

Innovative Community Tourism in Uganda International Tourists, National Networks, and Local Livelihoods

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Article abstract

This paper illustrates an innovative approach to enhance rural livelihoods through community tourism in Uganda. Following pro-poor tourism principles of local participation and linking with existing systems, Gorilla Friends Tented Camp opened in Ruhija village, where mountain gorillas were recently habituated for gorilla tracking tours. In a village that had no previous tourist accommodations and few opportunities for villagers to earn income, a percentage of profits from Gorilla Friends Tented Camp are returned to support other livelihood enhancement initiatives in the village. While much of our previous research has focused on identifying and developing local capacity to participate meaningfully in Uganda's tourism industry, attention must also be paid to tourists' experiences at the site to ensure continued viability. Findings based on interviews with tourists to Ruhija illustrate the need for national partnership networks to support local community tourism. Additionally, understanding how tourists came to and experienced the community will assist the local people with sustainability of their operations and activities, and inform continued innovation in community tourism development in Ruhija.

Innovative Community Tourism in Uganda

International Tourists, National Networks, and Local Livelihoods

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ABSTRACT: This paper illustrates an innovative approach to enhance rural livelihoods through community tourism in Uganda. Following pro-poor tourism principles of local participation and linking with existing systems, Gorilla Friends Tented Camp opened in Ruhija village, where mountain gorillas were recently habituated for gorilla tracking tours. In a village that had no previous tourist accommodations and few opportunities for villagers to earn income, a percentage of profits from Gorilla Friends Tented Camp are returned to support other livelihood enhancement initiatives in the village. While much of our previous research has focused on identifying and developing local capacity to participate meaningfully in Uganda's tourism industry, attention must also be paid to tourists' experiences at the site to ensure continued viability. Findings based on interviews with tourists to Ruhija illustrate the need for national partnership networks to support local community tourism. Additionally, understanding how tourists came to and experienced the community will assist the local people with sustainability of their operations and activities, and inform continued innovation in community tourism development in Ruhija.

Keywords: community tourism, partnership, Uganda, poverty, wildlife.

Rural poverty, environmental degradation, and the resultant threat to biodiversity imperil the social and economic development of Uganda. Tremendous potential exists, however, in Uganda's rich natural and cultural heritage resources for sustainable tourism while providing a much needed local impetus to support the conservation of wildlife and natural areas. Although critiques of ecotourism in Africa caution on its natural and cultural limits (Adams and Infield, 2002; Laudati, 2010), the Ugandan government has identified the thoughtful development of tourism as crucial for conserving Uganda's wildlife while simultaneously sustaining the integrity of Uganda's diverse cultures (Government of Uganda, 2000, 2004). As a result, community conceived alternative tourism development strategies are needed to lead rural development and avoid dependency (Lepp, 2008). Local capacity building in research, planning, and management of the resources are also foundational to sustainable tourism and profit realization (Ashley *et al.*, 2001).

Travelling to view nature and wildlife has been traced to the mid-18th and early 19th century Britain (Jasen, 1995). Today it continues to become increasingly more popular, in

part as a reaction against more traditional forms of tourism as some nature-based tourism aims to address economic and environmental concerns (Boo, 1990). The significant travel numbers associated with viewing nature and large wildlife have sustained the segment's prominence in international tourism markets, including Africa (Adams and Infield, 2002; Reynolds and Braithwhite, 2001; Weaver and Lawton, 2002). Currently half of the world's mountain gorilla population resides in Uganda (Figure 1).

Recent critical study by Laudati (2010) exposed the complexity of issues that emanate from the intersection of well-meaning conservation, tourism, and rural poverty alleviation in Buhoma, a village adjacent to Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, and a main gorilla tracking entry point. Control, power, and access concerns are at the root of undermining independence and enhanced livelihoods (Laudati, 2010). While there are countless examples of unsuccessful pro-poor tourism, that in which the costs outweigh the benefits, following principles of local participation, linking with existing systems, and flexibility can lead to sustainability (Chok *et al.*, 2007).



FIGURE 1 : Mountain Gorilla
(*Gorilla Berengei Berengei*)
(photo : courtesy of M. Campbell).

Project Background

The focus for this paper is drawn from one element of a six-year collaborative project between the University of Manitoba, Canada and Makerere University, Uganda. The full project is designed to enhance rural livelihoods through community tourism in Uganda where 61% of Uganda's population lives in poverty (i.e., below US\$1 per day) (UNDP, 2006). The three main goals of the multi-year project are to address: 1) weak institutional linkages between rural communities, NGOs, universities, government departments and public policy makers; 2) deficiencies in community oriented professional skills in

sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation; and 3) the need for interdisciplinary approaches in higher learning to address intertwined problems of biodiversity conservation and sustainable tourism development.

