

## Tourism as Sustainable Local Development Option: A Case Study in Simen Mountains National Park, Ethiopia

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**ABSTRACT:** Tourism has become agent of change for sustainable local development in different parts of the world. It is supporting the economic growth and is driving force for poverty alleviation program of many developing nations. In Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) of Ethiopia, tourism is the main motivation to conserve its biodiversity and aesthetic beauty. It has shown better conservational efforts and created environmental awareness amongst the local community though the economic reward tourism brings. The sector is becoming the main means of livelihood in adjacent towns. It is also supporting the livelihood of traditional farmers in and around the park by generating extra income. Different employment opportunities are created for the community, especially to the young. The local community understands the value of their culture and tends to preserve it. Tourism in the park is establishing a long-lasting productive base to allow the local communities and service providers to enjoy a better standard of living. This paper has outlined how tourism is contributing to the sustainable development of the study area.

**KEYWORDS:** Tourism, Sustainable Local development, Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP).

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is widely accepted as a means of achieving development to the local community in destination areas (Hall, 2000). It can bring several opportunities to the community directly or indirectly. If tourism is properly utilized, it can definitely be an effective source of income, employment and infrastructural developments (Miller, 2001). Tourists require a variety of goods and services in destination areas, including accommodation, food and beverages, entertainment, local transport services, souvenirs and so on (Brohman, 1996). In order to fulfil such products, like food for hotels and restaurants, the farming industry has to be expanded and infrastructures and facilities need to be improved at the local areas. This in turn led to an increasing use of the local technology, capital and expertise (UNWTO, 2013). In such a way tourism can motivate other economic sectors as a catalyst.

Besides the economic benefits, tourism can bring tremendous socio-cultural opportunities to the local community. It encourages the local people to be proud of their cultural and natural heritage and stimulates interest and conserves aspects of the community heritage (Hall & Richards, 2002). As tourism is a source of new knowledge, experience, and encounters people's cultural level can be raised. The community's self-esteem can be enhanced because of tourists' recognition of the uniqueness and value of their culture, nature resources and traditional knowledge (Welford, Ytterhus, & Eligh, 1999).

Tourism often provides the justification of environmental protection, especially in the national parks and rural areas (Kiss, 2004). Some funds raised can also be used for community development initiatives like education and health facilities (Butler, Hall, & Jenkins, 1997). This study assesses how tourism can be an option for sustainable local development in one of the national parks of Ethiopia.

The SMNP is located at the north western part Ethiopia 900 km far from the capital Addis Ababa. It was established as a national park in 1966 following the recommendation by UNESCO mission in 1965(Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority

[EWCA], 2013). Initially it was protected to conserve the rare and endemic mammal Walia Ibex and Chilada Zingero (Baboon). Due to its unique landscapes and rich biodiversity resources, the park was inscribed by UNESCO as world heritage site in 1978. The varied topography of the park offers a habitat to a wide range of flora and fauna with complex of endemism. Besides its endemic mammal species, it is home for more than 180 bird species of which six are endemic to the park (EWCA, 2013). Having these rich resources, the park is able to attract few international visitors. Despite it is less known to the world, the number of visitors is growing dramatically. In 2011, for instance, it has attracted 17,566 international visitors and shows a 25% increment every year (Kefyalew Azanaw, 2012). Tourism contribution to the socio-economic condition of the area is also increasing. Hence, this paper focuses on the role of tourism in SMNP and its contribution for a broader strategy for sustainable development to the study area. It described how tourism is contributing to the socio-economic development and environmental conservation of the park. The paper has answered the research question how can Tourism in SMNP contribute to sustainable development.

## 2 TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

International tourist arrivals have shown a continuous growth, rising from 675 million in 2000 to 940 million in 2010 (UNCTAD, 2013). According to WTTC (2013) the total contribution of tourism comprised 9% of global GDP (US \$6.6 trillion) and generated over 260 million jobs. The report also shows as tourism industry has grown faster than other notable industries such as manufacturing, financial services and retail in 2012. It has also generated over 10% of all new jobs created in 2012 (WTTC, 2013). Tourism is a key source of foreign exchange and essential contributor to the balance of payments, especially in developing countries (Kim, Chen, & Jang, 2006). It is a primary or secondary source of export earnings in 20 of the world's 49 least developing countries (LDCs) and the principal source of export earnings in 10 of these countries (UNCTAD, 2013).

