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Embracing community-based ecotourism  
*Joseph Kariuki*

## Embracing Community-Based Ecotourism

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### Introduction

Mount Kenya is endowed with biodiversity of local, national and global importance and has cultural and physical endowments that make it a national and international tourist destination.<sup>1</sup> In 1978, the 'man and biosphere' programme of the UNESCO accorded the mountain national park a biosphere reserve status. The mountain also has a scenic beauty although it is not yet a developed recreational and tourist destination. Nevertheless, it continues to attract domestic and international tourists who include mountain climbers, walkers, bird-watchers, and fishermen. The tourism potential of the mountain's ecosystem and the adjacent areas has also drawn interest from various actors like private sectors (hotels and lodges), NGOs and international development organisations as well as local communities. The different interests aim at developing and exploiting the untapped tourism market estimated at Ksh 50 million per year.<sup>2</sup> If this becomes a reality, it will greatly boost the economy and employment in the region. The development of new niche-based tourism products like community-based ecotourism will continue to draw importance in the Mount Kenya area and its bio and cultural diversity.

### *The study area*

The research was carried out in four study sites that have tourism potential and on on-going tourism activities around Mt Kenya. The first site was the Sagana Scheme/Kabaru area located in Mathira, Nyeri. This site, host to the Mountain Lodge, a key tourist lodge, was chosen to investigate the community-private sector collaboration in the development of tourism in the area. Other community-based tourism activities such as ecotourism projects were also identified.

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<sup>1</sup> Emerton, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Gathaara, 1999.

The main tourism attractions include wildlife viewing. There are also ecotourism activities being developed in collaboration with the Mountain Lodge Hotel that incorporates local cultural aspects through organising and supporting cultural dancing troupes in entertaining the tourists and promoting reforestation activities in the Kabaru forest block, using the local community. Ecotourism activities are also being promoted by international development agencies like the UNDP through Community Management of Protected Areas Conservation (COMPACT Initiative), through working with local communities, and identifying tourism potential in the area. One such initiative in the area is the Sagana Scheme Women Group which through funding from UNDP has started a community fishing project and is planning to develop community sports fishing and picnic sites for local tourists.

The second study site was the Naro Moru/Nanyuki site. Key tourism activities include mountain climbing, bird watching, ecotourism as well as an emerging ecotourism destination being developed through cultural and historical resources like Mau Mau historical caves and Kikuyu cultural villages. The ecotourism activities in this area are being developed in collaboration with local community-based groups and organisations such as Nature Kenya and UNDP's COMPACT initiative. This area is located on the western side of the mountain and is significant in two respects. Firstly, it offers a key base and route for mountain climbing which is the main tourism activity in the area. The area offers two of the three trails used to get to the summit of the mountain. These are the Naro Moru trail and the Sirimon trail, near Nanyuki. Secondly, it has attracted a number of tourism service providers—private and community run—which are crucial to understanding the development and growth of the tourist industry around the mountain. This site is also leading in the promotion of a new variety of cultural products such as Mau Mau caves (historical sites) and Kikuyu cultural villages for tourism.

The third site was the Meru town and its environs. This site had two crucial elements to the study. It is the key eastern side of the mountain in the development of the tourism potential. Secondly, this is where the Nkunga sacred lake is located, making it a principal tourism development and conservation area. The other attraction is the Meru museum. The last site was the Chogoria which is the third hiking route to Mt Kenya. The significance of this site was to

compare and supplement information on mountain climbing tourism activities with the other two mountain climbing trails/routes at Naro Moru and Sirimon.

## **1. Conceptual framework and methodology**

This was an exploratory study using emerging paradigms that enable local communities participate and contribute to the development of their local areas. These perspectives emphasise the use of local resources to generate income for the communities.

