

The nature of nature tourists in Bwindi Forest Uganda

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Visitors to the gorilla-tracking site in Ruhija, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda were interviewed and observed in order to understand their level of leisure specialization, and the importance of nature to their Bwindi experience as well as in their home lives. Forty-seven visitors participated in the study over the course of a one-month field season. Findings revealed insights challenging eco-tourists as specialists with the exception of birders, and provide initial guidance relevant to Uganda's tourism product development and marketing.

Introduction

As ever increasing numbers of people travel to view nature and wildlife in distant and exotic lands, for over a decade nature tourists have been noted as one of the fastest growing segments of the leisure travel market (Weaver & Lawton, 2002). In response to the ever greater numbers of travellers seeking opportunities to observe and experience nature as an important part of their leisure (and business) travel, many developing nations, and African ones in particular, are embracing tourism to showcase their unique nature as a means of accelerating economic development. That nature tourism also promotes conservation goals is viewed as an added benefit. Like many other African countries, Uganda has identified nature tourists (and ecotourists in particular) as a receptive market for its tourism products and views the mountain gorilla as a key actor in these efforts, and as a result focuses much of its marketing efforts towards this market. Ecotourists in this context are seen as highly specialized nature tourists whose involvement in the attributes of nature tourism form an important part of their day to day lives (Lee and Scott, 2013). Sustainable community based tourism has been identified by the Government of Uganda as a solution to reducing poverty, enhancing rural livelihoods and its related problems: encroachment in protected areas, deforestation, poaching of wildlife, and attendant environmental degradation. However, Uganda's ability to identify and monitor visitors to the country and their motivations for doing so is seriously limited and has the potential to undermine the growing tourism in the country (Campbell et al, 2011, Government of Uganda, 2013). Understanding who the current tourists are, and what drives their decisions to visit Uganda are key to sustaining this important industry. It is often thought that nature tourists and ecotourists are highly specialized; however, often what constitutes "ecotourism" in the market is no more than an additional offering of other more generalized forms of tourism. In light of this possibility and the importance of effective, sustainable tourism development for Uganda, we sought to examine the degree of nature specialization of tourists tracking Mountain Gorillas (*Gorilla Gorilla Berengei*) in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park.

Method and Study Area

Ruhija is a community of approximately 1200 people located on the border of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park, which is located in Western Uganda bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo. The park is home to approximately 324 free ranging Mountain Gorillas. At the time the research was conducted (2011), two of eight habituated gorilla groups (habituated for tourism) were located in the Ruhija area. In addition to being the muster point for gorilla tourists visiting the Bitukura and Orozogo gorilla groups, Ruhija is a premier Uganda destination for bird watchers, and a partner community in a six-year CIDA-funded project linking conservation, community economic development and higher education. It is also the newest location for gorilla tracking in Uganda.

From August 15 to September 15 2011, all gorilla trackers (i.e., tourists) reporting at the muster point were approached each morning between X date and Y date and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study later that day. Those that indicated they were not staying in Ruhija were not included in the study numbers. Those who indicated a desire to participate were then met either at their accommodation or at the muster site after they had completed their track. The interview guide consisted of a series of open-ended questions eliciting information on the respondents' leisure specialization (Bryan, 1977) and image of Ruhija and Bwindi as destinations.

Results

In total 54 trackers participated in the interviews. Ten trackers declined to be interviewed and an additional 28 did not participate, as they were unable to arrange a meeting at a time convenient to them. Participants were highly international in origin with 37 from Europe, six from North America, five from Israel, four from Australia/new Zealand. Three were currently living in Uganda but were originally from elsewhere.

A thematic content analysis using open and structured coding provides the basis for the findings. Elements assessed to determine specialization were centrality of interest in nature to their overall life as indicated by level of participation at home, equipment, principle goal of the trip, amount and importance of past nature travel, degree of preparation (guidebooks, skills acquisition, training), and journaling (Lee and Scott, 2013). Saturation occurred very early in the study.

While nearly all respondents indicated that they occasionally watched nature and wildlife at home it was largely described as "accidental or circumstantial". Supplementing this was the result that only a few respondents regularly subscribed to "Nature" magazines or belonged to nature organizations. Indeed only the birders identified all these as important components of their leisure at home. Additionally birders often engaged in journaling about their nature experience and volunteered as citizen scientists. Non-birders, in contrast frequently described their gorilla tracking as a "one-off" or unique part of a more generally "relaxing" activity or something to "share with friends".

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the results of this study indicate that gorilla trackers in Bwindi are not serious ecotourists. With the exception of the four birders interviewed, participants are best described as "active

adventurers” and “circumstantial nature tourists”. When considered in light of other information regarding visitors to Uganda which suggests that over 50% of visitors are volunteers and less than 50% of volunteers visit Bwindi (Halowaty et al, 2012,) Uganda appears to have misread its tourist market and could do much to either provide experiences to match those currently visiting or better attract a more specialized nature tourist.

References

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