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A review of the role of tour operators towards sustaining ecotourism in Tanzania

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This review paper assesses the role of tour operators towards sustaining ecotourism in Tanzania. The motive behind it is based on the argument that tour operators have an important role within the ecotourism multi-stakeholder. However, little has been documented on how best to engage them for sustainable ecotourism. Thus, this paper provides a concise overview of the relevant literature, highlighting existing knowledge and gaps for prospective future research. In addition to the literature review and methods, the result section of the paper is organized in such a way that it elaborates on key concepts and provides the setup and organization of tour operators. As a core part of the review, this study underlined four key roles of tour operators towards sustainable ecotourism: their involvement in planning, development, promotion, and implementation of ecotourism products. The study concluded that ecotourism supporting and regulating machinery must work closely and strategically with tour operators at the individual level or through their existing tourism associations in order to ensure that those four identified areas are effectively and efficiently carried out, not only to enhance their business but also to conserve and market the destination sites and contribute to the country's revenue.

Key words: sustainable ecotourism, tour operators, Tanzania.

INTRODUCTION

Traveling to unspoiled natural and cultural places is prevalent in most countries. The motivation could be relaxation, enjoyment, learning knowledge, or inherent admiration for people, plants, and animals. To a considerable extent, this method encourages both natural and cultural conservation for the social and economic benefit of all stakeholders, especially local populations. This type of tourism is known as ecotourism, and similar characteristics of this description have been expanded in

culture to promote the active and socioeconomically beneficial involvement of local populations, as demonstrated in Ceballos-Lascuráin (1996).

As indicated by Weaver et al. (2007), ecotourism is one of the tourist subsectors that are increasing at a rapid pace. This is simply because its popularity with people is strong, owing to its protective character of cultural aspects, nature, and the environment of the destination sites. According to Pasape et al. (2014a), natural and

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cultural resources contribute greatly to sustainable development, particularly in terms of environmental conservation. According to Parris and Kates (2003), enthusiasts of sustainable development differ in their focus on what is to be sustained, what is to be developed, how to integrate environment and development, and how long should be allowed to exist. Therefore, ecotourism requires taking into account the activity's long-term impact; hence, tourism is good for the future and ensures the future by being accountable in the long run. Local communities are given special consideration in order to protect resources in the long run. As a result, as disclosed by Nworie and Adeniyi (2020), local communities must be informed of the impact of the various expedition activities on resource utilization so that the inhabitants who have access to ecotourism attraction sites are aware of the consequences of their actions and are engaged in conservation plans and strategies.

Tourism, according to Farsari (2012), causes numerous environmental problems: air pollution, water pollution, damage to fauna and flora, historical sites and buildings, waste, high energy consumption. These environmentally damaging impacts have contributed to greater awareness of the need for a shift to a more responsible form of tourism, ecotourism being one of them. Ecotourism is thought to have a low social and environmental impact, and it incorporates a wide range of stakeholders, including local communities, tour operators, and local and central governments. Similarly, Das and Chatterjee (2015) described the idea of ecotourism as well as contemporary practices, revealing that improving local livelihoods through ecotourism is commonly considered as an important policy instrument for biodiversity protection.

A number of researchers have claimed that ecotourism has a positive social, economic, and environmental impact. This is because it makes efficient use of natural resources, thereby creating new jobs and economic opportunities such as tour guide, hospitality, restaurant, and transportation jobs, as well as improving social entrepreneurship and promoting the status of local businesses and living standards, as evidenced by Zambrano et al. (2010), Nyaupane and Poudel (2011), Reimer and Walter (2013), and Ahmad et al. (2016). However, due to a mismatch between goal and practice, ecotourism has been a strongly debated topic since its deployment in various places.

Statement of the problem and study justification

Despite the sector's main success, ecotourism has been facing a number of hurdles and setbacks in Africa over the last 30 years. These have been ascribed to limits related to civil conflicts and poor governance, which in turn affect security, triangulity, and environmental degradation, emasculating the potential and trajectory of ecotourism expansion. Aside from that, most

infrastructure support, such as roads, airlines, and information and communication technology is deplorable, making ecotourism destinations difficult to access and affordable. Furthermore, evidences of insufficient human resources functioning as ecotourism practitioners, limited funding alternatives, and corruption are relevant, resulting in an inability to minimize the negative and unwanted impact of ecotourism as specified by Backman and Munanura (2015). All of these combined with a lack of stakeholders' engagement in ecotourism management and conservation may have an impact on the physical, natural, and cultural ecotourism resources for both present and future use.

