

Community Perceptions of the Economic Impacts of Ecotourism in Cameroon

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How to cite this article: Harilal, V. & Tichaawa, T.M. (2020). Community Perceptions of the Economic Impacts of Ecotourism in Cameroon. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 9(6):959-978. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-62>

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate community perceptions of the economic impact of ecotourism in Cameroon. Using a mixed-method research approach, based on two case study areas (the Mount Cameroon National Park and the Douala Edéa Wildlife Reserve), community surveys were administered to 442 households. In addition, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with relevant key informants. Key findings suggest that, while respondents generally agreed that ecotourism has many positive economic benefits, such benefits are often concentrated at government level, or contained within privately owned businesses. The lack of benefit sharing can be attributed to the low level of involvement of locals in the sector, unsuitable management practices that promote neither inclusiveness, nor the nomination of locals as economic beneficiaries of the sector, and an absence of dedicated ecotourism policy to guide the overall development and management of the sector. The study recommends that policies and strategies that encourage local economic development from ecotourism be established in the country, to ensure that the appropriate structures are put in place for the equitable distribution of the economic benefits to locals.

Keywords: Ecotourism, economic impacts, Cameroon, Local Economic Development, Mount Cameroon National Park, Douala Edéa Wildlife Reserve

Introduction

The tourism sector globally, prior to the dire impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak, has experienced rapid growth in recent years, with the subsector of ecotourism garnering an increasing amount of attention as being one way in which to spur on economic growth and development, especially in the Global South context (Nicolaidis & Vettori, 2019). Within many African destinations, the potential for alternative tourism, such as ecotourism, is great, with such forms of tourism having been adopted as a strategy to stimulate local economic development (LED). In Cameroon, for instance, tourism has been earmarked as a key sector for enabling strategic growth (Kimbu, 2011), with the subsectors of sport tourism, business tourism and ecotourism having been identified as being capable of bringing about such growth (Harilal & Tichaawa, 2018; Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2018; Tichaawa, 2017). Often referred to as an 'Africa in miniature' (Lambi, Kimengsi, Kometa & Tata, 2012), Cameroon has immense

biodiversity and varied natural landscapes that position the country well for the development of a popular ecotourism sector, which could be used to lever much-needed LED in terms of the local communities.

Although tourism in Cameroon has been identified as being a sector earmarked for widespread economic development, the sector (and its subsectors) suffer from varying states of underdevelopment, resulting in the uneven development of tourism in the country. The situation has been exacerbated by the lack of dedicated and guiding (eco)tourism policy, as well as by an inadequate supportive infrastructure and tourism-related services (Harilal, Tichaawa & Saarinen, 2018). In addition, the ongoing geopolitical conflict between the anglophone and francophone nationals, culminating in the anglophone crisis, has affected the country in recent times (Socpa, 2016; Kimbu & Tichaawa, 2018, 2020). Moreover, a further compounding factor has been the infiltration of extremist activity into the northern parts of the country, rendering popular ecotourism attractions, like the Waza National Park, desolate (Tichaawa, 2017). Such factors, coupled with the uneven development of the sector, have also resulted in an unevenness in the generation of economic impacts across the various regions in the country, especially in those already identified as ecotourism hotspots, like the Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP) and the Douala Edèa Wildlife Reserve (DEWR).

Cameroon has a tourism sector that possesses the potential for widespread economic benefits that the country (and its people) could accrue from its sustained growth, thus underscoring the ability of the sector to stimulate LED. However, to ensure that the efforts directed at increasing the amount of LED are realised, it is essential that appropriate supportive policies be put into place, to ensure that all the relevant stakeholders concerned will be able to harness the maximum benefits therefrom (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013). In the present study, and within the context of ecotourism, local communities are argued as being the relevant stakeholders, who must have their role recognised, so as to ensure that the benefits of such development are circulated at the local level. Hence, considering the foregoing discussion, the designation of ecotourism for strategic development, including LED, as well as the hurdles that the sector faces in various regions of the country, necessitate the need to examine community perceptions of the economic impact of ecotourism in Cameroon, with the sector involved stimulating and promoting LED. Hence, the primary research question that this paper sought to address was determining the economic impact of ecotourism in Cameroon, through an examination of community and stakeholder perceptions, specifically in the chosen case study areas.

Literature review

Economic impacts of ecotourism

Ecotourism, first and foremost, has been associated with positive economic impacts on the destination economies concerned, with the sector being noted as being the fastest growing within the tourism industry (Eshun, Adjei, Knust & Segbefia, 2016; Hugo & Nyaupane, 2016). Positive economic impacts are generally linked to the creation of jobs (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf & Vogt, 2005; Venkatesh & Gouda, 2016) within the sector, which encourages the diversification of community livelihood strategies (Duffy, 2006; Nsukwini & Bob, 2016; Stone & Nyaupane, 2017; Stronza, Hunt & Fitzgerald, 2019). Through such diversification, locals gain an opportunity to be less reliant on traditional livelihood activities, like agriculture, than they have been in the past. Moswete and Thapa (2015) illustrate the above, using the example of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in Botswana, in terms of which the locals have been educated regarding ecotourism, and relating to the opportunities for engagement that arise from the sector, thus lessening their dependence on a single strategy to support their livelihood.

