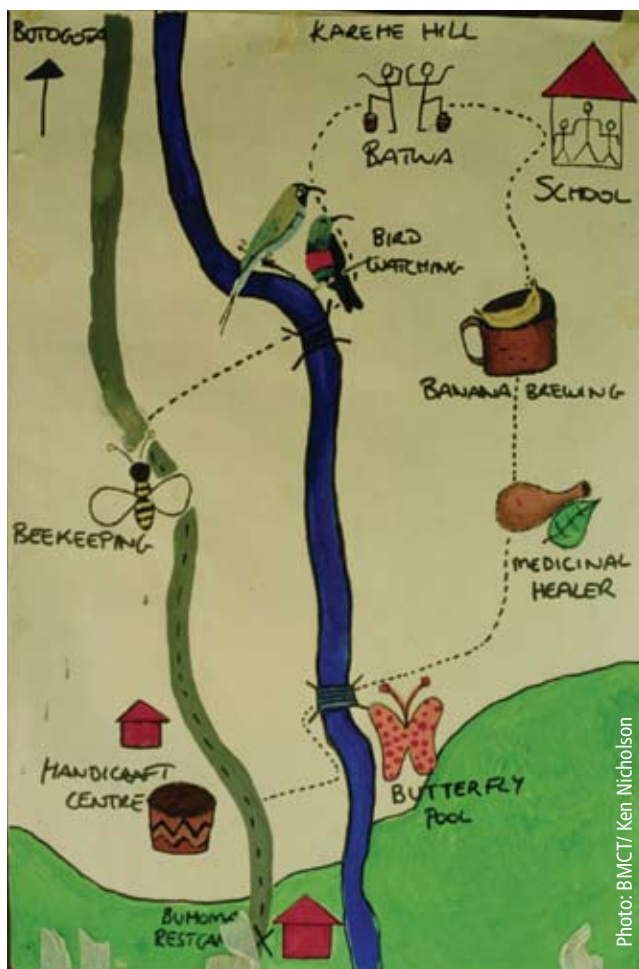


BUHOMA VILLAGE, Uganda: Creating New Trails in Ecotourism

Guide explaining banana brewing products



Map of the Buhoma Village Walk



Wildlife tourism is expanding all over the African continent. How can a village benefit from this expansion when it does not have the infrastructure to welcome tourists? This issue was raised by the Buhoma community, which lives in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP), Kanungu District in Uganda. With their unique forest environment, numerous gorillas and abundant wildlife, the villagers were aware of the considerable tourism potential of their place.

BINP was opened to tourists in 1991. The mountain gorillas are the primary attraction of the park. Tourists pay US\$500 to track one of the three groups of gorillas, plus US\$20 for park entrance fees. Only 20 per cent of the entrance fees are shared with the people living in the areas adjacent to the park. As entrance is limited to 24 persons per day, local communities receive only very small amounts of revenue from the park.

Enhancing ecotourism services

Prior to the establishment of BINP as a national park in 1991, local communities in areas bordering the park depended on the forest for such resources as weaving materials, medicinal plants, bush meat, honey gathering, fruit collection and building poles. When Bwindi was gazetted as a national park, the local communities were barred from removing forest products, some of which played a crucial role in their livelihood. Currently about 10 per cent of the population in selected areas have access to multiple use zones (MUZs) for limited harvesting of these products. The existing harvesting quotas are very low and do not provide scope for enterprise development. The 20 per cent (US\$4) of the entrance fees received from Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) as revenue sharing is equally small.



A guide testing the banana juice



With the support of the Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust (BMCT), the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), the villagers agreed to develop a high quality community tourism product in the form of a Village Walk. They decided on the procedure of site selection, sharing of proceeds and the institutional home of the walk.

In February 2002, a workshop was organised to assist members of the Village Walk in identifying the goals and objectives of the project. A survey was carried out by local community members, BMCT and UWA, to identify possible sites for the walk. About 20 sites were identified and a selection process

administered which narrowed the list to 9 sites. Community members brought their local knowledge of the area, its condition and terrain. These 9 sites display rich and in some cases unique natural and cultural settings. They include a handicraft centre run by women where they demonstrate traditional handicraft making; a waterfall in the middle of farmland; tea plantations where visitors can watch how tea is picked; and the butterfly pool on Munyaga River where women do their washing and where hundreds of multi-coloured butterflies can be found on the rocks. The banana brewing site is situated in the middle of a banana plantation, where the site owner demonstrates the stages of the banana brewing process. Tourists can also see the local gin distillery, the traditional healer, a community school and the Batwa centre and bird watching woodlot. Along the trail, they see different plants and gardens and meet the local people.

Photo: BMCT/Ken Nicholson



A community initiative was selected as a host institution, with all members of the community participating in the election of its officers. The owners of the nine identified sites, BMCT and UWA participated in the trail design. They elected their management team, which coordinates with UWA, and decided to meet on the fifth day of every month, together with guides, to discuss management issues of the trail.

The community defined a formula for sharing monthly proceeds so that 30 per cent of the income would be allocated to the guide, 5 per cent for stationery and brochure reprinting, 5 per cent for the coordinator and 20 per cent to the Buhoma Community Camp Ground to support community development projects. The remaining 40 per cent would be distributed among private site owners (70 per cent) and households of the Batwa, originally a forest people who perform their cultural dance (30 per cent).

The cost of the project has remained limited. The design of the trails, labour, small crossing bridges, steps on slopes and resting stools cost less than US\$900 in all. Radio hand sets were purchased for US\$1,060. A shed and a hut for the traditional healer were also built. After the launch of the initiative, running costs were met from the revenue generated from the walk. These revenues include US\$51.42 contributed by site owners each month that is used to maintain the trail and rehabilitate steps and bridges. Each site owner maintains its respective sites.

*Handicraft display
by women*



Photo: BMCT/ Ken Nicholson

The project involves various local partners. Local community leaders identify viable eco-tourism sites. The Batwa people, who traditionally had no source of income perform their dance. Site owners are involved in the project with each site carrying out specific activities. The Uganda Wildlife Authority is responsible for selling tickets to the tourists on mountain gorilla tracks.

Knowledge sharing for replication

In 2006, the project income amounted to US\$13,163, which was distributed following the formula agreed by the partners. The Buhoma Village Walk has directly improved the living conditions of the guides and site owners, and indirectly helped community members whose commodities/services are being purchased. The Batwas now have a source of income, earning US\$1,500 in 2006 thanks to the project. As a result, their access to medical care, schooling and other household purchases increased. The project has led to an improvement in the relationship between Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and the communities concerning the conservation of the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. The project has also enabled the communities in this eco-tourism zone to link an important source of income with the conservation of BINP.

The walk has been replicated at the Nkuringo gate in the BINP Kisoro district. Guides have gone there to give share their knowledge on site selection. Groups from the Queen Elizabeth National Park and the Kibale National Park also visited Buhoma and were fascinated at the simplicity of the walk and are now both in the process of establishing Walks of their own.

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The Buhoma Village Walk was the first community-based initiative to develop tourism in Uganda. It constitutes a reference for other communities living in areas where tourism could potentially be developed. Its attraction lies in its simplicity. With limited investment, the community has managed to offer a wide range of services and attract hundreds of tourists. In 2007, 1,789 tourists were recorded on the trails of the Buhoma village, generating US\$15,179 in revenue. Furthermore, the simplicity of the initiative has permitted the villagers to own their own project. Though external support played an important role initially, it has since become a sustainable project managed locally.

Photo: BMCT/ Ken Nicholson

*Traditional healer displaying
herbs used to treat different
illnesses*