Due to the above challenges, a number of researchers have gained an interest in working more on ecotourism, as evidenced in Drumm and Moore (2002), Garrod (2003), Mgonja et al. (2015), Clifton and Benson (2006), Backman and Munanura (2015), Courvisanos and Jain (2006), Aban et al. (2016), Ahmad et al. (2016), Pasape and Mujwiga (2017), Nugroho et al. (2018), Li and Liu (2020), Saidmamatov et al. (2020), Kerimbergenovich et al. (2020), Motlagh et al. (2020), Angessa et al. (2022) and Rahman et al. (2022). Besides, Motlagh et al. (2020) still urge more comprehensive studies on both the positive and negative aspects of sustainable ecotourism.

According to Li and Liu (2020), from 1990 to 2016, stakeholders such as researchers and policy makers at both local and national levels viewed sustainable ecotourism activities as a viable conservation strategy and an important means to accomplish sustainable tourism. Also, in order to deepen and concretize ecotourism research, the authors urge that more studies be performed, concentrating on interdisciplinary involvement and multistakeholders' participation, specifically on ecotourism awareness and behavior.

As demonstrated by Pasape and Mujwiga (2017), tour operators have been designated as major stakeholders and have proven to play a crucial and significant role within the multi-stakeholder team in ecotourism. However, little has been documented or conveyed about how the best tour operators may be leveraged to sustain ecotourism in Tanzania. Therefore, the goal of this review research is to investigate how tour operators, as key stakeholders, can help ensure the long-term sustainability of ecotourism. The main purpose of this review article is to provide a concise overview of both previous and current progress in tour operator involvement in sustainable ecotourism. The article specifically highlights and clarifies the subject matter for various stakeholders in the ecotourism sector, with the purpose of promoting sustainable ecotourism through existing knowledge and identifying gaps for future research.

This review research is organized into six parts. The first part of the introduction gives background information on the topic area as well as an explanation of the problem and purpose of the research. The second part contains a literature review that demonstrates the

conceptual framework and related empirical research that has been conducted to date. The third section includes a brief overview of the author's actions and methodology for conducting this review study. The fourth part, results, is the most covered part of this study. In this section, the author covers the set up and organization of tour operators in Tanzania, as well as the methods in which tour operators might sustain ecotourism by focusing on planning, development, promotion, and execution of ecotourism products. The author gives critiques, suggestions, and directions for sustainable ecotourism employing tour operators in the fifth part of the discussion, as well as suggestions for future areas of research. The conclusion and recommendations were included in the sixth section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecotourism in Tanzania

Anderson (2010) revealed that most of the tourists visiting Tanzania are linked to ecotourism attraction sites. This is because it is anticipated that almost 90% of Tanzanian visitors follow nature-based tourism. According to the United Republic of Tanzania through the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (2022), Tanzania is believed to be one of the distinctive destinations compared to most African countries, despite the fact that not all people around the world are aware of that. The country is blessed with abundant flora and fauna in most of its places, particularly in its 16 national parks, such as Serengeti, Arusha, Ngorongoro, and Manyara, as well as 17 game reserves and one conservation area. Tanzania is also home to the highest mountain in Africa, namely Mount Kilimanjaro, and the beautiful islands of Zanzibar. The country also hosts three of Africa's great lakes, namely Victoria, Tanganyika, and Nyasa. All of these ecotourism destinations protect the country's unique natural and cultural heritage for future generations, keeping it safe from deforestation and urbanization.

Based on Mseri (2019), Tanzania categorized ecotourism into three zones, namely as southern circuits, western circuits, and northern circuits. Specifically, while the southern circuit comprises Ruaha National Park, Katavi, Udzungwa, and Selous game reserves, the western circuit embraces the beauty of Burigi Chato, Gombe, and Rubondo. Besides, the northern circuit covers Kilimanjaro, Lushoto, Usambara, Ngorongoro, and Serengeti. Mgonja et al. (2015) reported that the concept of ecotourism in Tanzania has recently been massively promoted because it offers an alternative, sustainable and low-cost tourism for the conservation of cultural and natural heritage while benefiting local communities. In spite of that, reports revealed that utilization of the country's ecotourism potential is still at a low level, mainly

due to accessibility challenges in some protected areas, inadequate infrastructure and systems, and inadequate marketing and promotion strategies. The authors highlighted the need for responsible regulators to set and articulate clear policies, laws, guidelines, and procedures towards managing and implementing ecotourism programs countrywide. Such legislative and revenue generation strategies must stipulate how different stakeholders can be engaged and ensure tourists are satisfied, businesses are prospering, and, at the same time, local communities are benefiting from social economic and revenue generation activities. That is possible not only with the current setup but also in the future as there is still room for growth, especially in the other circuits other than the northern circuit.