The promotion of LED within the communities involved, leading to economic empowerment at the local level, and to the overall improvement in the quality of life for the locals, is a primary aim of the adoption of ecotourism (Mayaka, Lacey & Rogerson, 2019; Nicolaidis & Vettori, 2019). Schmidt and Uriely (2019) define the concept of empowerment as the degree to which locals within a community have the autonomy to make their own decisions, and to exert control over all aspects of their lives, or over all the factors that might affect their lives. The concept of empowerment is inherently linked to community-based ecotourism, in terms of which, through their meaningful involvement and participation in the subsector, locals (including the marginalised) can become financially empowered.

Ecotourism and LED

The concept of LED is focused on the stimulation of development at a local level. Tourism has often been flagged as being a sector that can act as a lever for LED, especially in terms of those types that emphasise local involvement. Ecotourism, which is often premised upon such, tends to be an ideal vehicle for the promotion of LED. The general aims of LED are to alleviate poverty, to contribute to improving the quality of life of locals and their communities, to enhance their access to services and to contribute to the development of communal infrastructure (Kokt & Hattingh, 2019). The ways in which LED is stimulated, through tourism, is by the creation of employment for locals, and through the formation of public-private civil society partnerships (Snyman, 2017), which also tend to provide for the upskilling of people, thus raising the level of meaningful participation of locals in LED initiatives in the sector.

Ecotourism and LED – possible positive influences and outcomes

The creation of jobs as an impact of (eco)tourism is an important economic benefit to consider, as it gives rise to various economic and sociocultural impacts. The jobs that are created through ecotourism promote the adoption of alternative livelihood strategies for the locals (Musavengane, 2018), as was previously mentioned, given that the conservation efforts in the protected areas, and in other areas where ecotourism occurs, might hinder, or restrict, such traditional strategies as agriculture (Kimengsi, Kechia, Azibo, Pretzsch & Kwie, 2019; Poyyamoli, 2018), with such becoming an especially salient point to note. Additionally, if locals are able to accrue economic benefits from the tourism sector, through the diversification of their livelihood strategies, the pressure exerted on the natural resources, as a result of their use by the tourism sector, as well as by the locals, can be reduced (Moswete & Thapa, 2015).

Moreover, the amount of support for the sector, and for the ecotourism-related activities and efforts, is likely to increase when locals are able to be involved in, and to extract, equitable benefits from the subsector. For example, the poaching of wildlife in the protected areas has come under scrutiny, with the locals hunting for food, not considering their actions to constitute poaching, whereas those who are involved in conservation efforts do. However, if locals are able to benefit economically from the sector (enabling those with purchasing power to ensure their own food security), and if they are educated on the necessity of conservation, as well as being involved in the conservation effort itself, their compliance with, and their support for, the regulations is likely to increase (Lindberg, 2001; Okech, 2004). Similar sentiments are echoed by Clifton and Benson (2006), who argue that the accrual of economic benefits by locals, as well as the deliberate stimulation of LED, is an important aspect of motivating them to accept the role of host community, while also encouraging their participation and involvement in the sector. Moreover, as Su, Sun, Min and Jiao (2018) point out, the sustainability of the sector also depends on such factors.

Linked to the creation of jobs for locals from the ecotourism sector, and to the promoting of the diversification of livelihood strategies, is an impact that is jointly economic and sociocultural in nature. When the locals from the host communities are involved in the sector, and in receipt of financial outputs (from their jobs therein), traditional livelihood strategies, like agriculture, are often relinquished, representing a shift away from traditional livelihood practices. Hence, the above can result in staunchly traditional locals, who consider the impacts emanating from ecotourism to be a form of acculturation (De Azeredo Grünwald, 2002). Moreover, given that the traditional livelihood strategies are steeped in long-standing traditional practices, which have been passed down through the generations, such strategies are inextricably linked to the heritage of the locals. Activities that encourage or force a shift away from the activities, also encourage, or force, the locals to abandon their heritage (Su et al., 2018), so that they can be considered to be a negative and unwanted consequence of such development.

The development of ecotourism in an area might also serve as a mechanism for attracting foreign investment in an area, resulting in the funds being used for developing and growing the sector, through the development of infrastructure aimed at servicing the sector, and the community at large. The above is an important way in which ecotourism serves as a lever for LED, which is often cited as constraining the sustained development and growth of the ecotourism that is led solely by communities, or by the state (Asuk & Nchor, 2018; Aung, 2018; Bello, Lovelock & Carr, 2017; Sama & Molua, 2019). The funds generated from an established ecotourism sector can also benefit a host community, through enabling the construction of such infrastructure as schools, clinics and community centres, for local and community use. Thereby, a contribution can be made to the LED, along with encouraging the development of positive attitudes in the host communities towards the development of ecotourism in their immediate vicinity (Nsukwini & Bob, 2016; Stone & Nyaupane, 2017).

Ecotourism and LED – possible negative influences and outcomes

The possibility that positive impacts are the only type of economic impacts to arise from the development of ecotourism must be considered. For example, as Eshun and Tagoe-Darko (2015) argue, foreign investment from international companies that facilitate the overall development of the ecotourism sector often results in the economic leakage of revenue, due to the establishment of international accommodation and travel operation chains. The view is echoed by Scheyvens (2011), who uses the Maldives as a case study illustrating leakage, with the establishment of the international chains involved frustrating the development opportunities for local entrepreneurship in the ecotourism sector. Peaty (2007) echoes the above sentiments, citing the case of ecotourism in Ecuador, where all ecotourism-related businesses were, at one time, foreign-owned and belonged to international chains, with nearly all of the profits generated from the industry leaking out of the country.