### **1.1. The concept of community-based tourism**

Over the last few years, there has been a shift in development focus from a centralised, state-led approach to more decentralised approaches. These emphasise community-focused development where the participation of local communities has become vital. This paradigm shift has been adopted in various sectors of natural resource development like water management, land management, forest management, wildlife management, and more recently, in tourism development which is dependent on the natural endowments listed. The shift has not only seen a reduction in the role of the state in the management of natural resources but also increased partnerships among the various stakeholders (private sector, communities, the state and local authorities) in the implementation of these approaches with a special emphasis on involving local people in planning and implementation of decisions relating to development. In Kenya, citizens' demand to be included in decision-making, especially relating to natural resource management, has been more apparent with a change in the political administration from Kenya African National Union (KANU) which was perceived to stifle people's participation in decision making to a National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) administration which is seen to be more accommodative and participatory.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> KANU's policies were perceived to be detrimental to sustainable natural resource management on which tourism is dependent. Allocation of key state resources like forestland to politically-correct individuals was resisted by the citizens. With the establishing of the NARC government and the

Within the framework of grassroots focused development, the tourism sector has also seen a shift from mass tourism to new niches such as ‘sustainable tourism’, ‘ecotourism’, ‘pro-poor tourism’, and ‘community tourism’.<sup>4</sup> Promoters of these concepts who include donor agencies and NGOs have provided definitions to distinguish them.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the sustainable tourism concept focuses on long-term environmental and socio-economic concerns of destination areas. The concept is seen to be similar to ecotourism or nature-based tourism which is concerned with the preservation of the environment. The approach has led to a development of local tourism facilities and products to meet new visitors’ tastes such as eco-lodges, unspoilt wilderness and landscapes, etc.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, pro-poor tourism’s main goal is the delivery of tourism benefits to the poor. Lastly, community-based tourism is tourism directed or initiated by local communities or individuals in those communities. Although these approaches in theory emphasize on different areas of focus such ‘pro-poor’, ‘ecology’, ‘sustainability’, or ‘community participation’, in practice, there is a tendency to overlap the emphasis in the concepts.<sup>7</sup> Hence, a pro-poor tourism project may adopt many features of an ecotourism project. However, all these concepts underscore three goals—environmental conservation, community participation and fighting poverty—goals that have directly brought appreciation of the new approaches especially in the developing countries.

While these approaches have been adopted and their implementation started in Kenya for some time, an understanding of the practice has been minor. In Kenya, the approaches have covered particular rural tourism niches that offer important natural and cultural attractions like highland areas of Mt Kenya, marine attractions at the coast, and on the Kenyan plains, which are endowed with

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inclusion of leading members of the civil society in government, an inclusive policy and legislative agenda on such sector as forest, wildlife was set in motion. See Kariuki, J., 2004 for further analysis of collaborative forest governance around Mount Kenya.

<sup>4</sup> Ashley, Goodwin and Roe, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Ashley, Goodwin and Roe; 2001; Cattarinich, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Watkin, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

outstanding wild and cultural resources like Narok, Kajiado, Samburu districts.

## **1.2. Methodology**

Data for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, and direct observations. At the community level in Nyeri, Nanyuki and Meru areas of the mountain, semi-structured interviews were conducted with group members where their daily practices, experiences, and concerns as porters, guides and cooks for tourists were sought. Key informant interviews were conducted among community group leaders, tourist service providers and government officials such as the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) officials, as well as the curator of the Meru museum. The main data collected was official information on on-going activities and practices geared towards promoting Mt Kenya as a tourism destination.

Direct observations and site visits were also used to supplement data from key informants especially through visit to key attractions such as the Nkunga ecotourism project in Meru, and the Kikuyu cultural villages in which some Naro Moru community groups have begun to promote cultural tourism. A combination of these methods provided useful insights on the practice and status on the development of community-based initiatives around Mt Kenya.

## **2. Results and Discussion**

### **2.1. Case studies**

This section presents three different case studies on tourism initiatives in the Mt Kenya area. The case studies illustrate and explain a range of relevant themes and issues related to the community-based tourism practice in the area. Although no case study from two of the three mountain climbing routes (Sirimon and Chogoria) are included, data collected there was useful and is used in the elaboration of the themes tackled later in the discussion.