In addition to that, Tanzania does make use of the existing cultural and natural world heritage sites. Kilimanjaro and Serengeti national parks, Kondo rock-art sites, Mount Meru, and nature reserves such as Amani, Uluguru, Nilo Kilombero, Mnazi Bay, and many more are just a few examples, according to Tanzania Tourist Board (2013), UNESCO (2014), and United Republic of Tanzania (2007 and 2015) cited in Mgonja et al. (2015). In Tanzania, community involvement in ecotourism has a long history. Nelson (2004), for example, stated that the first community-based tourism ventures consisted of very expensive non-permanent camping and hiking activities for foreign tourists using Arusha-based tour operators. This was due to the availability of ecotourism attractions and the need for diversification in the rapidly growing northern Tanzanian tourism industry. By the late 1990s, approximately 25 rural Tanzanian villages had some type of on-going or seasonal tourism activity, typically in collaboration with one or more private businesses. The laws governing how Tanzanian villages run their businesses made it possible for these initial agreements between private travel operators and local communities.

Moreover, Shoo and Songorwa (2013) contend that ecotourism is widely acknowledged as being essential for the preservation of natural resources and improvement of livelihoods, particularly in areas of developing countries with high biodiversity. Once local communities are involved in ecotourism, either formally or informally, the issue of collective management and strategies for conservation and sustainability becomes crucial. Therefore, activities targeted at maintaining the sustainability of ecotourism must be given higher priority in Tanzania and other nations that depend on the same kinds of resources.

Sustainability of ecotourism

Sustainable ecotourism is contemplated to be the methods, systems, and practices that ensure that the present needs are met while safeguarding those of future

generations by guaranteeing that natural and cultural resources are not depleted through the incorporation of both natural and human patterns all the time. As stated by Early (1993), Rosenbaum (1993), Union of Conservation Scientists, United Nations Environment Programme, and World Wide Fund for Nature (1991), and United Nation (1987), the goal of all of these is to improve one's well being and quality of life.

Several authors, including Nelson (2004), Charnley (2005), Shoo and Songorwa (2013), Pasape et al. (2014b), Mgonja et al. (2015), Pasape et al. (2015), and Backman and Munanura (2017) conducted studies on Tanzania's ecotourism sustainability. For instance, when looking at sustainable ecotourism indicators, Pasape et al. (2014a) look at sustainable ecotourism indicators. Their research revealed that, in terms of the preservation of ecological variety, the preservation of cultural heritage, the strategic involvement of stakeholders, and suitable infrastructural support, ecotourism indicators could be divided into four main clusters. The findings of this study indicate important sustainable ecotourism indicators that can be utilized to disseminate information for use now and in the future at different scales.

Courvisanos and Jain (2006) reported on Costa Rica, in Central America, that despite threats from high rates of deforestation and expanding large-scale tourism that trades on strong environmental credentials, the country's success in leading in environmental conservation and thus sustainable ecotourism was attributed to an analysis and development of policies for general development and management of both small-scale and large-scale ecotourism.

Rivera et al. (2009) also reported on another sustainable ecotourism study in the Philippines, this time focused on sustainability, environmental protection, and local community involvement. Furthermore, key industry actors were identified and included in the development of a value chain framework for Philippine ecotourism that includes the quadruple bottom-line strategy to understand how value chain participants conduct sustainable tourism.

Thus, in order to sustain ecotourism, the variables that determine sustainable ecotourism must first be identified. Pasape et al. (2013) explored strategic stakeholders' engagement as critical to the sustainability of Tanzanian ecotourism.

The key findings indicated that stakeholders in the ecotourism value chain must: form ecotourism community advocacy groups comprising villagers and local community members near ecotourism attraction sites; maintain close interaction with ecotourism businesses and service providers; government agencies and players from research and academic institutions; and establish and maintain strong ecotourism networks. Furthermore, the authors recommend strengthening public-private collaborations in areas such as infrastructure development, capacity building, information and communication sharing, research and development, and

project management. Clifton and Benson (2006) also performed research utilizing an Indonesian case study to examine the type and root causes of the socio-cultural effects of ecotourism. The findings reveal that the altruistic surplus theory of individual recognition of community benefits is equivalent to the positive nature of socio-cultural impacts reported by host communities as well as the unpredictable nature of economic benefits to host communities.

The level and extent of empowerment toward exploiting and managing ecotourism sustainably determines the extent of community engagement and profits from ecotourism. Pasape et al. (2014b) investigate the impact of community empowerment on Tanzania's sustainable ecotourism. The key variables under consideration were education programs, information availability, and language use. Most tourism stakeholders lack knowledge about ecotourism resource conservation and preservation, and most community members have limited access to information due to a lack of news outlets, a lack of tourist information centers, and the use of English and other foreign languages in information and marketing communication packs, according to the findings. As a result, community empowerment is highly recommended towards making ecotourism sustainable. Furthermore, Stone (2015) discovered mixed results in a study on community-based ecotourism in Botswana in terms of biodiversity protection and community livelihoods, owing to the huge number of stakeholders involved in the creation, planning, and implementation of ecotourism activities. Additionally, the authors advocate for a successful, evolving, and progressive stakeholder approach to natural resource management.