In terms of the impact of economic leakage, Lindberg (2001) argues that, although jobs are created by, or through, tourism, the knock-on benefits of the employment creation might not circulate back into the host communities concerned. Furthermore, Lindberg (2001) notes that the type of employment that is created by tourism is also viewed as being positive (when stable) or negative (when unstable, or transient). Wearing (2001) points out that, when non-local products are used for ecotourism development, and the creation of jobs does not benefit locals, the above amounts to a negative impact, as locals then have to endure disruption to their daily lives, which is marked by the absence of positive benefits to even out the scale. Moreover, international and external funding in the ecotourism sectors results in a private-led sector, disabling the development of community-based ecotourism (thus inhibiting induced LED),

with the ability of the sector to become a forerunner of inclusive tourism being limited (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

The development of ecotourism, coupled with the influx of ecotourists and the noninvolvement of the locals in the sector, might, additionally, result in an inflated cost of living for the locals, as observed by Acquah, Nsor, Arthur and Boadi (2017) in the local communities in Ghana. The above is a challenge that could occur in the host communities located in the Global South, as most are characterised by low levels of economic independence and development, and by high levels of poverty (Duffy, 2006). The increased cost of living for the locals stems from an increase in the cost of services and products that are used in their daily lives. Often, especially within the Global South contexts, where economies are still developing, the cost of goods and services is less for some international tourists than it is in their own countries. Hence, the destinations involved become attractive to the tourists concerned, while affecting the ability of the locals to sustain themselves economically (Lindberg, 2001), and, ultimately, undermining any efforts that are exerted towards LED. Moreover, as the ecotourism sectors are often limited by seasonality, the benefits that the locals are able to derive from the sector tend to be intermittent. Those locals whose livelihood solely depends on ecotourism are put at risk thereby (Dodds, Ali & Galaski, 2018; McKercher, 2010). Setiyorini, Andari and Masunah (2019), supporting the above sentiment. The argument is that, although positive impacts might arise from tourism development, it is important to consider the severe impact of having communities become solely dependent on the tourism industry, given the seasonality of the sector. Hence, the economic insecurity of the locals is further exacerbated by the existence of a high level of dependence on the sector, coupled with an inflated cost of living for the locals.

Tangible economic benefits for host communities and for locals are essential for the success of community-based ecotourism, as such benefits tend to have a direct (positive) impact on improving the quality of life of the communities concerned (Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015; Sangpikul, 2017). The positive attitude of the locals towards the development and growth of ecotourism has been linked to the success and sustainability of the sector, as well as has been its ability to stimulate LED (see Clifton & Benson, 2006; Moswete & Thapa, 2015; Snyman, 2017), as communities are able to conceptualise, and to experience, the positive benefits of ecotourism at the local level. Therefore, the above is considered to be an important component of the development and growth of the sector.

Ecotourism that is primarily privately operated can also lead to the development of enclave tourism, which serves mainly the interests of the elite tourists, while contributing to the exclusion and the marginalisation of the locals (Zacarias & Loyola, 2017). Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) point out that, as a result of the above, the tourism industry has been thought of as an exclusive industry, which is out of bounds to (and unreachable by) the locals in terms of benefit sharing, while serving elitist interests through the exploitation of the natural resource base, as well as the local labour. In essence, through private sector dominance, opportunities for ecotourism-induced LED become inhibited.

Restricting access to protected areas (where ecotourism activities generally occur) for locals can, further, result in negative economic impacts for them. Such can be the case when the materials that locals use (as sourced from the protected areas) tend to become inaccessible, thus leaving them without a way of sustaining themselves (Lindberg, 2001), instead of tourism serving as a mechanism for empowering communities through the promotion of LED. The above has been observed by Stronza and Gordillo (2008), who explain that, despite ecotourism generating a substantial amount of revenue from the ecotourists seeking out pristine and authentic environments, the attendant benefits are often not shared with the locals. Therefore, the role of ecotourism as a tool that can be utilised for the upliftment of livelihoods, as well as

for achieving sustainable development in the local areas, has been questioned (Stone & Nyaupane, 2017). Although a barrier to the development and growth of ecotourism sectors is a lack of funding (Okazaki, 2008), the conditions and consequences of foreign investment can result in development that serves the interests neither of locals, nor of communities, which is a central tenet of ecotourism, especially in the Global South and African contexts.

The negative economic impacts that result in the non-participation of the locals, through the lack of equitable benefit sharing, frequently results in the development of a negative attitude and outlook towards ecotourism from a community perspective (Pemunta, 2019). Consequently, as has been repeatedly cited in the relevant literature (Stone & Nyaupane, 2017; Tosun, 2000; Wu & Chen, 2018), the adoption of negative attitudes to ecotourism, on the part of communities, translates into a lack of support for ecotourism-related activities, as well as for the sector as a whole. Therefore, it is essential that the host communities and the locals participate and benefit economically from the conducting of ecotourism activities, as such activities occur within their immediate vicinity (with some degree of disruption for their daily lives). In addition, the development of ecotourism results in a raised cost of living, due to the increased demand for goods and services from ecotourists, which increase the locals can ill afford (Acquah et al., 2017; Tang, 2019). The occurrence of such impacts often results in the unintended effect of LED becoming void.