The innovative contribution of the project rests on a triangulated approach of education, community involvement, and strategic networks. The three main processes and outcomes over the six-year duration are: 1) a new master's degree in wildlife tourism and recreation at the university in Uganda; 2) three community tourism demonstration projects; and 3) the establishment of a tourism strategic stakeholders'

network. Much of our work and research to date focused on identifying and developing local capacity to participate meaningfully in Uganda's tourism industry, the initiation of a tourism partner's network, and the creation of the graduate degree. The full details of those processes and outcomes are provided in previous publications by these authors (Campbell *et al.*, 2011a). Until recently less attention has been directed to tourist markets and experience, which are pivotal to understanding and assuring destination competitiveness and sustainability. An anti-poverty tourism framework proffered by Zhao and Ritchie (2007) based on contemporary development practices identifies destination competitiveness, local participation, and destination sustainability as key themes to enhance opportunity, empowerment, and security of poor communities undertaking tourism.

One of the demonstration projects, a tented camp for tourist accommodation serves as the case in this paper to illustrate the interdependence of local community (pro-poor) tourism implementation with international tourist experience, and national tourism organizations. The demonstration projects are located in communities adjacent to national parks – the main tourist draws for wildlife viewing, particularly mountain gorillas in the example for this paper. A significant part of addressing the project goals was the establishment of Gorilla Friends Tented Camp in Ruhija, a village community adjacent to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, where mountain gorillas were recently habituated for gorilla tracking tours. The unique environs of particular wildlife species, such as mountain gorillas and rare birds drive tourists' destination decisions (Applegate and Clark, 1987) as special interest tourists decide on activity/interest first and destination second (Trauer, 2006).

This paper provides an example of how partnership networks are required to support community tourism driven by wildlife viewing international tourists. Findings based on interviews with tourists to Ruhija reinforce the need for a collaborative approach. Understanding how tourists came to the village of Ruhija can also assist the local people with sustainability of their tented camp operations and other community activities, as well as inform potential product and service development to diversify economic activities.

Research setting: Gorilla Friends Tented Camp, Ruhija, Uganda

Ruhija is located in southwestern Uganda on the border of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Access to the community is by a rugged marram (packed earth) road. Ruhija community had no previous tourist accommodations and few opportunities for villagers to earn income. There was a research centre (Institute for Tropical Forest Conservation) however, and birders occasionally came to the community on day trips in order to view the endemic African Green Broadbill.

In 2008, one gorilla group (Bitukura) had been habituated and opened up to tourist visitation, spurring the involvement of the Makerere-Manitoba team in assisting with the development of Ruhija Gorilla Friends Tented Camp as a means for creating community incomes. The mission of the for-profit organization is threefold: "provision of good accommodation to tourists; facilitation and development of local community

projects around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Kitojo Parish through being campsite shareholders and provision of display places for selling handcrafts, and entertainment of tourists for income generation; provision of sponsorship schemes for orphans in school" (RGFRC, not dated).

The majority ownership (80%) of Gorilla Friends is made up of 26 local small investors, the remaining 20 percent is owned by the community as a whole. Currently, 20 % of the profits from the Gorilla Friends Tented Camp are returned to a community fund to support other livelihood initiatives in the village, such as product enhancement for bee-keepers and a water harvesting system. Seven community trails have also been developed with bird guide training for local youth.

The campsite houses four canvas tents on wooden platforms overlooking Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (Figure 2). There are three budget and one more equipped accommodation. There is also room to pitch one's own tent. Prices for two people range from 50 USD at the top end to 14 USD for a campsite. There is a dining area and bar. Since opening in 2009, the Gorilla Friends Tented Camp has hosted over 400 visitors and generated over 16 million Ugandan Shillings (approximately \$6,800 USD) in revenue (Campbell *et al.*, 2011b).

Methodology

As a means to explore tourists' perspectives on the community tourism offerings, 55 semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourists who stayed in Ruhija between August 19 and September 18, 2011. All interviews were conducted in English and took approximately one half hour to complete. Each day, all tourists at the gorilla tracking orientation were approached by two research assistants. Details of the study were explained and trackers (i.e., tourists) were asked if they would be willing to meet later to answer a series of questions about their experience in Ruhija. Appointments were made to meet those tourists who agreed to participate at their lodging later in the evening. Only 10 tourists declined to participate. Another 28 were unable to participate because their group was moving on to another location immediately after tracking. The 10 individuals who declined to participate indicated that they were not comfortable answering the questions in English.

The interview guide development and procedure followed Patton (2002). A thematic content analysis utilizing open and structured coding provides the basis for the findings. Firstly, the interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Question responses were analyzed individually and then considered across questions for recurring and unique themes.