In another study, Pasape et al. (2015) explored the association between outstanding governance practices and sustainable ecotourism. The findings found that insufficient openness, low accountability, and fragile integration machines combining ecotourism and firm activities impair Tanzania's sustainability as well as the country's strategic and socioeconomic aspirations. Poor governance increases the likelihood of ineffective planning, inefficiencies, and mismanagement of ecotourism resources. As a result, all stakeholders' accountability, openness, and integration of ecotourism topics are vital not just for meeting current criteria but also for maintaining the sustainability of ecotourism.

Moreover, Pellis et al. (2015) examined organizational strategies and practices between 2007 and 2013 and discovered how best conservation NGOs can be employed as intermediators of various forms of conservation-related tourism, including ecotourism, when multi-actor interdependencies are considered. Mismatched scale making plainly impedes organizational goals, prompting a rethinking of tourism in terms of conservation landscapes. Despite this, the National Environment Management Council - NEMC (2013) highlighted that, in addition to funding, deforestation,

poaching, and human encroachment as a result of rapid population increase have repeatedly compromised the sustainability of ecotourism attractive locations. According to a recent National Environment Management Council assessment, Tanzania has a deforestation rate of about 1.1 percent per person. This rate is said to be twice as fast as global deforestation, which is currently running at a rate of 0.5 percent per year. This highlights the need to include all key stakeholders in sustainability initiatives, with tour operators recognized as crucial actors in those ecotourism sustainability-related projects because they fall under the category of ecotourism network in the majority of the research reviewed.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a review article format, drawing on previously published papers, to summarize the existing literature on the role of tour operators in sustaining ecotourism in Tanzania in an attempt to explain the current status, highlighting gaps and future possibilities. This review study, in particular, involves a systematic search in the existing literature on sustainable ecotourism and stakeholder engagement for an answer to a specific issue of making ecotourism sustainable using tour operators' organization, planning, product development, ecotourism business operations, and marketing.

Inspired by Tranfield et al. (2003) with the argument that undertaking a review of the literature is an important part of any research project; some of the traditional narrative reviews may lack thoroughness. The author enriches this review study by incorporating evidence-informed management reviews. This includes using the past research and literature on Tanzania's sustainable ecotourism and various tour operators' initiatives in ecotourism. This study started by assessing the background information, followed by identifying the problem statements and gaps. Thereafter, a thorough literature review was conducted.

The author makes use of seventy relevant studies to assess the past and current status, assess the gaps, and discuss and recommend the best practices as well as possible future research. The structure of the review involves both topics, focusing on general knowledge on sustainable ecotourism and ecotourism practices in the specific context of ecotourism in Tanzania and tour operators. The author also allowed for comparison and contrast method, as well as geographical area and publication dates, whenever needed. The following are the specifics of the systematic methodology's step-by-step procedure:

First and foremost, the author outlined the purpose and rationale for conducting a review study. This was linked to a recognized need and a gap in sustainability strategies for Tanzanian ecotourism. The author then lays out the design plan, specifying the procedures to be followed in order to achieve the study's goal. The author describes the features of the participant studies to be reviewed, as well as their essential components, in the study phase setup. The emphasis in this context was on studies on sustainable ecotourism, sustainable tourism, stakeholder participation, ecotourism products, ecotourism strategies, and related matters.

Following the study description, the selection criteria for both included and excluded studies were established. During that stage, the author specified the types of research ranging from published articles, books or book chapters, conference papers, and study reports at the national, regional, and international levels via the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The sources of such materials were also highlighted, with a focus on related publications on the subject, common authors on the subject,

relevant search engines and databases, and key search phrases. This method really helped in developing a comprehensive description of all of the data sources, methods, interventions, and necessary comparisons from the selected research.

The author continued with the stages of searching for all data and information that fit inside the boundaries and parameters described. With regard to the research's sustainability strategies utilizing tour operators, the collected information was divided into four major groups: planning of ecotourism products; development of ecotourism products; promotion strategies; as well as ecotourism implementation frameworks and strategies. Other variables considered include the existing state of ecotourism, current and recommended sustainability strategies, as well as the setup and structure of tour operators towards sustainable ecotourism.

Among the primary search tactics included in this review study are reputable electronic databases searched, with indexed journals given priority most of the time. The other area was language selection. This study was limited to English and Swahili, the author's and the case's native languages. The search process paves the way for the data collection process.

To avoid mistakes and errors, the author copied and pasted the relevant text from web sources during the data collection procedure. After that, the author read, recast, and interpreted the content using own understanding and interpretation of the topic. The author additionally stresses the study's quality and, most of the time, avoids bias wherever feasible by conducting a thorough examination of the technique used and study outcomes in relation to the evaluated works' study aims. Analysing the collected information entails interpreting the methodology, results, and recommendations in light of the current study's goal of comparison and contracting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides information, reasoning, and evidence for the four key responsibilities that tour operators can play in supporting ecotourism in Tanzania. The writers begin by emphasizing the necessary setup and organization to support the deployment of those tour operator duties.

