

Local community involvement and participation in avitourism: a case of Arabuko Sokoke Forest in Kenya

Koki N. Jairus^{1*}, Pepela Anthony¹, Wamukota Andrew² and Kidere M. Flaura³

¹Department of Hospitality and Tourism management, Pwani University

²Department of Environmental Studies, Pwani University

³Department of Business and Economics, Pwani University

* Corresponding Author, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

E-mail: jairuskoki@yahoo.com

Abstract

Avitourism in the Kenyan Coast has received little research attention. This study examined issues relating to the level of local community involvement in avitourism in Arabuko Sokoke forest in Kilifi County. An adapted community involvement framework was used to assess community involvement with other stakeholders in relation to avitourism activities and programs by collecting the views of both the local community and other external avitourism stakeholders. Results indicate that although the community is willing to participate in avitourism, lack of knowledge, limited economic resources and the poor negotiation skills of local tour guides has dis-empowered them from maximally benefiting from their guiding services. Both state agencies and the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have greatly supported the community in avitourism through capacity building and funding with little contribution from the county government of Kilifi. For the success and growth of avitourism in the study area, the local community need to be assisted and capacity built in marketing, training and funding awareness, while the county government of Kilifi should play its rightful roles.

Key Words: Avitourism, dis-empowered, Guiding, involvement.

1. Introduction

Avitourism which is better known by the term bird watching is a specialized niche of nature based tourism. It is a form of tourism characterized by local natural habitats with the appreciation of nature and the local traditional beliefs and cultures. According to UNWTO (2012), avitourism constitutes unique traditions, education and interpretative features organized in a specialized manner for small groupings with the aim of fulfilling desires and minimize negative impacts to bird life species and the environment. Avitourism is specifically a non-consumptive activity emphasizing on bird watching using the existing natural resources with social and economic benefits to local communities (Glowinski, 2008). Shaoliang (2017) argued that in avitourism destinations, local communities benefit from avitourism from the provision of accommodations, guiding services, food and transport to avitourists. The economic impacts brought by avitourism to a destination motivates the locals to engage in the long term monitoring and conservation of birds which contribute to the conservation of both the bird species and the local environment (Sekerciogulu, 2002). Cordell and Herbet (2002) argued that avitourism popularity has been on an upward trend. It's importance and contribution to household livelihoods is dependent on nature based resources which cannot be underscored.

In the last two decades avitourism has been promoted as a mechanism for enhancing conservation and development, and a means of generating income for marginalized and vulnerable rural communities. Naidoo and Adamowicz (2005) argued that avitourism has been taken as an alternative form of formal employment among rural communities who have limited livelihood opportunities. Barrow *et al.*, (2002) highlighted on the avitourism potentialities as an income generation and entrepreneurial opportunity for many rural communities who are dependent on nature based resources.

However, according to the United Nations (UN) report of 2016, avitourism (Bird-watching) can present significant economic opportunities for many local communities through sustainable communal participation and involvement.

The notion of avitourism being a tool for achieving socio-economic development objectives by most government administrations has been in existence for a while (Wapole, 2017). According to Kiss (2004), avitourism can provide livelihood security, maximize economic leakage from the local economy and achieve the novelty of strengthening conservation (Drake, 2011; Welss & Brandon, 2012).

In Tourism destinations which have embraced avitourism as a diversified form of tourism, avitourism has delivered mixed results on local economic development and on the conservation fronts. However, avitourism successes among the local communities has been limited by certain contextual factors such limitations in skills and knowledge, funding, unfavorable local conditions, unsupportive local administrations, societal negative attitudes to stricken policies and regulations.

2. The Evolution of Avitourism

Avitourism is still in an embryonic stage of development in the developing countries as compared with other mature forms such as beach and wildlife based tourism. Though other forms of tourism have grown in depth and breath, avitourism is yet to be measured and analyzed in the different spheres of its linkages, influence, contributions, and its impacts to the environment as well as human well-being. Several studies have documented avitourism in different perspectives. For instance previous studies have shown that avitourism emerged in the mid-19th century in the North America and in Europe among countries who had recognized ecotourism as an important sector (Glowinski, 2008). Furthermore, avitourism practices during this era was only among the most affluent members of society who pursued bird watching as a hobby and in fulfillment of a desired interest (Connel, 2009; Bonta, 2010).