Tourism can actually be the very reason for protecting environmental and natural resources and can be beneficial to the natural environment by providing a motivation for conservation (Gossling, Hansson, Horstmeier, & Saggel, 2002). Tourism provides a financial incentive for public sector bodies to protect the natural environment and raise tourists' awareness of environmental issues.

Tourism activities involve a special relationship between visitors, the industry, the environment and local communities (McIntosh, Goeldner, & Ritchie, 1995). This and its dynamism and the major contribution that it makes to the economies of many countries and local destinations makes tourism to hold a special position in contributing and challenging to sustainable development (Hall, 2000).

The UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 has identified three dimensions or 'pillars' of sustainable development are now recognized and underlined namely; economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability. Swareboork (1999) argues that sustainable development is about long term thinking, a need for intervention and planning and embracing the environment, people and economic systems. Hence, sustainable development implies creating a better life for people in the ways that will be as possible in the future as they are at present (Liburd & Edwards, 2010).

A basic requirement of the tourism sector is that it should embrace the principles of sustainable tourism and focus on the achievement of sustainable development goals (Butler et al., 1997). Sustainable tourism, as defined by UNWTO (2005), is any form of tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. More specifically, sustainable tourism is aimed at economic viability, local prosperity, employment quality, social equity, visitor fulfilment, local control, community wellbeing, cultural richness, physical integrity, biological diversity, resource efficiency and environmental purity (UNWTO, 2005). Sustaining these three elements of tourism is essential to maintain the industry and support communities, provide employment and respond to growing needs of customers (Liburd & Edwards, 2010).

Governments are now too much concerned on sustainable tourism development (Kim et al., 2006). This can be evident from Agenda 21 of the 1992 Earth Summit and RIO + 20 of 2012. For instance, on United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (RIO + 20) governments emphasize as follow (2012, p. 25):

*...We emphasize that well-designed and managed tourism can make a significant contribution to the three dimensions of sustainable development, has close linkages to other sectors, and can create decent jobs and generate trade opportunities. We recognize the need to support sustainable tourism activities and relevant capacity building that promote environmental awareness, conserve and protect the environment, respect wildlife, flora, biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural diversity, and improve the welfare and livelihoods of local communities by supporting their local economies and the human and natural environment as a whole....*

Both sustainable tourism and sustainable development, however, remains debatable in literatures. Sustainable tourism and sustainable development are an impossible dream but more sustainable form of tourism can be developed (Swarebrook, 1999). However, tourism has shown a proven evidence of being agent of change for sustainable local development in different corners of the world, especially in developing nations.

### **3 RESEARCH PARADIGM AND METHODOLOGY**

An interpretive social science or constructivist research paradigm is used in this study. This is because of the multiple explanations and realities applied to explain the contribution of tourism to sustainable development of the study area. Using this paradigm, the research process seemed to be subjective as it employed qualitative methodology (Jennings, 2001). Guba (1990) argued that subjectivity is the only ways of unlocking the constructions held by individuals. Accordingly, interviews with park management and experts and analysis of documents are the key data gathering techniques used in the study. Supplementary interview is undertaken with project officers of two tourism and conservation partners of the park namely; Simien Community Tourism (SIMCOT) project and North Gondar Sustainable Natural Resource Management Program (SNRMP-NG). Trends of tourism in the park and its contribution to biodiversity conservation of the park and the overall socio-economic importance of tourism to the area were the main focus of discussion. Community involvement and the ways the area can be benefited most from the sectors are discussed with partner project officers. Moreover, different documents from both government and NGOs are analyzed. These include the park management plan, annual reports, baseline survey of projects and other studies. The author's work experience and observations in the study area also used to develop empirical material from insider's perspective besides interview with the park management and project experts.

The sources of data in this study are limited only to the park management, partner projects and the author's observation. It does not include the views of the local community. The number of tourist arrivals and receipts stated in the study represent only for international tourists. Local tourists are not considered in the study as the park is not keeping a separate record for local travellers.

### **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 TOURISM AS AN APPROACH FOR NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION**

SMNP has been using different biodiversity conservation approaches including tourism. The park management greatly acknowledge the importance of tourism as conservation tool and even prefer tourism than other biodiversity conservation approaches (EWCA, 2013). Economic benefits from tourism in the park to local communities are clearly linked to conservation of the biodiversity that draws the tourists. It can strengthen or even replace the environmental regulations of the park that may be difficult to enforce, while improving local communities' welfare simultaneously. Community based tourism can reduce the cost of conservation spend by government and conservancy NGOs (Welford et al., 1999).

