

# Strengthening local support for community tourism (in Uganda) through University – Community Partnerships

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**Abstract** — Rural poverty, poor environmental health and the resultant threat to biodiversity are significant impediments to sustainable tourism development in Uganda. These problems reinforce one another and are compounded by: a) weak institutional linkages between rural communities, NGOs, universities, government departments and public policy makers; b) deficiencies in community oriented professional skills in sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation; c) the need to transform community attitudes to view parks and protected areas and wildlife as natural capital on which rural livelihoods can be improved; and d) the need for interdisciplinary approaches in higher learning to address intertwined problems of biodiversity conservation and sustainable tourism development. The University of Manitoba in co-operation with Makerere University in Uganda has initiated a program to address these issues through the development of: 1) a master's degree at Makerere University; 2) a strategic partner's network and; 3) three demonstration projects in communities surrounding national parks. This poster presents initial results that illustrate how the university community-partnership is leading to stronger institutional links to not only the university and community but also to NGOs and government departments while providing much needed capacity building in local communities.

**Index Terms** — Community tourism, GIS, partnerships, Uganda.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Once a prime tourist destination in Africa, Uganda's share of tourism dropped dramatically after decades of internal conflict, during which time wildlife populations were decimated through widespread poaching. After over a decade of relative stability, wildlife numbers and international tourist arrivals have begun to increase. As such, enormous potential exists to utilize Uganda's rich natural and cultural

heritage resources for sustainable tourism while providing a much needed local impetus to support their conservation.

Uganda is home to one half of the world's endangered mountain gorillas and harbors over 1000 species of birds, many of them rare Albertine endemics. Uganda's capacity to manage these visitors is currently very limited at all levels of the tourism sector and to date has depended almost entirely upon outside expertise. Lack of expertise in visitor management, market research, monitoring and the application of GIS is a serious impediment to sustainable tourism development.

Tourism is an inherently geographical industry where supply and demand cycles often relate to finite resources in time and space [1],[2]. Geographic Information

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Systems (GIS) can be used to assess and manage these resources as natural capital on which rural livelihoods can be improved while facilitating approaches to biodiversity conservation [3]. Within the context of sustainable development, GIS can guide development objectives and infrastructure planning, assist in sensitivity analysis and determining location suitability, assess resource availability and carrying capacity, aid in evaluation of visitor experience preferences and in tourism promotion through on-line services (e.g. Google Earth, for a review and examples see [4]). Sustainable tourism planning and development can be thought of as occurring in three phases (modified from Boers and Cottrel 2007): 1) tourist/market segmentation through identification of cultural and natural assets; 2) zonation of assets geographically based on supply and demand as well as carrying capacity; and 3) infrastructure and resource development. Although GIS has numerous applications in sustainable tourism development and is widely recognized as an essential tool, it is often under utilized in planning because of limited expertise and lack of training [3]. A major contribution of this project is the training of faculty members and technicians at Makerere University, together with wardens of the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), to use GIS technology as one strategy to enhance visitor management in the national parks.

## 2 UNIVERSITY – COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Tourism in Uganda has recently overtaken all other sectors as the number one contributor to the GDP (Personal Communication, Minister of State for Tourism 2008). In spite of being Uganda's primary foreign income generator, tourism resources in Uganda are still under explored and utilized, partly due to limited tourism infrastructure, lack of integrated approaches to resource utilization, and limited capacity in tourism planning, partnership building and networking.

Makerere University (Uganda) and the University of Manitoba (Canada) are in partnership to implement tourism community outreach through building and nurturing tourism networks at institutional, government, NGO and community levels by developing a masters' curriculum in Wildlife Tourism and Recreation Management. The partnership and embedded Master's programme is based upon the premise that developing in-country expertise in Uganda will allow Uganda to better plan for, manage, and benefit from tourists. Built in to the curriculum is field based practicum. Graduate students will work in poor rural communities adjacent to protected areas where their knowledge will be shared to assist villagers in generating healthy livelihoods through wildlife and community-based tourism and as a consequence motivating them to advocate for conservation.