Background to the study area

Given the limited amount of research conducted into ecotourism in the Cameroonian context, a mixed-method approach was adopted for use in the current study, with both qualitative and quantitative research methods being employed. Using such an approach, the relevant tourism stakeholders, including local communities, were able to participate in the study, resulting in the collection of a holistic data set, which accounted for the viewpoints of different stakeholders from various perspectives. A case study approach was utilised in the current study, in terms of two different protected areas, with the areas both being ecotourism attractions, being selected. The selection of the case study sites was also determined by their geographic location, as each fell in either an anglophone- or a francophone-dominant region of the country. In basing the selection on such considerations, a comparative geopolitical analysis of the results became possible, with it also becoming a defining feature of this study.

The local geopolitical context in Cameroon is shaped by a historical divide between anglophone and francophone nationals, stemming from the country's colonial past. Cameroon was colonised by three imperial powers during its history, first by Germany, and subsequently by France and Britain (following Germany's defeat in World War I), with it being placed under the League of Nations in 1920 (Kimbu, 2010). France gained control of a large area (four-fifths) of the country, being the Eastern part of Cameroon, whereas Britain gained control of a smaller area (one-fifth) of the country (the Western part of the country), giving rise to the politically and culturally divided francophone and anglophone Cameroon (Mbatu, 2009). In recent times, the divide has given rise to violent tensions between the two factions (Socpa, 2016). Given that the ruling political party in Cameroon is dominated by a francophone ethos, the balance of power in the ongoing conflict is skewed. Consequently, locals' perceptions of government initiatives vary across the geopolitical landscape.

Specific to ecotourism in the country, the above is of particular importance, as community involvement and participation is a large component of ecotourism. The ongoing conflict has direct implications for the ability of the locals to collaborate in, and to cooperate with, the other tourism stakeholders, especially those from the opposing sides. The Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP), which is located in the South-West province (a predominantly anglophone region), and the Douala Edéa Wildlife Reserve (DEWR) – as it was

known at the time of data collection, but changed to national park status since October 2018 - which is located in the Littoral province (with it being a predominantly francophone region) were the two selected case study sites for this study (see Figure 1 below).