#### *2.1.1. Case study 1*

The Lake Nkunga community ecotourism project is located at Lake Nkunga about 5 km from the outskirts of Meru town. Lake Nkunga is a crater lake sitting on 100 acres of land. It is surrounded by a forest whose trees are in danger of depletion. The lake is referred to as a sacred lake because in the traditional past of the Ameru people, it was a sacrificial area to their god.

The tourism value of the lake constitutes development for water sports (paddled canoes), picnic sites, nature and education trails. Currently, weeds are being removed to create waterways/paths to enable the use of paddled boats by visitors along the trails at the shores. Nature trails are planned along with education modules (information) for visitors. Walking paths and a viewing tower has already been set up.

The project started in started 2001 as a joint effort of the UNDP-GEF/SGP,<sup>8</sup> the Lions Club of Meru<sup>9</sup> and the local community.<sup>10</sup> The UNDP-GEF/SGP and Lions Club of Meru are the main sponsors of the project. The contribution of the local community is mainly in kind especially through their labour. The local people are represented in the implementation committee of the project with a fours representative (two men and two women). The implementation of the project also involves other relevant government departments like the Meru Museum, the Forest Department, Kenya Wildlife Service, National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) and the Department of Social Services.

The conservation of the lake was designed to meet the conservation objectives of the area as well as the needs of the local people who are dependent on the lake's water for their household use. In a feasibility study conducted in 2001, it was established that the greatest community need that was a threat to the lake's environment and conservation value was water. A borehole was, therefore, to be

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<sup>8</sup> UNDP-GEF/SGP stands for United Nation Development Programme Global Environmental Facility Small Grants Programme

<sup>9</sup> Lions Club of Meru is an association of Meru town businessmen and their representative is the coordinator to Lake Nkunga ecotourism project.

<sup>10</sup> Local community in this case means the immediate local population who are dependent on the lake to meet their basic needs such as drawing water for their domestic use and for their animals.

sunk to meet the water needs of the community and thus prevent them from fetching water from the shores of the lake. This would help reduce erosion of soil.

### 2.1.2. *Case study 2*

Mt Kenya Biodiversity Conservation Group situated in Naro Moru township is a group combining community-based tourism enterprise and biodiversity conservation. Founded in 1999, they started as a local group of tour guides, porters and cooks seeking to serve the tourists using the Naro Moru route to Mt Kenya. Because of the dual nature of their work (tourism business and community biodiversity conservation) they have registered as a community group registered with the Department of Social Services as the Mt Kenya Biodiversity Group with a business arm registered under the name 'Summit Ventures.' This enables them to meet their two main objectives.

The group's community conservation work has been boosted by a strategic collaboration with NGOs and other development organisations working in the area. It is in a position to benefit from new ideas in conservation and development work. The group has been incorporated into the establishment of the upcoming eco-resource centre which will be a one-stop centre to promote community interest in conserving the Mt Kenya ecosystem and exploit its tourism potential. The eco-resource centre is sponsored through a collaboration of the UNDP-GEF/SGP, Nature Kenya, Forest Department, the Kenya Wildlife Service and local community interests.

The group's tourism business enterprise initiative have led to the diversification of tourism products from the predominant ones like mountain climbing to culture based products like Mau Mau caves and the Kikuyu cultural villages. These new initiatives have also enabled them to establish local and international contacts with tourism groups interested in community-based eco-cultural tourism. The local contacts include schools on whose behalf they organise eco-tours of the area and climbing expeditions of Mt Kenya. International tourism groups involved include BaseCamp Explorer Group and Jamba Safaris, both of Norway.

The Mt Kenya Biodiversity Conservation Group, together with other community groups, local hotels and school volunteers join with the KWS in clean-up exercises of the mountain routes and the various huts used by tourists. These activities are regularly held during the 'Mt Kenya Conservation Day.' The group also actively involves schools in other environmental activities such as tree-planting and organising 'home stays' where willing tourists are housed in local homes for about a week and participate in the community's activities.