Anthropologist further observed that human fascination with bird life has been an ancient phenomena among traditional communities as to the existence of avitourism, only the coinage and usage of the the term 'avitourism' had not come into existence (Stoll *et al.*, 2005) and was only taken to be a unique cultural position in most human societies (Collar *et al.* 2007; Cocker and Tipping 2013). Although past interest in birding relate to food supply for households, communities also pursued them for eliminations as vermin, pests or predators (Kerlinger, 1993). Jones & Nealson (2005) and Biggs *et al.*, (2011) studies also indicated of bird watching, birding expeditions and bird watching festivals to have been practiced in developed countries as late as in 1930's.

However, avitourism practices in the present contemporary tourism set up is distinctively biased to Northern and Southern hemispheres. North America is presumably thought to be the leading global avitourism destination (Newsome, 2010; Steven & Castley, 2011). This is partly explained by the fact that Bird watching has been a tradition, a hobby and recreational culture among the North American people for many years (Moss, 2004; Connel, 2009). In South America, avitourism is one of the most practiced activity within the Amazon basin with

Peru, Brazil and Paraguay leading in avitourism adventures and ornithological safaris deep into the Amazon forest (Bernardon and Nassar, 2012).

Furthermore, despite New Zealand and Australasia being relatively high in the global levels of avian diversity and endemism, avitourism is not any of their new form of tourism (Jones & Neelson, 2005) and Bialowieza forest (BF) in Poland, Europe is one a famous bird watching destination in the European continent. Currently the Bialowieza forest is a UNESCO world heritage bird site attracting thousands of avitourist enthusiasts across the Europe and from the globe (Paluch, 2012).

In Asia, India, China and Indonesia have diverse bird life habitat which host and support thousands of bird species. The Islands of Java and Celebes in Indonesia are re-known avitourism destinations with Bali's Island caged bird life being leading bird life heaven (Bird Life International, 2021). The attention paid to avitourism in Africa is still low as compared to countries in both Northern and Southern Hemisphere (Green & Jones, 2010). South African avitourism sector is being popular among the middle class population where the activity is conducted in the protected areas and especially in Zululand where local communities get involved for improvement of their livelihoods.

2.1 Avitourism in Kenya

In Kenya, avitourism is a nature based form of tourism which is much dependent on bird life species, the local environmental habitat and the wisdom of birding knowledge and guiding among the local populace. According to Kavanagh (2015), Kenya is ranked second after Democratic Republic of Congo in relation to conducive avitourism habitat diversity. Kiragu *et al.*, (2011) noted that Kenya's habitat changes greatly within short distances thus presenting different bird species which can be watched in a short span duration. Bird watching has created a birding culture in Kenya thus giving avitourists a better chance of locating endemic bird species in various areas during their avitourism consumption (Kiragu *et al.*, 2011).

3. Research Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The research data and analysis was carried out in the following order; desk research, interviews, observation and photography. A quantitative questionnaire was used as a primary tool for data collection. Other data information was also obtained from the study area key informants (KI), government employees and local opinion leaders who were knowledgeable on the field of avitourism.

The data collected refer to the linkages and interactions between the adjacent Forest Community and Arabuko Sokoke forest in terms of benefits obtained from the Forest, community involvement in forest conservation and their avitourism activities. Relevant literature review of previous studies on ecotourism and avitourism in Arabuko Sokoke forest was used to seek rationalizations on the discussions and find various relationships that link local community participation and involvement in avitourism programs and activities. The interviews and field work was undertaken in several phases namely August -October 2019 and from April-May 2021.

3.1 Study Area

The study was undertaken in Arabuko Sokoke forest located in Kilifi County in the coastal region of Kenya. Arabuko Sokoke forest is one of the only remaining coastal endemic forest with an area of about covers 420 km² (Arabuko Sokoke Forest and Management team, 2002) and home to many Palearctic and endemic bird species.

The forest exhibits a unique biodiversity and habitat rarity, which makes it a sanctuary for a remarkable diversity of plants, birds, insects and other forms of animal life not found anywhere else in Kenya. The forest habitat is composed of Cynometra, a forest thicket habitat for the Sokoke Scops owl, *Bachystagia*, a forest woodland habitat ideal for leisure walks where birds and butterflies are more visible on the open canopy and mixed forest habitat that is rich in bird species like East Coast Akalat and Tiny Greenbuls.

