

Over the past quarter century, the number of tourists in Africa has more than quadrupled, bringing around US\$17.9 billion in revenue to sub-Saharan African countries in 2005³⁵. Tanzanian, South African and Kenyan reserves are already well-known all over the world, attracting millions of tourists every year. Tourism could offer further economic opportunities in the region. A quarter of mammal species and a fifth of bird and plant species occur on the continent, with a large number of them endemic. The vitality of wildlife, the biodiversity, warm climate and cultural specificities constitute assets of significant value for African tourism.

However, if not well designed and managed, tourism development does not necessarily benefit all. Tourism may even disrupt the livelihoods on which communities rely – e.g., by restricting access to protected areas where they had traditionally gathered products needed for their daily lives. Furthermore, tourism sometimes has a negative effect on the environment and biodiversity. Its ecological footprint is significant as tourism requires energy, water and food consumption and is concentrated in biodiversity hotspots, where the variety of species is the highest.

Therefore, new practices have gradually emerged in Africa to reconcile tourism and sustainable development. These practices, sometimes labelled “ecotourism”, encompass a wide range of initiatives, from environmentally friendly infrastructure to micro-projects based on local community participation. The two following case studies illustrate the potential role of local community participation. The Tiwai Island in Sierra Leone demonstrates how tourists can be integrated in the traditional way of life of local communities and contribute to the preservation of the Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary. Hence, the Tiwai complex offers a unique combination of ecological, historical and health tourism experiences to national and international tourists. Its healing and fitness services will be based on both Sierra Leonean ethno-medical practices and allopathic medicine, while the accommodations will be made from locally available materials. A university outreach program for ecotourism hospitality training, an indigenous knowledge research and biodiversity monitoring centre, as well as an integrated Traditional Medicine/Allopathic facility offering cross-training internship opportunities for medical staff will be integrated in the complex.

The second case study, the Buhoma Village Walk in Uganda, shows how tourism can be initiated and owned by local communities themselves. In a Ugandan village named Buhoma, the local community, in association with the Uganda Wildlife Agency, has developed a high quality community tourism product for tourists who visit Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP). Incorporated in the village walk site is bird watching and a handicraft workshop to increase the variety of tourism activities offered in the area, while also providing members of the local community with an alternative source of income and contributing to the protection of the park.