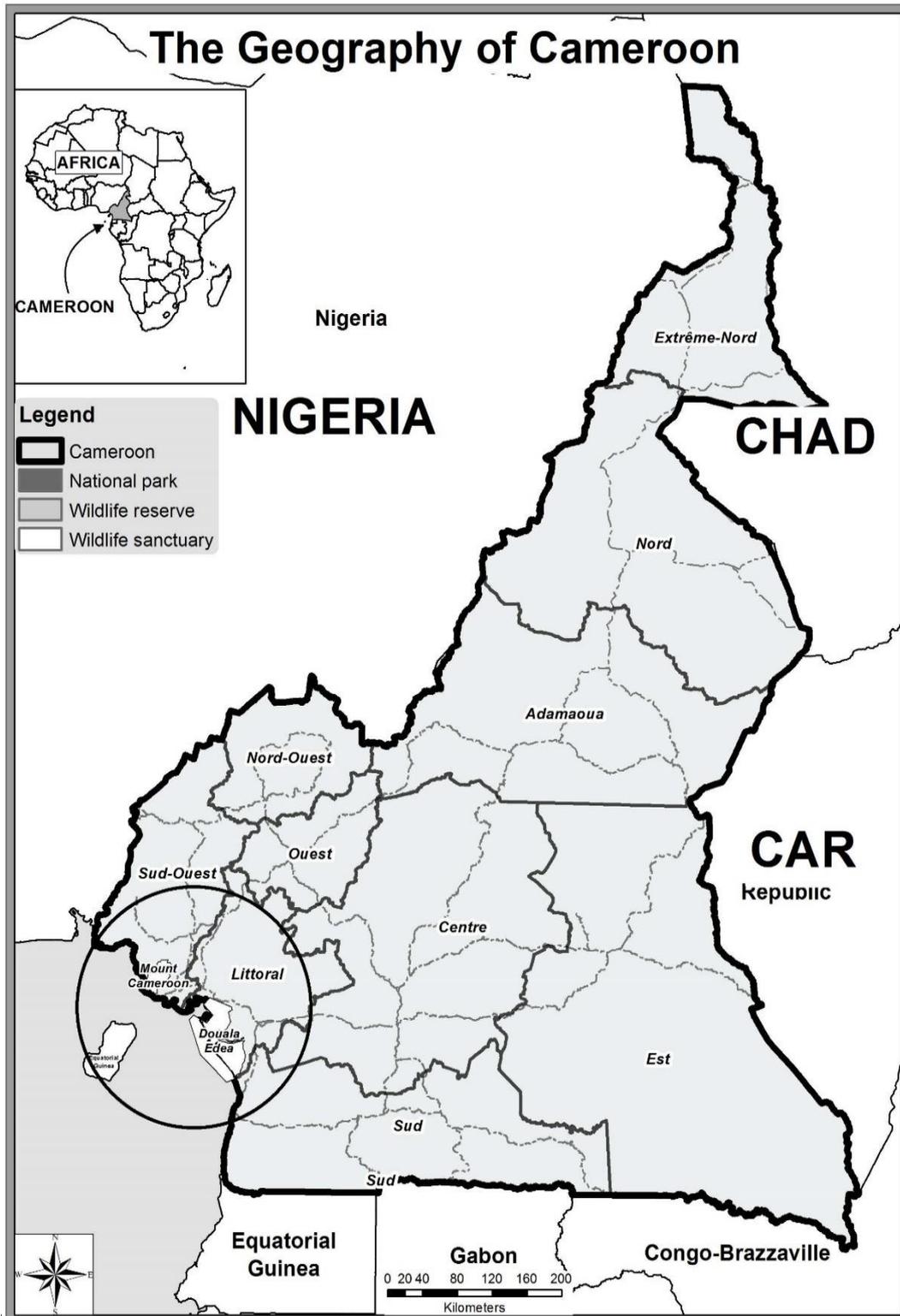


Figure 1: The geography of Cameroon
Source: Authors

Research methodology

Within the identified sites, two population groups were targeted for data collection. The heads of households (or the adult representatives thereof) in local communities were selected using a systematic sampling method, for the dissemination of the quantitative aspect of this study. However, there was an unknown sample size, given the lack of reliable data indicating the number of households in each case study site. Hence, the number of households required for this study was calculated on the basis of an unknown population size (see Isaac & Micheal, 1981). Using systematic intervals of every 3rd household in the case study sites, a total of 442 household surveys were completed, with 227 emanating from the MCNP region and 215 from the DEWR region. Owing to the larger area of the MCNP region, a higher number of surveys were completed.

The data collection for the study occurred over a four-month period, lasting from June to September 2017, with the assistance of trained, local fieldworkers. The involvement of local fieldworkers was essential, as this enabled any potential language barriers to be overcome. Additionally, as French and English are both national languages in Cameroon, the survey instrument was translated into French for dissemination in the predominantly Francophone region. The community surveys that were administered to households across both the MCNP and DEWR regions consisted primarily of closed-ended questions. They measured basic demographic variables, as well as the perceptions of respondents with regard to the various impacts of ecotourism, using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. However, in the results, the scales have been grouped ('strongly agree' with 'agree' and 'strongly disagree' with 'disagree'). Data collected from the surveys was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software, version 25, which allowed for the generation of descriptive statistics.

In contrast, key tourism stakeholders were purposively selected for the execution of the qualitative aspect of this study. Twelve in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with key tourism stakeholders, including local community chiefs, representatives of community leadership forums, national park managers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community tour operators, each of whom possessed in-depth knowledge of ecotourism in Cameroon. All interviews were conducted by the researchers themselves, with a translator present for instances where French was the spoken language. Stakeholders were questioned on their unique knowledge of ecotourism in Cameroon, especially relating to the state of development of ecotourism, the levels of participation and involvement of locals in the sector, the amount of benefit sharing amongst locals, as well as the dissemination of local economic development levered from the sector. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, to enable thematic content analysis of the data.

Results and discussion

Demographic profile of respondents:

Given the limited data available on ecotourism in Cameroon, the collection of demographic data provided an insight into the characteristics of the communities potentially affected by the development of ecotourism in the MCNP and DEWR regions. This type of data is useful for planning purposes, especially in a country like Cameroon, where developmental efforts in the sector are still underway. Most respondents surveyed in the current study were men, who, typically, occupied the position of head of household, as is noted in the table below. The age range of the respondents from the MCNP region was 18 to 65 years of age, with it extending to older than 65 years of age in the DEWR region. Regarding the employment status of respondents, 41.6% and 47.6% of respondents from the MCNP and DEWR, respectively, indicated that they were self-employed. A higher percentage of respondents from the MCNP



region (24.2%) stated that they held full-time employment, compared to the relatively low 9.5% of respondents from the DEWR region who were so employed. A significant percentage of respondents from the DEWR region indicated that they were unemployed (18.6%), with 8.1% indicating that they were retired. The higher percentage of retired respondents in the DEWR region corresponded to the elderly population in the region.

Position in household		
	MCNP	DEWR
Head of household	51.8%	63.7%
Adult representative	48.2%	36.3%
Age		
Age range	18–65 years	>65 years
Gender		
Male	71.3%	82.3%
Female	28.7%	17.7%
Employment status		
Self-employed	41.6%	47.6%
Working (full-time)	24.2%	9.5%
Unemployed	13%	18.6%
Working (part-time)	8.1%	10.5%
Home executives	8.7%	5.7%
Retired	4.3%	8.1%

Community perceptions of the economic impacts of ecotourism

Table 2 below details the community perceptions of the economic impacts of ecotourism. The impacts relate to variables, including ecotourism and LED in the communities and the cost of living, as well as business opportunities and employment.