Setup and organization of tour operators

For years, ecotourism in Tanzania involved a number of people mainly operating under specified networks of tour operators, hotel owners, transporters, tour agents, and investors, as revealed in the work of Pasape et al. (2013). Tanzanian tour operators are governed by the Tanzania Association of Tour Operators, often known as TATO, which is the government-recognized tour operator's representative and has long been a government partner in the implementation of several programs and policies. Since 1983, the association has represented the interests of its members, which include tour operators, air operators, hoteliers, and associate members; provided a common and ample position of the tourism industry to government institutions in all matters pertaining to policy formulation, planning, and maintaining high quality standards among its members and other intermediaries, as evidenced by TATO (2022).

Apart from TATO, tour operators have also been organized based on portfolio, e.g., Zanzibar Association of Tourism Investors, Hotels Association of Tanzania, Tanzania Association of Cultural Tourism Organizers, Tanzania Tour Guides Association, Tanzania Hunting Operators Association, Tanzania Professional Hunters Association, Tanzania Air Operators Association, Tanzania Society of Travel Agents, as well as private business owners involved in tourism, namely as the Tourism Confederation of Tanzania and union of tourism associations such as Intra-African Travel and Tourism Association as revealed in Tanzania Tourist Board (2022). As per statistics of 2020, the United Republic of Tanzania's Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (2022) reported that the number of tour operators had reached 1874.

Due to the importance of networks in the ecotourism business, Pasape and Mujwiga (2017) assessed the fundamental issues impeding Tanzania's ecotourism networks and discovered that the majority are experiencing financial difficulties, resulting in insufficient money to finance ecotourism enterprises, notably marketing. The issue worsens as access to and conditions for securing financial institutions deteriorate. In such circumstances, the ecotourism sector's success and sustainability would constantly lag behind due to a lack of funds to finance day-to-day operations and new products. Furthermore, the ecotourism network has infrastructure challenges such as limited direct flights and reliable roads to attraction places, pricey hotel services, and tourism legislative implementation during implementation (Pasape and Mujwiga, 2017).

Moreover, Anderson (2009) determined various roles of networks in an effort to promote ecotourism through networks in the Balearics, specifically acknowledging the power of networking or providing the right environmental education programmers; the role of networks in promoting green environments in hotel establishments; and warranting active participation in the process of controlling ecotourism quality and sustainability of use of all resources. A variety of ecotourism instruments, policies, and legislation were produced with the assistance of the networks.

Additionally, in terms of tour operators' business arrangements, some tour operators have counterparts in foreign lands in order to carry out ecotourism operations. These counterparts are known as outbound tour operators. The study was conducted by Nemasetoni and Rogerson (2017) to assess the dyadic relationships between Tanzanian inbound tour operators and their overseas outbound partners, with a focus on the effect of partner irreplaceability and distributive fairness on acquiescence and the subsequent effect that acquiescence has on conflict. According to the findings, establishing a partner agreement is critical in interfirm interactions and is critical to the development and sustainability of ecotourism businesses because it assists

the focus firm in achieving its goals.

The above structures, functions, and operations of tour operators as individual enterprises or as networks place them in a critical position in Tanzania's ecotourism business. As a result, it is in the author's best interests to figure out how to integrate those tour operators into making ecotourism more sustainable.

Ways through which tour operators can sustain ecotourism

Tour operators are involved in several strategic and operational activities that have the ability to influence the sustainability of ecotourism in Tanzania. For that reason, the need to establish the role of tour operators towards sustaining ecotourism becomes a very crucial and strategic matter. The following are four major ways towards achieving that goal

Planning ecotourism products

Planning is an essential component of any management decision-making process, and the involvement of important parties, including local communities, is strongly encouraged. However, in the context of ecotourism, Garrod (2003) observed that the effectiveness of local community participation is becoming increasingly rare in most ecotourism-related programs. Besides, France (1997) revealed that ecotourism programs in most tourist places might confront the risk of mass tourism, negatively compromising their sustainability. Thus, ecotourism sustainability plans and strategies are so unavoidable. According to Nugroho et al. (2018), developing ecotourism products requires extensive planning in which the roles and responsibilities of each participant at the macro, ecological, and local levels must be well defined and integrated. Spenceley and Manning (2013) stated in another study that best-practice planning approaches and programs consider all aspects of sustainable development, including economic, environmental, and social factors.

Tour operators engage in a variety of planning activities in order to prepare for ecotourism products. A tourist product, according to Noll et al. (2019), is made up of both tangible and intangible components. In most circumstances, the product components are given either individually or collectively to ecotourism travellers as a single coherent experience.