### 2.1.3. *Case study 3*

In the Mt Kenya region, there are about 200 community-based groups<sup>11</sup> operating as guides and porters along the three mountain hiking routes of Naro Moru, Sirimon and Chogoria, targeting the Mt Kenya tourism circuit. The oldest among these groups is the Mt Kenya Guides and Porters Safari Club, located at the foot of Mt Kenya, at Naro Moru. The club was started in 1970 as an entertainment group for tourists visiting Naro Moru River Lodge. They also offered porter services. Today, the group offers porters, guides and cooks to trekkers and climbers of Mt Kenya. However, they are still dependent on Naro Moru River Lodge for subcontracts on the services they offer since they are not able to source visitors independently mainly due to lack of finances and communication infrastructure.

The club had collapsed late in the 1970s due to reduced incomes and wages for the members. It was revived in 1980 and today has 120 members. Due to the slow business, they work through duty shifts and their work is organised on a duty roster where each member is assigned trips to the mountain on an agreed schedule and depending on one's area of specialisation. The group officials estimate that the group handles about 800 visitors per year.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> According to the KWS officer in charge of tourism in the Mt. Kenya area, half of these groups of these are registered with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) which is charged with the regulation of porters and guides taking climbers up the mountain and KWS also provides security in the Mount Kenya national park.

<sup>12</sup> This is only an estimate. Record keeping among most of these community groups is poor.

The two full-time employees are an office assistant and a security guard. The group is run by a management committee. It has bought a one-acre plot (from members' private contribution along with proceeds from their tourist activities) on which they have set up an office, and built additional rental rooms for additional income. In the future they hope to build an eco-lodge targeting users of the Naro Moru route.

## **2.2. Key features of tourism practices around Mt Kenya**

### *2.2.1. Trends and status of community tourist benefits*

Tourism activities around Mt Kenya have long been dominated by private sector tour operators and hotels. Most of the groups depend on foreign tourists as local tourists are very few. Today, these operators and hotels are well-entrenched in the area and their better financial endowment places them far ahead of the up-coming and struggling community group operators. With a better network of international tourists sourcing, they remain in a better position to dominate the local tourism industry. For the time being, community operators continue to be dependent on the subcontracts of services from the private operators and hotels or depend on the few tourists who visit the area on private arrangements.

The Mt Kenya Porters and Guide Safari Club is a fair representation of the state of a community-run tour business. Most of them lack basic facilities to run their marketing activities.<sup>13</sup> With the marketing of tourism moving into the information age, community groups are clearly disadvantaged. Most of them only have e-mail addresses as their contact to the world outside their villages and even then, these are not often used due to limited internet services which are only in major nearby towns like Nyeri, Nanyuki, Meru or Embu. Therefore, the greatest challenge facing the community tour business is marketing themselves to both local and international tourists, as they do not have the required infrastructure.

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<sup>13</sup> Brochures remain the main marketing tools for most community tour groups and the introduction of mobile telephony has improved local communication between towns of entry and the groups operating in the interior, at the foot of the mountain. A few groups, for example Mt Kenya Biodiversity Group have constructed Internet homepages for promoting their activities (see: [www.summitventures.4t.com](http://www.summitventures.4t.com)).

Due to competition from private operators, inaccessibility to the lucrative foreign market and lack of credit facilities to develop their weak enterprises, these groups have not generated sustainable benefits from tourism. This explains why they still have to engage in other forms of income-generating activities like farming to be able to meet their livelihood needs (see Case Study 3). According to members of the groups, the seasonality of tourism<sup>14</sup> and the small numbers of visitors coming to this area specifically for mountain climbing has hampered the group's dependence on tourism to earn their livelihood through porter services, guiding and cooking services, which are their specialities. This has obliged local tourism groups to engage in other farm-based activities like horticultural crop production and herding, as they cannot sustainably rely on tourism income under the present circumstances. A venture into more rewarding services such as travel and tour operations still is beyond their reach as it involves huge capital outlays. However, with credit facilities, they could realise. They hope to build simple *banda* (lodges) for their visitors to further supplement their income, although financing for the construction is proving difficult. The issue of credit is crucial to these groups in their endeavour to be more competitive.