Table 2. Community perceptions on the economic impacts of ecotourism in Cameroon (in %)

	MC	DE	MC	DE	MC	DE
	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
LED in communities						
V1 Ecotourism development is very important for economic development	2.4	12.6	9.5	16.3	88.1	71.2

V2	Ecotourism brings important economic benefits to the residents of the community	12.5	47.4	10.1	19.1	77.4	33.5
V3	Ecotourism activities have increased the local people's active participation in local development	7.8	36.3	14.9	34.4	77.4	29.3
V4	Our standard of living has improved, due to tourist spending in the community	35.2	67.9	14.9	14.9	50.0	17.2
V5	Ecotourism brings increased investment into the communities' local economy	22.6	45.1	11.9	14.4	65.5	40.5
V6	Ecotourism helps the government generate foreign exchange earnings	6.8	24.6	9.5	26.0	83.9	49.3
V7	Ecotourism has increased revenue from tourists for the local government	11.9	32.6	12.5	24.7	75.5	42.8
V8	Tax revenues from tourists are used to improve infrastructure and public services for the community	50.0	67.5	25.6	23.7	24.4	8.8
Impact on the cost of living							
V9	The cost of living in the community has increased because of ecotourism	61.9	70.7	14.3	11.6	23.8	17.7
V10	The prices of goods and services have increased because of ecotourism	64.9	67.4	6.5	16.3	28.6	16.2
Business opportunities and employment							
V11	Local businesses benefit from tourists	8.9	30.2	13.1	14.4	78.0	55.3
V12	Ecotourism only benefits business owners	68.4	57.6	7.7	8.4	23.8	34.0
V13	Ecotourism has increased employment opportunities for local residents	9.5	57.2	6.5	6.0	83.9	36.7
V14	Ecotourism provides desirable jobs in the community	43.4	81.4	16.1	7.9	40.5	10.7
V15	Ecotourism has caused younger people to abandon 'family' jobs for tourism-related jobs	33.9	67.6	12.5	15.3	53.6	16.7

*Note: MC = MCNP; DE = DEWR.

The two case study areas in the current study were not only geographically different, but they were also different in terms of their ideological - political standing (being either predominantly anglophone or francophone). The level of ecotourism-related development in each area also differed, with the resultant economic impacts being varied. The MCNP region's development

has thus far been guided by a planning document (see MINFOF, 2014), and has therefore benefitted from an increased level of ecotourism related development. Contrarily, there is a stark absence of such in the DEWR region, contributing to its extremely underdeveloped state. A cursory assessment of the results presented in Table 2 indicates that, although the overall level and type of economic ecotourism impact varied, the region that accrued the most (positive) economic impacts from the development of ecotourism was the MCNP region, which was also a predominantly anglophone region. However, upon further consideration, the level and type of economic impacts, attributable to ecotourism in the regions, also directly corresponded to the extent of ecotourism development in the regions. In the case of the DEWR, the development of an ecotourism subsector was found to be severely stunted. Hence, the economic impacts accrued from the subsector were similarly stunted.

LED in the communities

The findings presented in Table 2 reveal that ecotourism-induced LED was far more prevalent in the MCNP region than it was in the DEWR region. This assertion was supported by 83.9% of respondents, who stated that ecotourism aided in the generation of foreign exchange earnings for the government (V6), with 88.1% of respondents indicating that ecotourism development was important for economic growth (V1). In addition, 77.4% of respondents noted that the development of ecotourism brought with it important economic impacts (V2), as well as asserting that the participation of locals in the tourism sector had increased since the development of the ecotourism subsector (V3). Additionally, 75.5% of respondents from the MCNP region opined that the local government had experienced an increase in tourist revenue, due to the establishment of ecotourism in the area (V7). However, despite many respondents agreeing with the statement, only half of the respondents from the MCNP region noted that the tax revenues from tourists were used to improve the infrastructure and public services to the community. The improvement of infrastructure, serving both the sectorial, as well as the community, needs, was a key benefit of tourism-induced LED that had not benefitted the locals in the MCNP region. The above was not due to a lack of development per se, but it was the result of the locals being (financially) unable to accessibility the existing infrastructure. A local community chief from the region explained:

They have built a hotel very far [away] in the mountain, and, if you don't have a very strong vehicle, a four-wheel drive [which most do not have], there is no ... other ordinary vehicle that can get there. They have said that the people can hire it. But, how can you say that you have built this hotel, and [that you] want to hire it out, but put a very high figure on it? So, it is already indicating that the community ... will not be able to use it.

The survey results that were obtained in the DEWR, compared to those that were obtained in the MCNP region, differed in many respects. Generally, there was acknowledgement of the benefits that ecotourism could generate. For example, 71.2% of respondents agreed that ecotourism development was important for economic development in the area (V1), with 49.3% of respondents agreeing that ecotourism aided in the generation of foreign exchange earnings (V6). However, only a third of respondents (33.5%) agreed that ecotourism had, in fact, brought benefits to the residents of the community (V2). Along similar lines, only 29.3% of respondents acceded to the notion that the ecotourism activities undertaken in the area had resulted in an increased level of local participation in local development (V3), with fewer respondents (17.2%) agreeing that their standard of living had improved, due to increased

tourist spend in the area (V4). The results were reinforced by a local community representative from the region, who stated:

The activity is not beneficial to the community at all, [as] there is limited, or no, contact with tourists. There is a lack of cohesion and collaboration between [the] government and the community and [the] locals, in leveraging the tourists that come into the Reserve and [who are] given opportunities.