The forest is an ideal habitat for the promotion of avitourism activities because of its' mixed forest nature that host diversity of bird-life (KWS, 2014). The dry land endemic forest habitat is managed by Kenya Wildlife Service while the marine habitat and the waters that end up in a mangrove forest under the management of Kenya Forest Service (KFS). This marine habitat which is composed of mangrove forest, the beaches and creek are ideal stopover and feeding ground for migratory bird species.



Figure 1.1: Map of the Study Area
Source: *Kenya Tourism Board, 2019*

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Community involvement by Gender

In this study, gender participation and involvement in avitourism was considered the main factor for assessing the sustainability of avitourism programs and activities. Drake (2011) in his study on the Integrated Ecotourism projects (IEPs), reported that women get involved and participate as much as 72% in the local community projects and activities, implying that rural folk women hold the power to sustainable development of tourism projects and activities including avitourism. In addition the involvement of the women and young people in avitourism is vital to their success and sustainability. This is important since most of the avitourism programs and activities have long term benefits. Gender distribution of the local community involved in the avitourism adjacent to Arabuko Sokoke forest is as shown in figure 1.

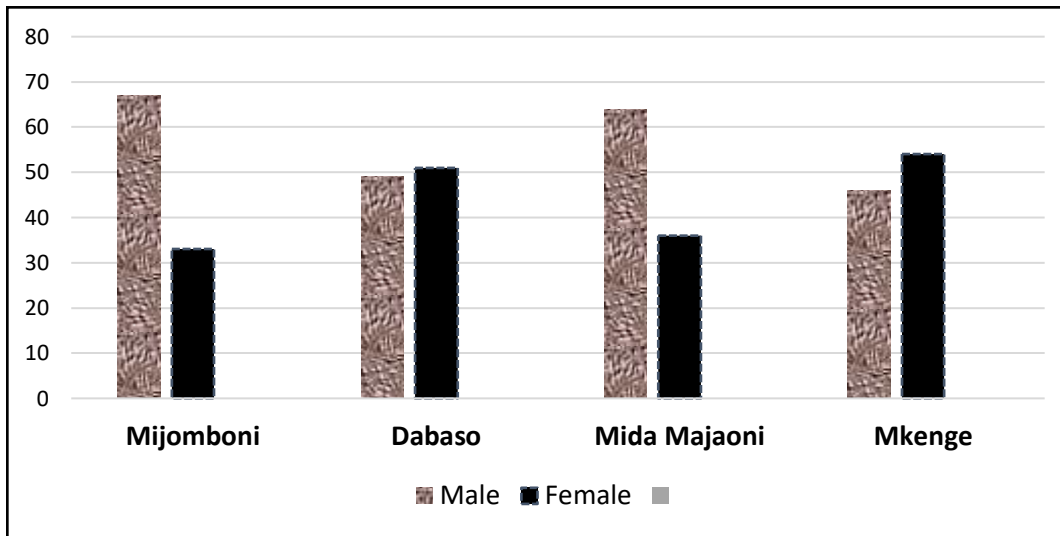


Figure 1: Gender Distribution among the four sampled villages

Source: *Author, 2022.*

From figure 1 above, it can be seen that both gender are well represented in many of the villages participating in avitourism activities adjacent to Arabuko Sokoke forest. The study further observed that more female guides from Mkenge village in the study had passion for bird life guiding.

Avitourism Awareness in the Community

The study sought the level of avitourism awareness among the Arabuko Sokoke forest adjacent dwellers and if they had heard about the term. The results is as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Avitourism Awareness among the responds

Responses on avitourism awareness	Freq.	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Correct responses	274	77.6	77.6	77.6
Incorrect responses	79	22.4	22.4	100.00
Total	353	100.00		
Meaning of Avitourism				
Correct responses	124	35.1	35.1	35.1
Incorrect responses	229	64.9	64.9	100.00
Total	353	100.00		

Source: *Author, 2022*

The result in table 1 shows that most of the local avitourism practitioners (77.6%) within Arabuko Sokoke forest are aware of avitourism with a paltry 35.1% not knowing the meaning of avitourism. Similarly, in most research, the description on the awareness of the projects and activities by the community involvement was unclear. Furthermore the study noted of the local community involvement in avitourism to be influenced by several factors including the need for incomes and household daily needs. This finding is in line with Biggs *et al.*, (2011) where in there research study argued that local community roles and their involvement in decision making whether to participate or not is determined by participatory approach being used in that area. Moreover, Connel (2009) in his study of Arabuko Sokoke forest conservation argued that community involvement in avitourism in Arabuko Sokoke forest is dependent on awareness and understanding of avitourism programs and activities.