#### *2.2.2. Civil society and mobilisation for grassroots eco-focused tourism*

The Mt Kenya area has an enormous potential for the development of community-based ecotourism. The potential has already been identified and steps taken develop it. Like in many other places, people-focused tourism efforts in the area are driven by the civil society, especially non-governmental organisations and international development agencies. A UNDP programme, the Community Management of Protected Areas Conservation (COMPACT) that focuses its programmes specifically on Mt Kenya, has been in the forefront of propagating ecotourism alongside other community-based biodiversity conservation efforts. The initiative supports ecotourism and other environmental conservation projects through funding community projects. Mapping of the major projects

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<sup>14</sup> Tourism in the area as in the rest of the country is dependent on the two main seasons when tourists from Europe and North America visit. These seasons falls in the December–February and June–August period.

in the area reveals that the Nkunga Sacred Lake ecotourism project (Case Study 1) best illustrates the potential of ecotourism.

Other NGOs involved in mobilisation of community-based tourism efforts include Nature Kenya and the Green Belt Movement. A clear combination of conservation and tourism promotion is evident in the area. Nature Kenya, for example, focuses on the promotion of birding<sup>15</sup> as an alternative tourism attraction while the Green Belt Movement is using community-based tree planting to promote ecotourism through their Green Belt Safaris. The Green Belt Safaris initiative is similar to that of the Mt Kenya Biodiversity Group, a site support group of Nature Kenya. Both groups involve tourists in 'home stays'. The home stay is intended to orient the tourists to local cultural practices and at the same time build an appreciation of environmental conservation activities.

Through such efforts, the arrangements to involve tourists in local environmental activities is gaining root in the area, attracting even international groups. A case in point is the UK-based *World Challenge Expeditions*, which visits the Mt Kenya area every year to participate in eco-activities. They buy tree seedlings locally and plant them join members of the local communities in planting them. Their itinerary also involves visits to the Kikuyu cultural villages and the Mau Mau caves. Such initiatives are being used to promote eco- and culture-based tourism along the western side of the mountain. The involvement of the tourists provides the community with a source of income directly through purchase of their seedlings.

The work of community-based organisations involved in ecotourism has made the concept very popular in the area and have brought together tourism promotion and biodiversity. They have also worked to mobilise local populations on the need to conserve their environment and improve their livelihoods through tourism. This is important at a time when the Mt Kenya ecosystem has been exposed

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<sup>15</sup> According to the Nature Kenya's coordinator for the western Mt Kenya area, the mountain is an important bird area and home to some threatened and little-known Abott's Starling species. Nature Kenya collaborates with community-based groups referred to as 'site support groups' throughout the country in implementing its programmes. Mt Kenya, as one among its 60 Important Bird Areas (IBAs), is targeted to be conserved and promoted as a tourist destination.

to great threat through the encroachment of protected areas by people who engage in destruction of forests and illegal poaching of wildlife.

### *2.2.3. Regulation and control of local tourism activities*

With increasing value being attached to tourism, its promotion has been taken over by major stakeholders ranging from the state, the private sector and civil society groups. Civil society groups have been active in the development of the concept of grassroots tourism with strong community participation. In the Mt Kenya area, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), a state agency, has played a prominent role in the promotion and regulation of tourism and environmental activities in the area.

The KWS today retains an important role in the various tourism and environmental activities taking place within the borders of the mountain. As Mt Kenya is host to the Mt Kenya National Park and game reserve, KWS is mandated with providing security. It also organises clean-up activities along the main routes to the summit of the mountain and has also mobilised local hotels and community groups to participate. In the early 1990s, KWS rallied local private operators in generating information material on tourism and the environmental state of the mountain.

