) identified the relative peace and security of the country, the expansion of telecommunication services, and globalization as an opportunity for community based ecotourism development in his study area.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings from the review of different studies revealed a lack of basic ecotourism infrastructure and facilities, conflicts of interest over resource usage and a lack of trained manpower as the major hindrances of community based ecotourism development in Ethiopia. These are followed by a low awareness ecotourism, the lack of promotion and ineffective marketing, poor participation in ecotourism and inadequate financing, as major problem areas and thus challenges.

Though eco tourists do not want luxuries and sophisticated service and facilities, they need basic ecotourism facilities such as transportations, clean accommodation and other support services. Hence, the government, NGOs and any other concerned bodies should strive to fulfill these needs by offering such facilities in order to ensure the development of community based ecotourism. In addition, it would be better to consult and involve the local communities whenever commencing or initiating ecotourism ventures and conservation projects. Moreover, it is recommended that there should be created alternative means of livelihood for local communities who live around ecotourism destinations in order to mitigate the conflict that may arise, due to the local community's dependence on wildlife resources in protected areas.

Hence, it is recommended that the state should employ well-trained and suitable professionals in protected areas, provide useful culture and tourism offices, and also any other needed bodies in and for the tourism industry. Furthermore, the Government, the private sector and NGOs should allocate sufficient budgets for the promotion and marketing of ecotourism destinations effectively. It is also essential to devise awareness creation programs for local communities living in and around protected areas about ecotourism and how it adds value to their lives and communities making the area sustainable for future generations to enjoy.

Moreover, the results from the review also identified the presence of abundant ecotourism resources, the close proximity to honey pot areas and the enabling policy environments as the major prospects for community based ecotourism development in Ethiopia to succeed. In addition, the global increasing demand for ecotourism, the potential benefit of ecotourism is a source of employment and income generation. This would bring relative peace and security to the country, support the expansion of telecommunication services, support globalization, and help drive the growth of various Ngo's and conservation projects. These are all stated to offer opportunities for community based ecotourism development in Ethiopia to flourish. To sum up, Ethiopia has enormous potential and it could be one of the top community based ecotourism destinations in the world if the infrastructural, human resource, marketing and promotion, financial issues, effective resource use, awareness and participation constraints are resolved appropriately.





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