It is therefore recommended that the sustainability of tourism is heavily reliant on proper differentiation of product components during planning, so that it is clear when ecotourism will visit, what type of accommodation will be provided, a variety of meals, the location and extent of guided and unguided walks, as well as modes of transportation. This would not only allow tourists to

shop the products before acquiring them, but it would also ensure that organizers and tour operators adhere to conservation and preservation actions for the destination's present and future use. This will exert an immediate impact on eco-tourism product packaging, marketing, and market. According to Nugroho et al. (2018), developing ecotourism services includes efforts to develop local empowerment and infrastructure to meet environmental conservation, as well as building governance to gain a positive experience and well-being, as well as integrating tourism promotion through product development and market segmentation, and analysing and educating to offer cultural and environmental education.

Moreover, consumer satisfaction as a result of the planned and delivered products is critical to the success of ecotourism-related businesses. According to Gidebo (2021), managing tourist demand and satisfaction criteria is critical for any international traveller, necessitating the use of powerful information and communication technologies. This could be Internet connectivity for communication and information search, reliable and accessible reservation systems, or user-friendly online marketing platforms. In line with this, Drumm and Moore (2002) discovered that tour operators and other travel agents, whether in touch or outbound, play an important role in the coordination of various means of transportation such as aircraft, ships, vans, and buses. Therefore, if sufficient preparation is done ahead of time, tourists will be comfortable, happy, and satisfied with the service offered, while the integrity and sustainability of the ecotourism destination will be maintained. Thus, simply because tour operators are at the forefront of ecotourism planning, all activities and policies relating to quality and value addition in these places must take them into account.

Additionally, tour operators and other players must emphasize the security and conservation of ecotourism goods and destination places for the current and future utility of ecotourism. According to Noll et al. (2019), it is critical to conduct a thorough destination assessment to ensure that destinations are well protected and that all primary stakeholders, such as local community members surrounding those destination sites, understand the unique cultural, historical, and natural strengths that must be promoted and conserved. With the help of tour operators, this assessment can be completed successfully.

Furthermore, Drumm and Moore (2002) stated that incorporating private tour operators into the planning process is difficult because such projects are typically costly and encounter numerous hurdles. However, if the participation of tour operators in such planning efforts significantly reduces costs, the target can be met sooner than expected. The authors also recommend the following key inputs in the process: information provision about potential ecotourism markets; business services and

advice on available tangible and intangible products; marketing of ecotourism related programs; providing essential services for accessing and utilizing ecotourism sites; capacity building of local tour guides and entrepreneurs; and ecotourism operations and investment.

Development of ecotourism products

A tourism product, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022), is a combination of both tangible and intangible components, such as cultural, natural, and historical attractions, whether naturally existing or man-made, as well as their associated facilities and services, which form the core of any tourism destination and a traveller's overall experience. According to Xu (2010), travellers frequently encounter a diverse selection of tourist items in different destinations. Various tourists have different requirements, expectations, preferences, perceptions, desires, and motives during their travels, as proven by Jaafar et al. (2014). Internal factors such as psychological, physical, and social communication and exploration dynamics, as well as external factors such as transportation modes, accommodation types, local community attitudes, safety status, prices, and services offered, and the historical and cultural significance of the destination, cause those differences, according to Hsu, Tsai, and Wu (2009). The authors confirm that tour operators, through various services within the ecotourism value chain, have a significant probability of influencing eco-tourist choices as a result of positive and gratifying attitudes, communication, dependable modes of transportation, lodging, and product prices. To maintain the sustainability of ecotourism in Tanzania, tour operators must have a favourable business environment for the production of good and appealing products.

Ecotourism products, like most other items on the market, rely heavily on product quality and quantity. According to Matilla (2011), the quality of a tourist product can only be determined and quantified by examining whether it meets or does not meet the expectations of tourists and other clients, who have varying expectations depending on their knowledge, prior experiences, and tagged prices. Despite the fact that most ecotourism destination sites are owned and regulated by the government, their relationships with tour operators are direct given that tour operators are responsible for product customization, segmentation, and management, ensuring that the offered services are of high quality and reflect the value for money spent. Aside that, Smith (1994) underlined the importance of quality in any ecotourism product given that it not only satisfies the travellers but also plays a significant role in product pricing. As a result, one of the main elements of tourism is corporate profitability, which also affects product

prices.

United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022) underlined that tourism product pricing must take into account all stages of the product life cycle as well as distribution channel price and that product quality must mirror product pricing in order to satisfy travellers. In this regard, tour operators have the opportunity to establish a decent price due to satisfied clients' high prices, which will contribute to the government's revenue and thus increase their ability to maintain and preserve the ecotourism attraction sites.