The curriculum provides the vehicle for action learning with the rural communities around protected areas of Bwindi, Queen Elizabeth, and Kibale National Parks forming the life laboratories or workshops for developing/transferring skills, and learning tourism best practices while serving as rich data-base in indigenous knowledge and cultures. The curriculum also helps to draw together all key players in wildlife and community tourism; NGOs, local government, line ministries, conservationists, tourism board, tourism association, Uganda Wildlife Authority to work together with students and university professors to harness this valuable resource in sustainable manner. The model adopted herein de-mystifies universities as the "Ivory Tower" devoid of shared vision for rural community development concepts. Instead, the rural communities and the protected ecosystems serve as attractive centers for innovations in tourism, learning, and knowledge creation and economic development. Finally as tourism is still a relatively nascent industry in Uganda, the education of tourism professionals capable of anticipating and managing a growing number of visitors is essential.

### 3 CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT – KITOJO - RUHIJA

In the initial project work-plan all community-university projects were to be run as a component of the practicum requirements of the degree. However, during the needs assessment and Rapid Rural Appraisal conducted in 2007 in association with project partners UWA and the Uganda Community Tourism Association it became apparent that the community training component needed to be accelerated. The reason for the acceleration was the decision on the part of the Ugandan Wildlife Authority to issue tourist permits to a group of gorillas habituated by researchers in the Kitojo-Ruhija (henceforth to be called Ruhija) Parish of Kabale District. The short timeline for tourist permits (July 2008) and the community's lack of experience with tourist and tourism lead to the decision to engage the community immediately and send students from the University of Manitoba to begin the sensitization process and to identify community strengths weaknesses and training needs in terms of tourism capacity and visitor management.

#### 3.1 Attraction

The primary tourist attraction in Uganda is the endangered mountain gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla berengei*). At the outset of the project there were 4 habituated gorilla groups operative in Uganda, however the Ugandan Wildlife Authority had plans to habituate other groups to tourists so as to distribute the benefits of tourism more widely (previously habituated groups were concentrated in two districts). The process of habituation, where wardens follow gorillas daily slowly getting closer to reduce the animals natural fear of humans, can take up to two years. In Ruhija, however, gorilla groups had been under study for a number of years and the process of habituation was advanced. As a result it was possible for the UWA to plan to sell tourist permits within a shorter time frame than usual.

#### 3.2 Community expectations

During the initial Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) conducted in 2007 the Ruhija community was identified as one in which there was some potential for tourism development based in large part upon the existence of at least three rare Albertine endemic bird species being resident on community land and the potential to attract serious birdwatchers to the community. With an assessed moderate level of organization and potential for tourism development, UWA notified the project team that gorilla permits were likely to be issued in early to mid 2008 for the Ruhija gorilla group. While the community had been hoping to have a habituated gorilla group for some time, news of the decision was still something of a surprise.

As noted previously, visitor management skills and knowledge are still largely rudimentary in Uganda, where to a large degree major sections of many parks are simply off limits to tourists. As numbers of tourists to Uganda are increasing and the recognition of their significance to the national and local economies grows, there will undoubtedly be increased pressure to expand the suite of experiences available to them. Given the current lack of expertise in visitor management, the implementation of this programme (UM/MAK CIDA) is essential to ensure the optimization of tourism in Uganda.

#### 3.3 Participatory rural appraisal

In 2007 and 2008 two fieldwork placements were conducted by University of Manitoba graduate students under the supervision of the project directors. The principle functions of these fieldwork placements were to conduct Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) to determine community awareness, capacity for and openness to receiving tourists. The PRA were conducted with U of M students, in part to develop the template for subsequent placements by Makerere students enrolled in the Master's curriculum.