Findings and discussion

In total, 26 men and 29 women participated in the interviews. The interviewees were highly international in origin, with 37 from Europe, six from North America, five from Israel, four from Australia/New Zealand. Three participants were currently living in Uganda but originally from elsewhere. They were also highly educated as 21 held undergraduate degrees, 17 held graduate degrees, and nine others had professional/technical designations/diplomas. It was the first trip to Ruhija for all, but six had been to Uganda before. While most



FIGURE 2 : Gorilla Friends Tented Camp, Ruhija (photo : courtesy of M. Campbell).

interviewees used the services of a tour operator or travel agent to arrange their trip to Uganda and gorilla tracking, 15 were travelling independently.

Choosing Ruhija

When tourists were asked how they decided on Ruhija the responses can be summarized in the words of one traveller who said – “*we didn’t*”. The discussions revealed first and foremost the destination choice was based on the gorilla tracking opportunity, with some birding, affirming their special interest tourist classification (Trauer, 2006). Family members with lifelong goals to see the gorillas would do the research and information search and make the bookings. Other destinations in the decision set would include Rwanda and Congo. Although Uganda was selected, Ruhija was not always mentioned or known to the tourists, however. This specific village location was driven by the tour operators’ package decisions, which were influenced by where and when permits for tracking could be acquired from the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). This role of travel intermediaries as influential gatekeepers is not new (Brown 2000). Some interviewees recounted changes in their itineraries, and accommodations not being the same as were originally noted, but with their lack of familiarity, they did not question the changes as long as gorillas remained on the agenda. The same restrictions and decision chain occurred for the independent travellers as well, as they had to purchase permits directly from UWA (500.00 USD for non-residents).

The influence of culture in the decision to come to Ruhija could best be described as a secondary benefit, or as one interviewee remarked a “*side effect*” for some people. The primary focus was gorillas and when asked about the importance of

culture, the tourists interviewed were apologetic, and prefaced their responses with “*honestly*” and “*to be honest*” while noting that they “*don’t want to be disrespectful*”. These individuals were foremost wildlife tourists. They observed that Ruhija offered a rural village experience in contrast to large cities. The activities done and attractions seen were minimal and for those few who did partake, they mainly consisted of a community walk, school and church visits, shopping for groceries and souvenirs, and talking to people. Most tourists’ remarks echoed “*our time is limited... very tight schedule*” so they would do the “*other things*” at other places/points in their trips but in Ruhija the focus was on gorillas and/or birds.

The other reaction to this question revealed a lack of information on what might be possible to do, as one tourist bluntly stated “*nobody promote(sic) anything*”. Travel information aids potential tourists in deciding where to go, what to do, and make specific travel arrangements (Jun *et al.*, 2010). This lack of information can be problematic and hinder the potential economic contribution of the tourists as information has been found to influence activities and spending at a destination (Fodness and Murray, 1999; Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1998).

Continuing on the concept of information, study participants remarked about the dearth of advance information on the destination, as well as information related to “*trip conditions*” such as weather, and the exertion required to hike and track the mountain gorillas. The other information theme that arose focussed on their roles and impacts as tourists on the local community. The interviewees felt it was important to know how tourism is helping the village and communities they visit and requested tour operators to “*give people that information*”.

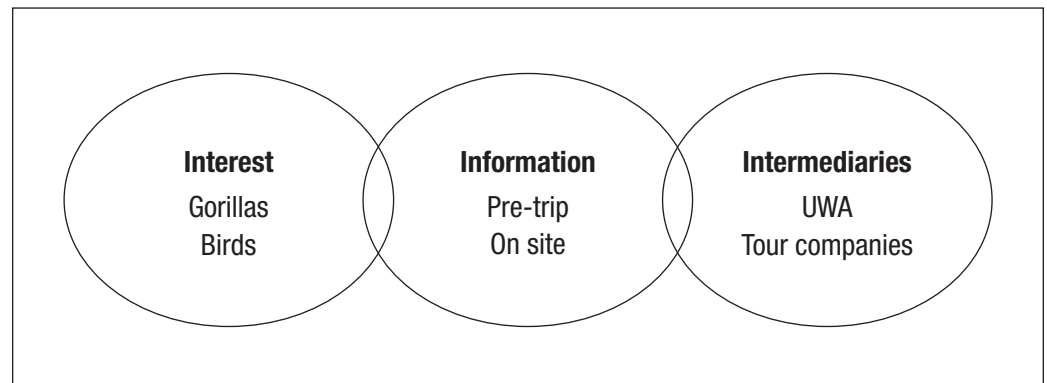


FIGURE 3 : Influences on Tourist Experience in Ruhija (source: Authors' compilation).

