

WILDLIFE TOURISM – THE BEAUTY
BEYOND THE BEAST

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THE EPITOME OF NATURAL ASSETS

They travel when and as they wish with a clear disregard for permits, passports and protocols. They cross borders at their whim, disrespecting immigration officers, visa requirements and entry fees. They show no loyalty to the national flag, and yet are given honorary citizenship of VIP status. They have no permanent address, yet they intuitively know when they are 'home'. Tourism officials - the people charged with ensuring that the movement of nationals and visitors is carefully monitored – turn a blind eye to their blatant abuse of travel formalities, for they know that these creatures are responsible for a contribution to the country beyond all human capacity.

These creatures, these beautiful creatures, have become the most important aspect of their competitive tourism proposition, accounting for a higher level of GDP than the nation's traditional economic earners.

These creatures, the magnificent mountain gorillas of Rwanda.

For over two decades, gorilla tourism has been a staple of the economic frameworks of a special trio of central African nations – Rwanda, Uganda and the Congo - that are blessed to be the only place where these incredible primates can be found. Like many destinations across the globe, *wildlife tourism* represents a critical niche component of the national growth and development plans in place for this region. As a result, protection of these precious natural assets has become a critical part of each destination's identity, viability and competitiveness.

It is '*sustainable tourism*' brought to life, literally and figuratively.

In north-western Rwanda, *Volcanoes National Park*, a vast, rich rainforest land area home to five of the region's eight volcanoes, is also home to a mountain gorilla population estimated at being over eight hundred strong – a dramatic improvement from the record lows of the mid-three hundreds (and falling) counted in the mid 1970s.

Much of the credit for the growth in appreciation and resulting conservation of the nation's, and region's, endangered mountain gorilla population is given to American researcher and conservation crusader Dian Fossey whose life's work in Rwanda's mountain terrain focused on their protection. Her life, and death, are a part of the land that today provides the nation's people with earnings they simply could not survive without, monies that gorilla tourism channels directly back into the country's developing infrastructure.

The direction and management of that growth, and its remarkable source, however, can never be taken for granted. Economic and social development of Rwanda is as fragile as the ecosystem of its national parks. Put undue pressure and risk to wellbeing on the mountain gorillas, and they will simply go elsewhere, taking their natural gift of giving to their home nation with them. Or worse – they die off.

FIRST, DO NO HARM

Wildlife tourism, offering a perfect blend of natural beauty and adventure that consistently act as primary motivations for travel for more than 15% of travellers across the globe, makes it possible for visitors to a destination to get up close and personal with its four-legged, finned, feathered, furry, flapping, fanged, or otherwise free-to-be inhabitants. The very nature of this type of tourism means entering the space of the animal (or aquatic) kingdom, often putting oneself at personal risk.

The risk, however, goes more than just one way.

As conveyed by the UNWTO in the outcomes of the first Pan African Conference on Sustainable Tourism Management in African National Parks and Protected Areas: Challenges and Opportunities which took place in Tanzania in late 2012,:

“A precautionary approach to tourism activities and development is particularly important in and around protected areas, to prevent damage to wildlife, and to protect the quality of tourism products.”

While clearly outlining the benefits of wildlife tourism to national economies, societies, identities, communities and development agendas, the UNWTO continues with its words of caution, stating:

“Measures to manage visitors and minimise their impacts are vital in protected areas. Too much tourism can be damaging –this is why clear limits on numbers of tourists and tourism development are essential in order to balance tourism with community livelihood needs and with conservation. There is a need for constant monitoring and adaptation of tourism and conservation, combined with a strong commitment to long-term environmental protection and maintenance of the vital ecosystem services, to ensure they remain in balance.”

For this reason, the tourism and conservation leaders of Rwanda Development Board (RDB) – exemplary champions in wildlife tourism development - are clear: tourism, the largest contributor to GDP within Rwanda (exceeding traditional economic pillars of tea and coffee), can only survive if the nation’s wildlife survives.

Rwanda must protect its wildlife tourism if Rwanda is to protect the future of its people.

As stated by Rica Rwigamba, Head of Department, Tourism and Conservation Department at RDB,:

“Rwanda has positioned itself as an ecotourism destination of choice. Mountain gorilla tourism is a flagship in our tourism sector. Sustainable tourism of any wildlife species, in particular a critically endangered species like mountain gorilla requires an understanding of threats facing its survival, and carefully looking at how tourism can be used as a conservation tool to address those threats.”