With the increase in the number of local groups involved in mountain trekking activities, there is need to regulate their activities. The Kenya Wildlife Service has therefore begun to issue park entry cards for porters and guides as a control measure. Porters and guides are also required to possess a certificate of good conduct, to be issued with the park entry permit. This measure ensures that responsible guides and porters lead tourists and guarantee their security.

Another emerging feature is the insistence of local authorities to access income generated by tourism. Local authorities are seeking to tap fees charged to tour operators and hotels operating within their area of jurisdiction and to be allowed to run the parks. The Nyeri County Council, at the time of field work for this study, sought to have the KWS Act amended to enable them charge fees to tour operators. Being the focal point of local level development, the County Council argues the importance of accessing money generated

by tourism to help them provide services to the local communities and improve the transport infrastructure.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of local authorities accessing money generated through tourism is borrowed from some of the leading county councils such as Samburu and Narok which have greatly benefited in terms of improving their income from tourism and are some of the richest councils in the country, largely due to tourism incomes. Some county councils have recognised the value of income from tourism and sometimes case controversy over the way some of the resources and facilities are run. The Meru South County Council have, for example, been at loggerheads with the Chogoria Town Council on the running of the Chogoria lodging huts located on the Chogoria trail. The Meru South County Council planned to rent out their *banda* to a private investor but were opposed by the Chogoria Town Council.

#### *2.2.4. Partnerships and community ecotourism development*

Ecotourism projects in other places have shown that success of community ecotourism initiatives is dependent on the adoption of inclusive measures where actors are involved in the initiatives.<sup>17</sup> Community ecotourism has provided the best opportunities for partnerships among various actors. Although the Nkunga Sacred Lake ecotourism project will be handed back to the local community to run, the case study shows how preliminary collaboration between civil society, state, private sector and local community can boost eco-enterprises.

In the past, the Mt Kenya area has seen attempts by actors to collaborate in promoting tourism as well as conservation of the mountain ecosystem. The first attempt was in 1996 when some locally based tourism service providers formed the Association of Mount Kenya Operators (AMKO).<sup>18</sup> The association used to organise what was known as a 'mountain challenge', a host of clean-up activities along the three major climbing routes. However, the association folded up in 1998 because it was dominated by a few well-to-do

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<sup>16</sup> *Daily Nation*, 5 June, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Watkin, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with coordinator, Mt Kenya Biodiversity Conservation Group, 19 April 2005.

operators who excluded others especially the small emerging community-based groups of porters and guides.<sup>19</sup> Smaller porters and guides groups along the Chogoria route claim that it was dominated by operators from the western routes (Naro Moru and Sirimon) and they were often excluded in training opportunities that the association had arranged.<sup>20</sup>

The collapse of the association has caused the mobilisation of various local actors to be very poor. However, there are project-based partnerships going on which are useful in promoting mountain tourism and environmental development. One such initiative is the construction of the eco-resource centre at Naro Moru (Case Study 1). Other partnership arrangements with community groups in the past were focused on equipping local community groups with the capacity to run their groups, create awareness of the local residents' responsibilities for the mountain ecosystem, and equip them with skills in running tourism services such as porters and guides. The KWS and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) offered such training although today, only the KWS continues to engage the local community through their community outreach programme.

Existing partnerships between the private sector and community groups are weak. Most of the partnerships involve private operators and hotels sub-contracting guide and porter services. Such a relationship exists between the Naro Moru River Lodge and the Mt Kenya Porters and Guides Safari Club. Other collaborations involve contracting local dancing groups to entertain tourists, for example the dancing groups in the Hombe/Sagana scheme area who are recruited by Mountain Lodge Hotel. The hotel and community relations have been extended to cover other activities including environmental clean up exercises around the Hombe Forest, especially during public holidays. A different type of relationship was observed at Chogoria where Ice Care Mountain Expeditions, a local group of guides and porters, work with the Transit Hotel. The community group have rented a room within the hotel to act as an office and use the hotel facilities such as telephone and postal address in conducting their business.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the chairman, Ice Care Mountain Expedition, Chogoria, 21/4/2005.