Over the course of the PRA process students remained in the community for

extended periods of time meeting with community members and gathering information regarding the level of organization of community groups, level of understanding of the potential impact of tourists on the community (positive and negative), potential cultural and natural attractions (crafts, dancing, birds, caves, etc), and the ability to “interpret” these resources and understanding of tourist needs and desires. In addition, as a follow-up to the PRA, project teams consisting of university faculty and NGO partners visited the communities to formalize the partnership and facilitate and organize training initiatives. It became readily apparent that while the community possessed tremendous resource potential for tourism, they lacked the capacity to transform these resources into income generating opportunities. As an example the Gorilla Friends Group had combined their resources to develop a tourist accommodation and with some input from the 2007 U of M student (in landscape architecture) developed a site plan for their enterprise. However, in the absence of ongoing support and advice the group changed locations and constructed “accommodations” based upon local understanding of a guest house.

The result was a structure wholly unacceptable to all but the most rugged tourist and unlikely to attract a single visitor. Subsequently, the project partners provided opportunities for members of the Gorilla Friends Group to travel to several budget tented camps to gain an appreciation of the style and standard required to attract budget and mid-range travelers. In addition, the team provided input to site design and planning and the group is now in the process of constructing a tented camp at the site which sits atop a ridge overlooking the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Currently, the 2008 student intern has been providing on site training to members of the Gorilla Friends Camp in customer service, hygiene, and accommodations management.

Other groups within the community are also being trained to take advantage of the tourism potential of the community. Specifi-

cally, the beekeepers group have had two members sent to Nakasongola for training in beekeeping business management. In addition, they have received instruction in “interpreting” their operation for tourists (something they never thought tourists might be interested in) and initiatives are underway to assist them in developing and packaging product for tourist consumption and export. The organized community orphans group and several women’s groups are also receiving training in craft production and basic accounting and money management for their small enterprises.

As a result of the project’s involvement in the community, in a very short period of time a number of tourism initiatives and income generating activities are underway. A key component of the agreement with each of the groups was that a percentage of the income generated by their initiative would be set aside to assist other groups in developing their initiatives ensuring sustainability and reducing resentment within the community.

### **3.4 Role of GIS training**

Within Ruhija, GIS addresses deficiencies in community oriented professional skills in sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation by providing a toolset to manage existing resources more efficiently while simultaneously presenting new development opportunities. For example, a key economic limiting factor with respect to the natural resources is the policy of managing by exclusion - gorilla are a significant revenue source so access to any part of Bwindi is highly regulated, reducing opportunity for development of other attractions. In the absence of real geographic information regarding abundance and distribution of gorilla, guided bird viewing, nature walks and canopy tours, etc. are unlikely to be developed. Yet the number of visitors viewing gorilla per day is strictly regulated and therefore revenue is capped. GIS can be used to identify areas of high habitat suitability for gorilla and other wildlife species, while sensitivity analysis can aid

in the assessment of development impacts on the landscape. Through careful visitor access management, the Ugandan Wildlife Authority can protect gorilla and at the same time provide critical market segmentation and economic development opportunities. The cultural and community resource segments can similarly benefit from GIS through zonation and planning. Application of GIS within Ruhija does face significant challenges, primarily through lack of geographic, culture and species data beyond basic physical attributes (e.g. climate, topography, coarse thematic habitat maps from remotely sensed data, roads from GPS telemetry). However, the partnering of the Uganda Wildlife Authority with local communities to manage wildlife and tourism through the use of GIS technology does provide a basis for enhanced economic opportunities, and improved visitor and resource management.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the CIDA project, community capacity in tourism enterprise and visitor management is already being enhanced. While the graduate programme and curriculum is slated to begin in the fall of 2008, early

intervention in the community has accelerated the partnership development component of the programme. The Uganda Wildlife Authority and several partner NGOs have been actively involved in facilitating and training of community members. Indeed it was the partnership with UWA that allowed the project team to learn in advance of any public declaration that Ruhija was to be a location for gorilla tourism, thus allowing the project to respond as rapidly as it did. Such proactive community capacity building to prepare for visitors will lead to sound visitor and resource management.

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