Despite its future risks that mass tourism challenges to conservation, tourism in SMNP can protect and add value to biodiversity, wildlife, and the ecosystem of the park. Kiss (2004) argued that tourism in parks is also an environmental educational opportunity to amplify both visitors' and residents' awareness of environmental and conservation issues, and even to inspire conservation action beyond its financial reward to locals.

The park management and other conservancy organizations have completely inclined towards tourism in keeping the aesthetical beauty of SMNP. They agreed that tourism, started few years ago in the park, has showed greater change in biodiversity conservation in very soon years. It is started by establishing ecotourism associations in the boundaries of the park and its buffer zone with in the 25 km radius. Local communities living in all the 38 villages of the park are invited to be a member in these associations. Majority of the local communities in the park, especially those in and around the major tourist spots, are now becoming fully aware of the economic implication of each and every resource found within the park (Mulugeta Asteray, 2011). The same study argues that this awareness has brought the increase of Walia Ibexes and Red Foxes number from 250 to 750 and 20 to 200 respectively.

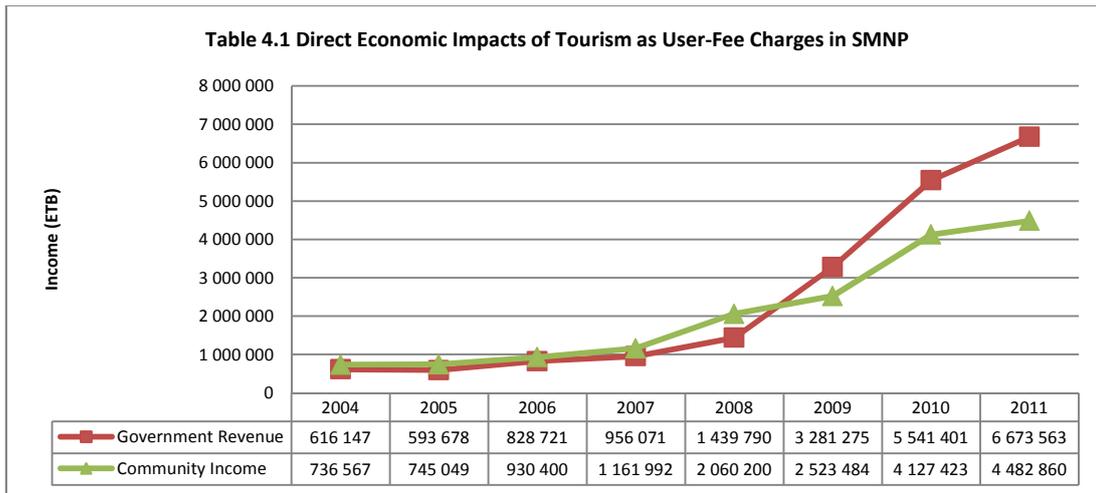
The simple reason is they are getting the share from the cake of tourism in the park, though it is not satisfactory yet. This is developing a feeling of ownership and responsibility among the communities.

#### **4.2 TOURISM AS SOURCE OF GENERATING REVENUES TO THE PARK AND SURROUNDING AREAS**

Tourism is becoming a key sector and has a potential to become an alternate means of livelihood to local communities in the park. Its economic impacts in the park can be measured in terms of its contribution to labour income or the number of

jobs created in the area. The direct economic contribution of the sector in the area is also increasing from time to time, though not matching with the rich resource of the area. In 2011 tourism has generated 10.1 Million ETB only from user fee charges.

A detailed tourism economic impact assessment measuring the value of all financial transactions made by tourists and government in the park and their impacts on a local, regional or national economy is not done so far. This study, however, shows the direct revenue generated from the park in terms of different user fee charges. As shown in table 4.1 the revenue is increasing and its contribution to labour income and number of jobs are also supposed to increase. Moreover, economic impact occurs with any financial transaction made in and around the park by whomever. Evidently the number of tourist arrivals to the park is increasing and this growing number of tourists is with parallel increment in spending. These include tourists' purchases of guided tours, food and beverages, transportation, lodging, souvenirs and other different services.



Source: Compiled from SMNP Tourist Registry Book

Table 4.1 shows direct revenue of tourism goes to government as user fee charges in terms of entrance, staying, vehicle entrance, camping, research and filming fees. It also shows the amount of money goes to the local community as guiding and scout fee for the last eight years. These economic impacts happen despite the origin of the funds or the home location of the tourist injecting fresh money to the economy.