The above results, when examined comparatively, portray vastly different situations of the way in which ecotourism development had unfolded in each region, with the resultant economic impacts also differing. Hence, although, when considered against the existing literature, in terms of which tourism (and ecotourism) is purported to be an ideal tool to foster LED in communities (see Midoun & Nardjess, 2019; Musavengane, 2018; Snyman, 2017), the findings reveal that such is not always the case, with other factors also impacting upon the ability of (eco)tourism to foster LED. One of the most important factors to emanate from the literature is the integral role of the local degree of involvement and participation in the sector (Clifton & Benson, 2006). Without such involvement and participation, any notion of LED, with an emphasis on the local, becomes void, as the development generated from the activities is channelled to outside the community. With the occurrence concerned being known as leakage, another documented phenomenon in the literature (Eshun & Tagoe-Darko, 2015), which also serves to underpin the importance of local involvement in the development, operation and management of ecotourism sectors, entails ensuring that LED is a true outcome of the activity undertaken. An NGO representative from the DEWR region alluded to the occurrences of leakage that were linked to the noninvolvement of locals in the sector:

During the dry season, when tourists come, they just go with their tents, and mount them. So they stay there, and bring all their food from town. They don't even rent those little motels to stay in, or buy from locals.

In spite of the ecotourism subsector in Cameroon still undergoing development, the level of development of the sector was found to be significantly higher in the MCNP region than it was in the DEWR region, which was evidenced by the greater number of respondents in the former region who acknowledged the benefits accrued from ecotourism, in terms of LED, as discussed above. However, in the DEWR region, where the limited number of ecotourism activities that existed was mostly run by external parties, the levels of local participation in the subsector was particularly low. Consequently, the level of economic leakage in the region was particularly high, with most economic benefits, although accruing in the region, in actual fact being accumulated outside it.

Impact of the cost of living

Generally, a common economic impact, stemming from the establishment of tourism in regions, is that the cost of living for locals increases, due to tourism operators hiking their prices to profit from tourists with significant disposable income (see Acquah et al., 2017; Lindberg, 2001; Tang, 2019). However, the above is also often linked, once again, to the level of (eco)tourism development and activity occurring in a region. In the cases of MCNP and DEWR, where the levels of ecotourism development were relatively low, the majority of the respondents (61.9% in the MCNP, and 70.7% in the DEWR) accordingly indicated that neither

had the cost of living in their communities increased as a result of ecotourism (V9), nor had the price of goods and services increased (64.9% in the MCNP, and 67.4% in the DEWR).

The low levels of ecotourism in the regions surveyed were emphasised by the key informants interviewed. For example, an NGO representative from the DEWR region noted that locals were interested in becoming involved in the development and operation of ecotourism in the area, being cognisant of the potential benefits that they may accrue. However, there was a lack of opportunity for them to do so, as the limited amount of development that had already taken place in the sector was dominated by the private sector.

The above-mentioned sentiments were somewhat echoed in the MCNP region, where the low levels of local involvement and participation in the sector was attributed to the inadequate operation of an inefficient management system, as well as to the exclusionary practices of those who were already involved in the subsector. For example, a community representative from the region stated that the lack of a participatory management system disallowed effective local participation and involvement, through allowing the managerial power for the sector to be concentrated in a select few. As a result, instances of exclusionary practices had occurred within the community, with not all of the locals being given the opportunity to participate in the sector. The above was further elaborated on by a community representative (see following quotation), who explained that nepotistic practices had become prevalent in the region, effectively undermining the inherent principle of the use of community-based ecotourism development as a lever towards equitable local community development.

But now, since there are so many tour organisations, it becomes like a family thing. I have my tour organisation, and I call my brothers and sisters to take part. And that is ... it. Forget about the communities! It becomes like a family thing now.

Business opportunities and employment

The majority of respondents (83.9%) from the MCNP region indicated that the undertaking of ecotourism had increased employment opportunities for local residents (V13), with 68.4% of respondents additionally noting that the opportunities that were available were not, necessarily, limited to business owners (V12). However, despite the making of such an acknowledgment, approximately 43.4% of respondents also noted that, although the number of employment opportunities had increased, the available opportunities were not, necessarily, desirable (V14), which also accounted for why many of the relatively young locals have abandoned 'family' jobs (V15), as was indicated by 53.6% of respondents from the region. A local tourism operator from the MCNP region reinforced the above-mentioned results, in stating that the types of jobs to emanate from the sector in the region had largely been limited to portering and tour guiding, which opportunities were mostly made available only to the men in the community. However, the results in the DEWR region painted a slightly different picture, with the majority of respondents (81.4% and 67.6%, respectively) disagreeing that ecotourism provided desirable jobs in the community (V14), or that it had been the cause of younger people abandoning their 'family' jobs (V15). Moreover, approximately 57.0% of respondents disagreed with the statements that the practice of ecotourism in the region had increased the number of employment opportunities that were made available for locals, and that ecotourism only benefitted the business owners (V12 and V13).

Such results should be considered within the context of the DEWR, which is in a predominantly francophone region, with the ecotourism sector being even more underdeveloped than is that of the MCNP region. The levels and types of business opportunities available are generally different and poorer in the former region. The results reveal that for (positive) economic impacts to be realised at the local level, in terms of the communities

existing where the subsector is established, the involvement and participation of local people is essential (Clifton & Benson, 2006). The above was shown by the contrasting results obtained from the two case studies, in relation to which, due to the increased levels of local involvement in the sector, and a greater amount of development overall, the economic impacts of ecotourism had been greater, as opposed to the situation existing in the DEWR region, where the low levels of development and local involvement were found to be congruent with the low levels of economic impacts accrued by locals. Drawing on the geopolitical context of the current study, as well as the results stated, including the findings of the interviews conducted, it is interesting to note that, although the levels of ecotourism development were found to be lower in the DEWR region, a higher level of trust and confidence existed in the government, compared to in the MCNP region, where at least some of the locals had benefitted economically from the sector.