### **2.3. Exploitation of diverse tourism products**

#### *2.3.1. Predominant tourism products in the area*

Natural attractions have played the most prominent role as tourist products and have contributed to the choice of the Mt Kenya region as a tourist destination. The most exploited products for tourism by community groups as contained in their itinerary brochures include mountain hiking, game watching, wilderness exploration and rock climbing. The core products have been profitable for private tour operators and agents but local community groups have had difficulties exploiting them. The tourism value of birds is being used to diversify tourism products to both local and foreign tourists.

Despite these natural resources, more emphasis is placed on marketing mountain hiking as the key tourism product in the area, for which Mt Kenya is famous. Consequently, this has resulted in stiff competition among the various interests ranging from the well-organised commercial tour operators and hotels and the less endowed community-based enterprises like the Mt Kenya Guides and Porters Safari Club. In addition, the emphasis on mountain hiking has had negative impacts by stressing the mountain ecology and environment. With mountaineering as the main tourism attraction, and with only three routes to the summit, there is extensive trail erosion, water pollution and littering. The degradation and erosion of the trails defeats the goals of ecotourism. As a result, there are proposals on the need to explore other routes to ease pressure on the existing three routes. Suggested new trails include the Mountain Lodge/Hombe area, as well as Castle and Kamweti areas in Kirinyaga District. The latter areas have been proposed with the aim of also exploring the tourism potential of the many community sacred groves.

#### *2.3.2. Underutilised and emerging tourist products*

The full tourism potential of area is yet to be exploited. Cultural tourism products have been underutilised, thus limiting the full exploitation of this tourism circuit. Cultural products present communities with a chance to access a tourism niche market in which they would have an advantage by being encouraged to use their local cultural resources and market them as tourism products.

Around the Mt Kenya area, there is an emerging focus on promoting culture-based tourism around the mountain. With the promotion of new tourism products like community-based ecotourism and cultural tourism, community groups are bound to reap benefits from the tourism market. These new tourism products are culture-related, such as the historical Mau Mau caves, Kikuyu cultural villages and the huge sacred trees like the giant king Muuru tree (*vitex keniensis*) in the Meru area.<sup>21</sup> Some other attractions like bird-watching safaris are underdeveloped despite being promoted by the Naro Moru River Lodge who have bird watching trails and organise ornithological safaris. The KWS is also developing this service within the protected area as a product diversification measure.



*A Kikuyu cultural village in Naro Moru where foreign tourists are taken through the process of preparing fermented ucuru, (porridge), a traditional Kikuyu drink.*

Most community groups are requesting credit in order to build community eco-lodges where they will develop eco-cultural tourist activities either on their land, or on government land neighbouring the protected areas. These products are located outside protected areas and would enable the community groups to tap resources from

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Meru Museum curator, 20 April, 2005.

the protected areas—wildlife viewing, mountain climbing—and outside such as traditional villages.

The other key resource for local and foreign tourists in the area is the Meru Museum. It has experienced fluctuations in visitor flows over the last few years. Foreign tourist flow to the museum has been reduced with no more than 200 visiting annually. As the table below indicates, the number of visitors has been boosted by education groups which accounted for more than half the visitors annually. Nationally, it has also performed badly having been ranked eighth from a total of 21 museums, snake parks and prehistoric sites.<sup>22</sup>

Meru Museum visitors statistics 2000–2004					
		Residents	Overseas	Educational groups	Total
Year	Visitors				
2000	Adults	2, 555	133	7, 831	13,172
	Child	2, 568	85		
2001	Adults	3, 300	131	9, 713	16,026
	Child	2, 830	52		
2002	Adults	3, 059	148	9, 021	14,928
	Child	2, 676	23		
2003	Adults	3, 336	63	9, 736	16,078
	Child	3, 435	47		
2004	Adults	3, 254	154	7, 703	14,078
	Child	2, 934	33		