The author believes that the economic benefit of the park go far further. Even when the park management spends its budget there is an economic benefit to the local community and contributes to an increase in wealth within the area. From a national perspective, however, there might not be increase in wealth but a redistribution of resources within the country. Being a world heritage site, SMNP is beneficiary of several funds from international development assistance programmes and it represents a real benefit to the local economy.

**4.3 TOURISM EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN SMNP**

Agriculture is still the main source of livelihood and employed significant number of residents in and around the park. However, the agricultural land productivity has decreased and farm production is below the needs of the residents, and only 28% of residents harvest enough food from their farm (SIMCOT, 2012). Livestock production also supports the livelihood of the local residents. However, production is limited by scarcity of grazing land as it is a protected area and only 18% of the land is left as zero level-grazing land in the study area (SIMCOT, 2012). Due to these factors tourism is becoming to be one of and the better way of supporting livelihood.

Tourism is likely to remain as the main non-agricultural source of employment even to villages adjacent to the park. Some villages are enjoying the employment from tourist-related service and improved their earning and lifestyle. The most important aspect of tourism in SMNP is its capacity to create large-scale employment opportunities, especially in main camping sites and Debark town.

Local communities living in the park and buffer zone are take part in and become beneficiary of tourism activities. Many of them are member to ecotourism associations. Tourism employed a considerable number of women and young people in hotels, cookers association, guiding, making handcrafts, involving in cultural activities and other tourism related tasks in Debarq town, where the park office is located. The town is used as a point of departure to and arrival from the park.

Tourism in the park offers enormous potential for utilizing the natural resources like exceptional landscapes and unique floras and faunas for the economic benefit of both local communities and government. It is adding value to locally-made souvenirs and articles that communities are producing to sell to tourist.

The employment opportunities that local community are benefiting from the park are through scouting, guiding, cooking, mule and horse renting, souvenir sale and others. As a rule of thumb, every tourist to the park has to be accompanied by scouts and should use local guides from the community. This is for safety reason to prevent them from animal attack and also increases benefits going to the local community in the forms of service charge. Details of direct community income from park tourism are summarized in table 4.2.

**Table 4.2: Summery of park tourism beneficiaries and related community and average incomes**

	Beneficiary (person)	Community Income (USD)	Change (%)	Average Income (USD)
2004	1623	736,567	-	454
2005	1845	745,049	1.2%	404
2006	2129	930,400	24.9%	437
2007	2527	1,161,992	24.9%	460
2008	3663	2,060,200	77.3%	562
2009	4937	2,523,484	22.5%	511
2010	6102	4,127,423	63.6%	676
2011	7693	4,482,860	8.6%	583

*Source: Compiled from SMNP Tourist Registry Book*

As shown from table 4.2, the revenue going to the community and number of local communities benefiting from the park are increasing. Community income in the table indicates the amount of money officially paid by tourists for their tour guides, scouts and experts. This figure does not include other payments to the community in the form of other services.

The sector has employed many people in Debarq town. There are more than 60 tour guides working in association and few travel agents in the district. The number of jobs created by hotels and restaurant are estimated to be more than 2,000. Communities in the park are also sharing benefit from establishment of community lodges, community based tourism associations namely local tour-guides, cooks, porters, local handicrafts, traditional music clubs and cultural museum.

**4.4 TOURISM FOR INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT IN SMNP**

Tourism requires, among other, basic infrastructural development. These include accommodation, transportation, communication, healthcare and other services. In this regards, tourism is changing the situations in the study area. The number of hotels and restaurants in the area has dramatically increased in line with increment in number of tourist arrivals of the park. There was insufficient accommodation for visitors both in number and quality before 10 years. Camping was the only option by then. Due to its economic reward from tourism, many local businesses are investing on accommodation establishments and restaurants. The number of hotel rooms in the town has reached more than 350 in 2012. With this room capacity, the town can accommodate 5 times more tourist than it is hosting now. This has led competition among the service provider for quality service. Many tourists are still staying in camping sites inside the park and also homestead with local communities.

The development of transportation and communication in and around the park is low. However, it is recently showing a dramatic change. The park is 110 km off from the main road of Gondar (historic town recorded as World heritage site by UNESCO). The road was gravel and uncomfortable to tourists. There have been frequent complaints by visitors and local communities. Few tourists have also been returning back from Gondar because of the road, especially on the rainy seasons. The same was also true for mobile communication network. It was quite poor and services were frequently interrupted and often insufficient and unreliable. The baseline survey data of SIMCOT project (2012) reveals that majority of community members do not knew how to use a mobile telephone so far and cannot afford to own one.