4.2 Stakeholders involved avitourism in Arabuko Sokoke forest

4.2.1 Local community and Government authorities

Government authorities especially the national government through Kenya wildlife Service (KWS) and Kenya Forest Service (KFS) assist Arabuko Sokoke forest for the elaboration and performance of avitourism projects. Both the organizations provide safety and security for avitourism programs and activities, however funding of avitourism projects and activities remain the main desire of the local community which has not been delivered by the management authorities. It is expected that the managing authorities should provide avitourism advisory information and facilitate capacity building on projects and activities relating to avitourism for the local community to participate as this endeavor will make Arabuko Sokoke forest an avitourism destination.

4.2.2 Local Community and Local Non-governmental organization

There are a number of NGO's supporting avitourism in Arabuko Sokoke forest which the local community appreciate for the roles they play. Many times NGO's in the study area act as the performers of government and provide the needed financial aid for sustainable development for programs of value to the local community including avitourism (Cordell and Herbert, 2002). The challenge for NGOs in Arabuko Sokoke forest is on the transfer of knowledge and skills on avitourism and in the creation of awareness on the avitourism resources available for community utilization through their involvement. NGOs such the A Rocha Kenya and Arabuko Sokoke forest Guide Association (ASFGA) has integrated different stakeholders within the community for the success of avitourism. These organizations have provided infrastructure and training in form of capacity building and managerial skills for the elaboration of avitourism activities within the study area. However, these organizations have more potential to incorporate more avitourism activities and promote local community involvement with avitourism activities.

For instance, ASFGA has been formalizing tour guides registration and orientation within the study area and it was the feeling of the majority of the community that the works of this organization will lead to better lives in village households, otherwise time will be wasted in attending workshops. Furthermore, the local community are looking forward to receiving assistance from these institutions and other funding institutions including aid donors to better develop and participate in avitourism.

4.2.3 Local community and private enterprises

Within Arabuko Sokoke forest, there exist collaboration and negotiation between the local community and private enterprises. A number of tour operators have interests in developing Arabuko Sokoke forest multiple sites for avitourism. The tour operators, travel agencies and hoteliers have shown interests in marketing the avitourism in Arabuko Sokoke forest as they link the supply with the services and products provided by the forest and the local community. These collaboration and partnerships has brought positive results into the community.

A majority of the stakeholders and players within Arabuko Sokoke forest care about environmental conservation and the cultural impact of avitourism to the local community. Some community members have established accommodations, transport companies and food restaurants to cater gather for the avitourist needs. However, local guides have complained of minimal guiding fees from avitourist citing it as in low and adequate to support and their livelihood needs.

4.3 Local community economic well being

The economic benefits of avitourism to the local community adjacent to Arabuko Sokoke forest come from guided tours, sale of hand-crafts, food stuffs and accommodations. Some members of the community have invested in transport businesses of carrying around avitourist to and from the study area birding sites. Furthermore, 42.4% of the interviewed guides acknowledged to have utilized revenue from guiding proceeds in motor vehicles for this purpose. Other avitourism benefits and profits from avitourism to the adjacent community is being felt at household level as shown in figure 2.