*Source:* National Museums of Kenya, Meru Museum

### 2.3.3. Marketing and promotion of tourist products

Marketing of Mt Kenya as a tourism destination has been largely through the initiatives of individual operators and agents. This has emphasised on the apparent attractions of Mt Kenya such as its scenic beauty and climbing expeditions. This undermines the cultural tourism products which would benefit communities more. Hence, since cultural diversity of the area has been under-utilised, many tourists visit the area specifically for mountain climbing. With the growing importance of eco-cultural tourism, new marketing initiatives

<sup>22</sup> See *Economic Survey*, p. 202, 2005.

are being devised to create awareness on these new initiatives and are largely done informally through organised tours by individuals or school groups. The target of this marketing strategy has involved both local and foreign tourists and done by community groups such as the Mt Kenya Biodiversity Group.

Marketing of these new tourist products in the area, however, remains a great concern. Although the mountain is a well-known tourist destination, local perceptions among various tourism interests in the area is that the Kenya Tourism Board has not done enough to promote the area outside the country for its full potential. There are suggestions among the various stakeholders that the mountain area be marketed as a single entity emphasising all its natural, environmental and cultural attractions. However, it has also being suggested that new tourist products be developed under eco-cultural tourism for communities to tap into the expanding tourism opportunities while a marketing strategy for the mountain is being designed. The new tourist products and facilities include camping and picnic sites, museums and eco-resource centres, and cultural villages. It is hoped that will attract more private sector tourism investment in the area.

### **3. Looking ahead**

The lessons drawn from this study are related to the present and future of community-based tourism in the Mt Kenya area. Tourism around Mt Kenya has for a long time followed mass tourism which is private-sector driven and motivated largely by economic goals. In the recent past however, niche-based tourism initiatives have begun to take root boosted by civil society players, particularly NGOs and international development agents in collaboration with local community groups. The recent efforts to promote other products and market them as tourism attractions hope to improve participation of local communities in tourism enterprises. They are driven by a combination of conservation, economic and livelihood diversification goals. As the land in the area is mainly used for food crops and some horticulture, these new tourism products are seen to generate options for a good number of the local populations living adjacent to the mountain. The positive response by community groups to the new initiatives will promote tourism numbers in the area.

However, community-based tourism is faced with various challenges. The first is related to seasonality of tourism activities particularly because the area is highly dependent on foreign tourists. The tourism high season for Mt Kenya is December–March and July–September. In order to promote local tourism, products that meet the tastes of local people must be developed. Examples are picnic and camping sites that local people would use during weekends or holidays.

The community is exposed to stiff competition from the well-established private tour agencies, operators and hotels. Hence, in most cases, community operators are dependent on the small groups that have their own tour arrangements or are sometimes subcontracted by the big operators to run guide, porter and cook services.

Another challenge to the development of community-based tourism is a lack of appropriate skills. Though local knowledge of the local communities is valuable in conserving the resources upon which tourism depends, there is a shortage of skills and knowledge to enable the communities run tourism enterprises profitably. There is thus a need to enhance the capacities of the communities which would also help them compete with well established private sector players, or get into fair partnerships with the private actors.

Deforestation and the loss of biodiversity presents another challenge. Unsustainable forest practices like charcoal burning, animal and tree poaching, have threatened the ecosystem. Coupled with the stress on the environment due to over-dependence on mountaineering, this poses a threat to tourism in the area.

Even with development discourse favouring community participation in environmental, development and tourism activities, community members are still challenged by a lack of appropriate skills and other capacities to enable them fully participate in the highly competitive tourist sector, or to run effective tourism enterprises. Efforts are needed to sensitise and equip the stakeholders in the tourism, environmental and enterprise skills and knowledge facing the mountain area and its resources. The tourism business in the mountain area is heavily dependent on the area environment, with culture-based tourism being very low. Efforts on community education by the NGOs and KWS are commendable. Private sector

investors should take a lead role especially through collaboration with the local communities. Partnerships among the actors are especially recommended for sustainable development of the area.

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