In 2011, Rwanda hosted around 908,000 visitors, generating approximately USD\$ 251 million. Comparing with 2010 at the same period, international visitors increased by 14%. While a fraction of the destination’s arrival numbers entered for the purpose of gorilla trekking, it is these tourists that offer the greatest revenue impact. Still, while demand is strong and equitable, supply management is critical. Regardless of increasing demand from across the nation, region and world, especially overseas travellers adding the gorilla trek onto a safari holiday coinciding with the great annual Maasai Mara / Serengeti migration, careful management of gorilla trekking tourist flows into the national park is strictly adhered to in Rwanda. In Volcanoes National Park, the main park for gorilla trekking, RDB has set a limit of 80 park permits per day. This translates to a daily maximum of 10 groups of 8 tourists being able to trek into the park to see the mighty primates in their

natural habitat.

In addition to strictness of permit availability, trekkers must be above 15 years of age, in good health (no sniffles and sneezes allowed), and follow clear guidelines for trek behaviour as set out by park rangers. Gorilla visit times are only within a window of early morning hours, and tourists are limited as to how close they can get to the breathtaking primates, and for how long. Whether teams of tourists trek 50 minutes or five hours to find the sought after gorilla family, time spent with the gorillas cannot exceed one hour, so as to prevent aggravation of the gorillas, and over-exposure to human antibodies and possible infection. Tourism growth is critical, but not if it is at such a cost.

Another nation that holds wildlife tourism close to its brand and sector heart is India. Tiger tourism plays a critical role in showcasing the exotic majesty of the destination, thereby contributing to the tourism economy. Still, not at any cost.

In mid 2012 the government of India put a temporary ban on tiger tourism as a means of halting potentially damaging over-development of tourism facilities and activities taking place in the national parks, thereby putting the tiger populations at direct risk of imbalance of their natural environments and sense of wellbeing.

As expressed by Vikram Madhok, Managing Director of Abercrombie & Kent India,:

"Currently, inbound into India is around 6.5 million tourists annually. Of this around 10% currently visit our National Parks. Tigers are synonymous with Incredible India! When people think of India, it conjures up images of royalty, history, culture, spirituality and the Tiger. The restrictions to enter our National parks were on account of some Indian states having permitted illegal construction of lodges, Hotels & shops inside the reserve area besides poaching. Hence the Supreme Court had warned forest authorities to come up with a plan to eradicate the illegal intrusions and to conduct tourism responsibly besides stopping poaching of the Tiger."

Interestingly, Madhok feels that it is wildlife tourists that raised the importance of tigers to the nation, and their protection, sighting tourists as *"conscious keepers of our National Parks."*

COLLECTIVE PROTECTION, COLLECTIVE PROSPERITY

In this spirit, wildlife tourism offers a unique opportunity for involving local communities in tourism activation, protection and promotion – making it possible for families and communities to stay together, creating a better life for one another, together. Failure to embrace local (especially rural) communities in wildlife tourism initiatives puts both the communities, and wildlife, at risk.

As expressed by the UNWTO in their conclusion of the Pan-African Conference on sustainable tourism summit,:

"Tourism needs to have a positive role in local livelihoods if it is to be sustainable and to be an effective tool for poverty alleviation. If communities do not receive

an equitable share of benefits, they have no incentive to support conservation. This leads to degradation of the natural assets on which tourism to African destinations depends.

Acutely aware of this reality, one of the pillars of RDB's success in development of gorilla tourism is its engagement of local communities in wildlife tourism. Across Rwanda, RDB has established a solid employment network for the people of the nation living alongside the national parks. Rwigamba continues:

"Tourism direct employment occurs through the park (trackers, anti poaching), and also through indirect employment such as tourist porters, park cleaners, hotel staff, and other tourism related services. Through this direct and indirect employment, the park works with over 500 local communities."

In addition, to ensure that local communities are able to benefit in ways that are truly meaningful, Rwigamba shares that:

"RDB HQ has established Park Management Plans for each of the parks. In partnership with the park management and partners of conservation, these plans are monitored regularly and form the basis for the budget requests each year, taking into consideration community conservation, protection and health monitoring and tourism development."

Uniquely, RDB takes a truly shared guardianship approach, working closely with a number of international, NGO and private sector entities to ensure that the gorillas, and their surrounding communities, grow in a way that is truly healthy. This includes the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International and the heroic Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project, a.k.a. the 'gorilla doctors'.

It takes a village to raise, and protect, a gorilla tourism offering.

And, as showcased in destinations across the globe, it is wildlife tourism that is able to bring to life the ability to touch, and uplift, the lives of so many, beyond the tourists themselves.

Ultimately, it is wildlife tourism that is able to expose the deepest sense of responsibility of a destination, for all creatures great and small. For as expressed by Mahatma Gandhi,:

"The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

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