Perceptions of Ruhija

The tourists interviewed commonly used adjectives such as “friendly”, “poor”, “lush/green”, and “remote” to describe their impressions of Ruhija. These descriptors encompassed impressions of people and place, demonstrating a distinction of village and villagers from the wildlife viewing experience. Their perceptions of the village were probed further by asking study participants to offer insights on what might be done to improve their experiences beyond the informational aspects noted previously. Reflecting upon their visit to Ruhija, interviewees raised the poor roads and infrastructure, and in some cases, a lack of activities for the length of visit (typically 2-3 days).

The underlying current was one of tension – tension between “real” Africa and infrastructure improvements. “Real Africa” was associated with an “adventurous feeling”, enhanced by the remoteness. As a couple of visitors noted, “if you’re going to change it – it’s not Africa... This is what Africa is all about”. Other visitors spoke to mutual enhancement of roads and facilities for tourists and for residents who “deserved better”. The counterpoint was focussed on the local people versus tourist experience and is illustrated in this tourist’s words : “...stay what they want to be ... not misled by tourists”. These comments illustrate the conundrum of much of eco/wildlife/cultural tourism as tourists wrestle with their own attitudes and expectations (Laudati, 2010; Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001).

Conclusion

The major themes relating to tourist experience in Ruhija drawn from the interviews relate to *interest*, *information*, and *intermediaries* (Figure 3) underpinned by the need for collaboration from the tourism industry (i.e., national networks) to support the local community tourism initiative in Ruhija.

In this case setting, tourists chose the destination (Uganda – Bwindi Impenetrable National Park) based on the focal interest in gorilla tracking and/or birding but not Ruhija specifically. This confirms their classification as special interest tourists even though the time spent there is relatively low compared to length of overall trip (Trauer, 2006). The limited time at the “main destination” is partially due to the distance travelled by tourists, but more so by the restricted access to gorillas, which is mediated by the tour companies and the

Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). UWA is responsible for the conservation of Uganda’s wildlife and protected areas in partnership with neighboring communities for the benefit of the people of Uganda and the global community. While it has come under criticism in the past (Adams and Infield, 2003; Laudati, 2010), UWA has been a supportive partner throughout the duration of the overall project. The influence and authority of government agencies and travel intermediaries on destination selection reported in this case study, reinforces the need for the partnership approach espoused by the overarching project on community tourism development; that is, a network of stakeholders built over years of communication and face-to-face interaction. These findings point to the need to keep the alliances and lines of communication open among the stakeholders to ensure the community of Ruhija benefits, otherwise there is vulnerability to the Gorilla Friends Tented Camp and hence the community’s enhanced livelihood potential, as well the tourist’s experience.

The initial insights provided by tourists to Ruhija may suggest room for potential additional service/products but more so for information about current offerings, the trip more broadly, and their contribution to the community. Research has shown that information reduces perceived risk and consequently enhances trip experience (Kah *et al.*, 2011). The simple act of including the Gorilla Friends Tented Camp online brochure with pre-trip information from tour operators would enlighten the tourists about Ruhija, the local initiative and community benefits. Knowing the mission of the Gorilla Friends Tented Camp could stimulate more communication between tourists and villagers resulting in increased participation in the village activities offered for tourists. Travel intermediaries, such as tour operators continue to retain their importance in international tourist markets such as Africa (Brown, 2000; Lubbe, 2005) and for exclusive activities that require rationed permits, such as gorilla trekking, intermediaries provide access that is difficult for individuals to gain on their own.

Challenges revealed through the tourists’ interviews, confirm previously identified needs for tourism and hospitality education and training, networking with tour operators to lever international markets, and lobbying government for improved roads to ensure accessibility (Campbell *et al.*, 2011b). The innovative advantage of this rural community

tourism initiative is that as a multi-year, multi-stakeholder, and multi-pronged approach it has built-in educational and partnership systems to address the ongoing challenges. For example, the development of community tourism in Ruhija has served as a vehicle for graduate and undergraduate student field placements. This will continue to occur, and should focus on training to encourage greater information dissemination and exchange between the community and the tourists to the net benefit of both parties. The Gorilla Friends Tented Camp has a unique competitive advantage as many tourists to this area want to contribute to the community. Increased communication of its mission and livelihood/ community enhancements is warranted.

Zhao and Ritchie's (2007) anti-poverty tourism framework emphasizes destination competitiveness and local participation as crucial to destination sustainability. Competitiveness in the situation examined here not only depends on the local destination supply and international tourist demand, but also on the actions of tour operators and UWA. The project's partnership network has involved UWA from the outset, thereby fostering a relationship of collaboration among the many stakeholders to promote viability of this community tourism case. This article provides an example of how national partnership networks are required to support local community tourism. The exploration of tourist experience as part of an innovative approach to enhancing livelihoods through tourism provides yet another dimension to inform the iterative development of sustainable community tourism in Uganda. ■

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