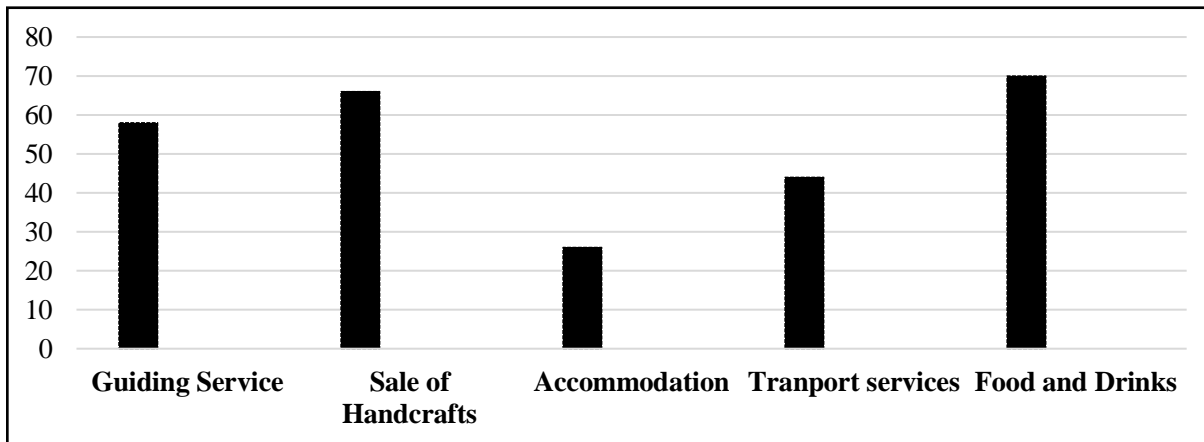


Figure 2: Local community economic activities

Source: *Author, 2022*

There are local businesses in the community developed from money earned in tourism such as convenience stores and truck transportation to Arabuko Sokoke forest. Most of the economic incomes for this community come from tourism and avitourism. Before avitourism existed there was no much cash in the local community economy system. There is money in Arabuko Sokoke to hire people to crop the land. Many have improved their lifestyle. Today, many of the jobs in the farms associated with the community are funded by money derived from tourism. As a result, the community has better rural development. However, it was noted that some households still rely almost entirely on crops and cattle.

4.4 Local community social issues with avitourism

Local community members who participate and are involved in avitourism have organized themselves into groups. The study established that avitourism incomes has benefited individuals and by extension their families. In Arabuko Sokoke forest, there exist rivalries between legal and illegal guides. Though the illegal guides were similarly from the same community, they are seeking for legislation and formalization of their grouping to practice and benefit from avitourism projects.

Arabuko Sokoke Forest Guide Association (ASFGA) and Bidii Yetu and Kazi Women group are such social organizations which assist in the formalization and routing out such revivalism among guides. However, the study noted of differences in opinion between a number of key local leaders in regards to community involvement in avitourism, and the reluctance of some. Furthermore, the study observed of competition in the community for the wealth of tourism with a low level of jealousy with some guide forming splinter groupings to syndicate ASFGA, which the lead umbrella organization consider it ‘grouping for power’ for tour guiding. Some interviewees were of the opinion that most of their young children cannot anymore provide labor in the farms as most of them get involved in avitourism activities. This has generated domestic problems, however, avitourism

has generally promoted and achieved a good level of social cohesion because avitourism has brought many opportunities for the community.

4.5 Politics and avitourism

The local community groupings and the initiatives of avitourism emerge from group assemblies. For instance some local group organization have learnt on how to follow procedures to be able to obtain government assistance and funding. Furthermore, most of the local group organization leaders in Arabuko Sokoke forest have visualized avitourism activities were they have represented the interest of their members by lobbying government and other organization for funding, capacity building and in provision of guiding gears. The study also noted of some group members having been recognized through Nomination to political leadership to represent the interests of their members.

Also the study observed the potentiality of young people involved in tour guiding and souvenirs sales of becoming better organized and in sizing on the opportunities offered by being involved in avitourism. However, the study noted of many of the local organization leadership inadequacies especially in administrative capabilities, negotiation skills and technical abilities of accessing government and donor funding through proposal development. Of concern is the low level skills of tour guides to negotiate with avitourist for fair remuneration for service delivered.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study it was apparent that the success of avitourism within Arabuko Sokoke forest was a result of many players and stakeholders recognizing the value and importance of Arabuko Sokoke forest resources and the potentials of avitourism to the local community livelihoods. The managing entities of Arabuko Sokoke forest have a structured relationship and ways of engaging the local community on the access, use, management and on the conservation of the indigenous resources for the benefit of the local community.

In effect while the community have the requisite power to be involved in avitourism activities and programs, locally established Non-governmental organizations such as Nature Kenya and A Rocha Kenya had come up in support of the local community in capacity building, funding and in the establishment of avitourism programs and activities.

While there is a growing need of research in avitourism especially on the roles of the local community involvement, there remain challenges in identifying community involvement roles as a major underlying issue in allowing the local community to take advantage of the forest resources and other prevailing opportunities to develop and elaborate major avitourism ventures.

In this study it was apparent that the conservation and marketing of Arabuko Sokoke forest as an avitourism destination can be achieved from the perspective of community participation and involvement once the local community are made more aware of the essence of avitourism and in building community capabilities, negotiation skills and a common will to be involved in avitourism and to protect Arabuko Sokoke forest resources on which they depend.

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