Promotion of ecotourism products

Ecotourism products, like other products in the market, must be communicated to potential and future customers through a variety of marketing communication channels. However, it is critical to create, build, and reinforce brands for any ecotourism destination location. This will allow for the development of unique and distinguishing features and experiences to conquer the market, ensuring eco-tourists are very satisfied with their first or repeated experience. Satisfied visitors, according to Jaafar et al. (2014), are more likely to provide positive feedback, convert to regular customers, and spread favorable word of mouth to other possible new consumers. As a result, it not only ensures customers' loyalty but also influences customer retention, which has an impact on the current and future ecotourism business.

Ecotourism promotion is a critical strategy for any destination's prosperity and success, as it may contribute to economic empowerment, local community development, and poverty alleviation, as demonstrated in Bakari (2021). As revealed by Boniface et al. (2016), marketing and promotion of ecotourism destinations by tour operators is one of the essential aspects of ensuring ecotourism sustainability because the failure of ecotourism development and management is mostly attributed to insufficient information, lack of awareness, and low creativity of the players and local community in terms of product promotion, diversification, and marketing strategies. The effectiveness of the location's marketing and promotion has a powerful and direct impact on driving tourists to any destination.

Other factors include insufficient infrastructure, an inability to manage and recognize potential in regions, a lack of awareness of local ecotourism potential, a lack of synergies of cooperation between communities, governments, and other stakeholders, and an inability to recognize the trend of people's need for tourism (Nitasha, 2018). The choice of object marketing is illustrated by three main attributes, namely local, unique, and contemporary, because it reduces the enormous effort required in the preparation of facilities and infrastructure; it differentiates the types of tours compared to other areas; and it captures the millennial generations, which

currently have a huge market potential and have more frequent travel habits than previous generations, as Simanjuntaka and Manalu (2019) describe in detail.

In the Tanzanian context, Bakari (2021) stated that major challenges affecting the country's national parks, including the Serengeti National Park, are a lack of promotion marketing packages for domestic tourism, the absence of a development and marketing policy and strategy for domestic tourism, a lack of devotion to domestic tourism from both business sectors and some government bodies, and economic challenges associated with the low country's per capita income. As a result, many aspects of ecotourism sustainability will be achieved as long as tour operators create, promote, and market ecotourism products well. Thus, government initiatives and policies to revitalize the economy and preserve ecotourism must filter down to tour companies.

Public awareness is the major concern in knowing, understanding, and implementing the ecotourism marketing plan, according to Simanjuntaka and Manalu (2019). Local officials and businesses, as well as all community groups, central government, private, and educational institutions, are expected to support the strategy's implementation.

Tour operators must play an important role in developing public knowledge on not just the beauty of ecotourism destination places but also on diverse conservation measures for future generations. By doing so, they will safely direct their business while also contributing to the sustainability of ecotourism. Experiences from other countries, such as South Africa, revealed that tour operators place a high value on innovative marketing information systems for both product awareness and as a management tool to facilitate informed managerial decisions, as evidenced in Potgieter et al. (2013).

However, the successful, efficient, and long-term marketing of ecotourism needs substantial financial commitment. As a result, the importance of financial stability for tour operators in order to engage in the necessary marketing and promotion efforts for sustainable ecotourism is emphasized. Tour operators must work hard to ensure that they have enough resources to improve their marketing capabilities. Marketing objectives can be met in this manner. Thus, in order to sustain ecotourism, tour operators must have the capacity to define, produce, convey, and deliver desired value to their target clients, as Neil et al. (2012) demonstrate.

Implementation of ecotourism products

Implementing ecotourism programs and associated products necessitates players minimizing any social, behavioral, societal, and natural repercussions while also raising cultural and environmental awareness to provide

positive experiences for both local and foreign tourists. Tanzania, on the other hand, has established ecotourism supporting policies, laws, and implementing institutions to work on the seamless implementation of ecotourism and other forms of tourism. Nonetheless, the development and advertising strategy of recruiting more domestic tourists is prioritized, particularly during the low season. However, the setback is related to the degree of coordination efforts. In the absence of it, little success in implementation efforts has been noted until recently, when the country had a provision of cultural and sporting events targeted at broadening the tourism offering and appealing to the home market. Despite these attempts, Bakari (2021) noted that such events are seasonal, impacting the sustenance and sustainability of the local tourism business. The inclusion of tour operators in the implementation strategy could help to mitigate this challenge.

As ecotourism products encompass tangible products, services, and relevant activities offered to tourists and travellers during their visit to ecotourism, tour operators play an important role in ensuring that all such activities are well planned and carried out in a very professional manner, reflecting a high level of hospitality, as also recommended by Jaafar et al. (2014). By so doing, the country will ensure a steady stream of visitors and enough funds to keep the attractions and businesses running. The accessibility of ecotourism destinations is critical for tour operators in order to attract tourists and conduct business effectively and efficiently. Therefore, governing authorities must guarantee that all plans take into account how best tour operators can implement present and future ecotourism goods?