The community representatives from each region elaborated on the issues discussed, in the following way:

Ecotourism is all about money. All the money from here is going to the Treasury, and the Minister of Tourism will decide what to do with this money. The community will never have access to this money. There is no amount that is coming to the community. The only people that are benefitting from this ecotourism thing are the porter and the guard. [MCNP community representative]

We [the community] have confidence that, if [the] government wants to develop ecotourism, [the] government will do it. [DEWR community representative]

In terms of striving towards LED through the establishment of ecotourism in different localities, the results obtained, when considered against those revealed in the existing literature, underscore certain common findings. For example, Scheyvens (1999) notes that the element of local participation and involvement in the subsector is imperative for its development in the local context, as well as for the realisation of economic benefits. Similarly, the results of the present study demonstrate that, where enhanced economic impacts and local development have been linked to increased local participation in the subsector, the outcome is a more developed subsector, overall. Another finding of the current study, which is consistent with the findings made by others in the field (see Bello et al., 2017; Moswete & Thapa, 2015; Saarinen, 2010; Wu & Chen, 2018), is the issue of awareness being linked to attitudes, as an imperative for fostering willingness to participate in the sector. The respondents in both the MCNP and DEWR regions were aware of the potential economic benefits that ecotourism could embody, and they were, thus, keen to participate in it actively. However, the locals, especially those residing in the DEWR region, had not been afforded an opportunity to participate actively in, and to amass, economic benefits from the sector, thus failing to contribute to the LED in the region.

Conclusion

The use of tourism, specifically of those forms of tourism that are premised upon local participation (such as ecotourism), has been a common strategy among many countries in the Global South that wish to encourage LED in their different regions (Musavengane, 2018; Venkatesh & Gouda, 2016). The tourism industry provides an ideal enabling environment for doing so, as the buy-in from, and the participation of communities in, such development is essential, with it becoming the ideal lever for LED in such regions (Kokt & Hattingh, 2019;

Nicolaides & Vettori, 2019). However, for the above to become a reality, strict measures need to be put in place to ensure that development occurs from the bottom up, through the participation and involvement of locals in the development, operation and management of the sector (Nel & Rogerson, 2016). Only in doing so can LED occur. When it does not, issues like economic leakage become endemic to the area, with economic benefits within the local context dwindling away. Hence, any possible economic benefits that can be derived from ecotourism can only become a lever for LED if locals are the beneficiaries of such.

In examining the community perceptions of the economic benefits of ecotourism, the extent to which LED occurs can be illuminated, given that the local community is central to such development. In the cases of the MCNP and the DEWR, the results indicate discord between the development of ecotourism and that of LED, to a varying extent. While the respondents generally agreed that ecotourism could have many positive economic benefits, the benefits accrued are often concentrated at government level, or else contained within privately owned businesses, thus impeding the realisation of LED. Such shortcomings can be attributed to the low level of involvement of locals in the sector, to unsuitable management practices that fail to promote inclusiveness, or the nomination of locals as economic beneficiaries of the sector, and to an absence of dedicated ecotourism policy relating to the guidance of the overall development and management of the sector. Furthermore, the geopolitical location of the study sites seemed to affect the results. Within the context specified, the results revealed that the MCNP, being located within a primarily anglophone region, experienced more ecotourism development, as well as more (positive) economic impacts at a local community level, than did the DEWR. Conversely, the DEWR, being in a predominantly francophone area characterised by strong support for the ruling (francophone) political party, experienced extremely low levels of ecotourism development, with the economic benefits accruing to the locals being almost non-existent.

The current study has contributed to the limited discourse on ecotourism within the West and Central African contexts, and particularly to the scant body of literature on the economic impacts of ecotourism, from a geopolitical perspective, in Cameroon. Although numerous studies have been conducted on ecotourism within the African contexts (see Clifton & Benson, 2006; Dzerefos & Witkowski, 2016; Lee & Du Preez, 2016; Lu, Gursoy & Del Chiappa, 2016; Mbaiwa, 2003; Nyamweno, Okotto & Tonui, 2016; Poudel, Nyaupane & Budruk, 2016; Saurombe, Du Plessis & Swanepoel, 2017; Snyman, 2017; Tyrrell, Paris & Biaett, 2013), most of the studies have focused on Southern and Eastern Africa.

Ecotourism-related research undertaken specifically in Cameroon has previously focused mainly on issues of conservation of biodiversity and wildlife, and on livelihood strategies (De Blas, Ruiz-Pérez & Vermeulen, 2011; Dinsi & Eyebe, 2016; Ngoran, Xue & Ndah, 2016; Njumba, 2012; Wanie & Asoh, 2016), with few studies focusing on the stimulation of LED, through an examination of the economic impacts of ecotourism, and from a geopolitical perspective in Cameroon. Thus, the theoretical contribution of the current paper lies in the adoption of such an approach, in terms of which the issues of ecotourism, economic impacts, LED and Cameroon's geopolitical context are collectively examined. The above is significant, as an argument can be made that a clear research gap exists in the area. Hence, a practical contribution that is made by this study lies in its addition to the limited amount of research available on ecotourism and its impacts in Cameroon, which can be used to inform further research, as well as to facilitate the guidance of much needed dedicated policy development.

Acknowledgement

This article, in part, is based on a doctoral thesis that was submitted to the University of Johannesburg.

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