However, this trend is being changed through tourism. The park management greatly acknowledges the role of tourism for infrastructural development of the park and adjacent towns. Government has given focus to the sector and the region and together with the contribution from the local community a 110 km of asphalted road is completed by the end of 2012. It has great contribution to motivate domestic tourism beyond ensuring the comfort of the journey to the park. The driving time is now shortened by more than half. The communication system is also improved significantly even in the remote parts of the park. Communication lines are installed in and around Debarq town and this has made telephone communication easy. Mobile network is also available in major parts of the park, especially in walking trails and camping sites.

#### **4.5 TOURISM PROMOTING CULTURE AND TRADITIONS OF THE PARK AREA**

The region shares more than 3000 years of Ethiopian magnificent history, unique culture, outstanding scenery and 13 months of natural beauty. The country has its own calendar system, alphabet, unmixed culture and remains independent and never been under colonial powers as the rest of the continent (Pankhurst, 2005). This is a pride of local communities around the park just like other Ethiopians. Tourism is bringing a sense of pride among residents of the park in their culture and traditions when they realize international tourists appreciating it. They understand that their culture and cultural artefacts have more than a monetary value. Tourism is promoting culture and traditions of the community. There are organized traditional music and dance group in Debarq town. The income from tourism is encouraging these youngsters to keep and develop their traditions. The district tourism office has recently constructed a cultural and ethnographical museum that exhibits the culture and tradition of the nearby community. This is one of the results of tourism in the region. This museum has a great importance of preserving and promoting culture and tradition of the area beyond its economic rewards.

Tourism is also becoming a major tool of revitalizing the tarnished image of the area and the country at large. Those who were associating Ethiopia with famine of the 1980's are now completely changing after they visited the rich historical and cultural resources in and around the park. Data from the park shows that most visitors are recommended by their friends and relatives who visited it so far.

#### **4.6 TOURISM FOR CAPACITY BUILDING AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT**

Community empowerment and capacity are major tools to assist tourism development in the park (Brohman, 1996). Involvement of the community in tourism decision making processes is essential and shows to what extent power is vested upon the community (EWCA, 2013). Tangible and intangible resources such as the financial power, ability, and expertise knowledge and leadership skill to make the park tourism happen are community capacities of SMNP. It is based on the idea that all members in the community have something beneficial to offer. However, data shows that only few members of the community in the park are capable and have the capacity to participate in tourism business without support from government or any other body.

Capacity building programs by government and NGOs in the park are observed and it have indispensable role in improving tourism development of the park and enhancing much benefits for local communities. Capacity building strengthens and increases the confidence of local communities needed to improve tourism development of the park. Such capacity building programs by government and NGOs helps individuals and communities of the park to find their unexploited and undeveloped skills, resources and comparative nature gift advantages. Efforts to enhance communities' capacity in the park have several motivations. The most fundamental one is to conserve natural and environmental resources of the park while improving living standards of the community by increasing its capability and power to engage in tourism.

Government and NGOs are engaged in capacity building by giving training and financing to Small and Medium Sized Tourism Business Enterprises (SMTBE) or eco-tourism associations. The capacity building for these associations includes giving training and providing necessary materials including constructing office to the associations in Debarq town. A start up seed money is also given to these associations.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

Tourism in Simien Mountains National Park incorporates the social dimensions of productive society and environmental conservation with financial motivations. It does more than create a series of activities to attract visitors. It also offers visitors an opportunity to interact with nature and local communities of the park. Tourism in the park is changing the qualities of the three pillars of sustainable development. The natural environment, source of economic gain of the park, together with its floras and faunas are better preserved than the previous times through tourism. This is because of financial benefits that the immediate inhabitants get from tourism. The social fabric of the park is better enhanced and getting improvements through

tourism. It is raising the community consciousness and they are becoming well aware about tourism business. The indirect and induced impact of tourism has gone far in the park. Many schools and health care centres in the park are constructed by community development fund donated from tourist. The community's standard of living, in some way and compared with the previous time, is also getting better. Tourism in the park becomes basic means of generating income for both the community and local government. This can be expressed through its direct effect of injection of money to the park and community. Annual disposable income of residents is increasing due to tourism as a supplementary means of livelihood. To sum up, tourism has shown a progressive improvement on the environmental conservation and socio-economic aspects of the park, though it is not yet that much developed. It has a huge potential to bring sustainable local development in near future. If tourism is well managed in this way, it can contribute much to the sustainable development of the park community and the country at large.

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