Michael et al. (2013) stressed the necessity of tourist regulatory authorities ensuring that ecotourism benefits trickle down and are easily accessible to local populations whose livelihoods rely on the cultural and natural resources where ecotourism activities take place in a separate study. Participation of local communities and beneficiaries in ecotourism activities must be improved during implementation. Owners and workers of tour operator enterprises, as well as local communities surrounding ecotourism attraction locations, are among those who benefit.

In view of the above information, this review study affirms that ecotourism is one of the crucial aspects of economic development in Tanzania, which does not need much resource mobilization since the country is highly gifted with a number of unique natural and cultural diversity for ecotourism. However, engagement of all key players, specifically tour operators in the tourism industry, is highly encouraged. Various authors show that tour operators have a high ability to influence the sustainability of ecotourism in Tanzania simply because of their direct and close involvement in planning, development, promotion, and implementation of all ecotourism products.

The current review further establishes that in order for tour operators to contribute substantially to the

sustainability of ecotourism, they must first be existing and in operation in various ecotourism destination points. Besides, a clear and recognized organization must be established in order to oversee operations and maintain strong contact with the government as needed. Furthermore, tour operators must have strong networks of diverse companies in the fields of transportation, hotels, and accommodations. By doing so, ecotourism planning, management, consultation, monitoring, and evaluation will be carried out for present and future business needs.

In addition to that, this review study ascertains that planning of ecotourism must be emphasized at all stages within the cycle so as to be sure of how ecotourism products will be packaged, positioned, offered, and marketed for current and future generations. The roles and responsibilities of each participant at all levels of operations, whether local, ministerial, or worldwide, must be explicitly outlined, agreed upon, and integrated at the planning stages. Current and projected ecotourism products must be developed based on existing resources and customer demand, with a focus on customer happiness most of the time. Furthermore, tour operators and other stakeholders must prioritize the security and protection of ecotourism products in order to ensure that they are utilized in a sustainable manner for future generations. As a result, ecotourism product planning must go beyond the business perspective by embracing conservation and sustainability considerations.

With respect to the development of ecotourism products, tour operators need to focus on products offered with distinct tangible and intangible associated features at their best quality in order to meet tourists' perceptions, preferences, and desires so as to secure future visits and positive word of mouth to expect new customers. Besides, tour operators can sustain ecotourism through the creation and strengthening of ecotourism destination sites as well as offering them at reasonable prices that reflect their value for money. This will not only satisfy tourists but also win their loyalty.

During promotion, tour operators need to communicate all the necessary precautions towards conservation and the role of each player in maintaining the attraction sites. Moreover, all marketing efforts must align with the national tourism marketing plan and strategy. Ecotourism products require clear and effective marketing communication techniques. The targeted message must be carefully crafted and clearly presented in several languages so that the relevant audience can comprehend it. Tour operators play an important part in making this happen because they are in charge of formulating the message as well as picking marketing techniques and channels of communication. The emphasis must be effectively stated on the destination's distinctiveness, worth, and benefits to both locals and tourists. Most of the time, marketing strategies must be accompanied by what is expected from tourists and the local community in terms of conservation and preservation for future

generations.

Multi-stakeholder coordination must be highlighted and strengthened to ensure that all policies, laws, and implementing organs, regardless of their diverse functions and industries are cooperating to sustain the destination sites. With this in mind, tour operators can be actively involved in sustainability plans and initiatives as individuals or through their networks and apex organisations. A study by Patterson (2007) also emphasized the importance of including stakeholders in the creation, implementation, and monitoring of ecotourism programs, as well as being stringent about what can and cannot be done in visitation areas in order to conserve and preserve natural environments.

Conclusion

The current review study emphasizes the role of tour operators in ensuring the utility and benefits of ecotourism in Tanzania for future generations. Tour operators, who are well integrated, in particular, can contribute significantly to sustainable ecotourism by planning sound and sustainable ecotourism products, developing unique and innovative experiences from the developed and offered products, and engaging in informative and protective marketing communication. Due to their role in the implementation of ecotourism businesses, tour operators have a high chance of advocating and enhancing the sustainable implementation of any ecotourism strategy and products. These findings are crucial in making sure that Tanzania's natural and cultural endowments are carefully utilized and that, most of the time, their use for future generations in many years to come takes precedence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

However, the author recommends that more research should be conducted on how to best sustain ecotourism through the joint efforts of both sustainable development specialists and tour operators during strategic planning and the implementation of ecotourism products. The government machinery in the country, in addition to their regulatory function, must work more proactively with tour operators to ensure the sustainability of the existing ecotourism attractions and destinations using policies, regulations, and consultative meetings.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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