

ECOTOURISM IN ETHIOPIA

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At the dawn of a new tourism era in Ethiopia, ecotourism is seen as one of the most lucrative niches, drawing in a number of stakeholders to develop and invest in it. There is no argument that in Ethiopia, imprisoned by chronic economic problems, yet rich with natural and cultural resources, ecotourism can assist in various problems from poverty alleviation to creating alternative livelihoods for rural communities, health and education (Chapman & Fikre, 2004; Williams, 2004).

Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent country, spreading over 1.13 million sq km (437,794 sq miles) home to some of the most spectacular sceneries and diverse cultures in the world. And yet, to most people outside of Africa, it is mainly known for the images of drought, famine and border wars with Eritrea (*ibid.*) that a lot of us get from major news channels and Bob Geldof type documentaries. With a population of over 73 million people, most of which live on less than one pound a day the country is in critical need for revenues from every possible source. Weaver (1998) points out that in recent years a lot of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) have placed high priority on tourism as means to achieve desired economic outcomes. However, whereas neighbouring Kenya had more than 1,130,000 arrivals in 2004, Ethiopia had just 186,000 in 2003 (WTO, 2005). Indeed the actual number may be closer to 70,000 as Addis Ababa is home to the Economic Commission of Africa (ECA), African Union (AU) and hundreds of local and foreign agencies and NGOs. The employers of these organisations travel frequently on missions and are visited by friends and family (VFR). Thus, rich in natural, cultural and historical resources, Ethiopia has not seen much of the regional share of tourism receipts. Already in 1996, Sagaye (1996) argued that tourism development could provide a solution to Ethiopia's dependency on coffee trade (50% of the country's export at the time). In the past 5 years a few successful tour operators and a handful of Ecolodges have emerged. As recently as Christmas 2005, a new national poverty reduction strategy (PASDEP) document was published, in which tourism was highlighted as one of the major sectors to be included in future donors' planned projects (MoFED, 2005).

Current major forms of tourism in Ethiopia involve the history tour namely Axum, Gondar and Lalibela; cultural tourism, the most famous example of which is tribe tourism in South Omo Valley and Nature tourism, mainly hiking in the Simian and Bale mountains.

There are currently three bases for ecotourism in Ethiopia:

- *The privately owned and managed Ecolodge* – these are owned and managed by a private investor or a tour operator, there is a partial employment of local community members, though not in management levels. There are various levels of economic benefits to host communities and different levels of social, cultural, and environmental conservation. The privately owned Ecolodges are all members of the Ecotourism Association of Ethiopia and are either tourism professionals or invest in ecotourism, which is a small part of their bigger business operations.

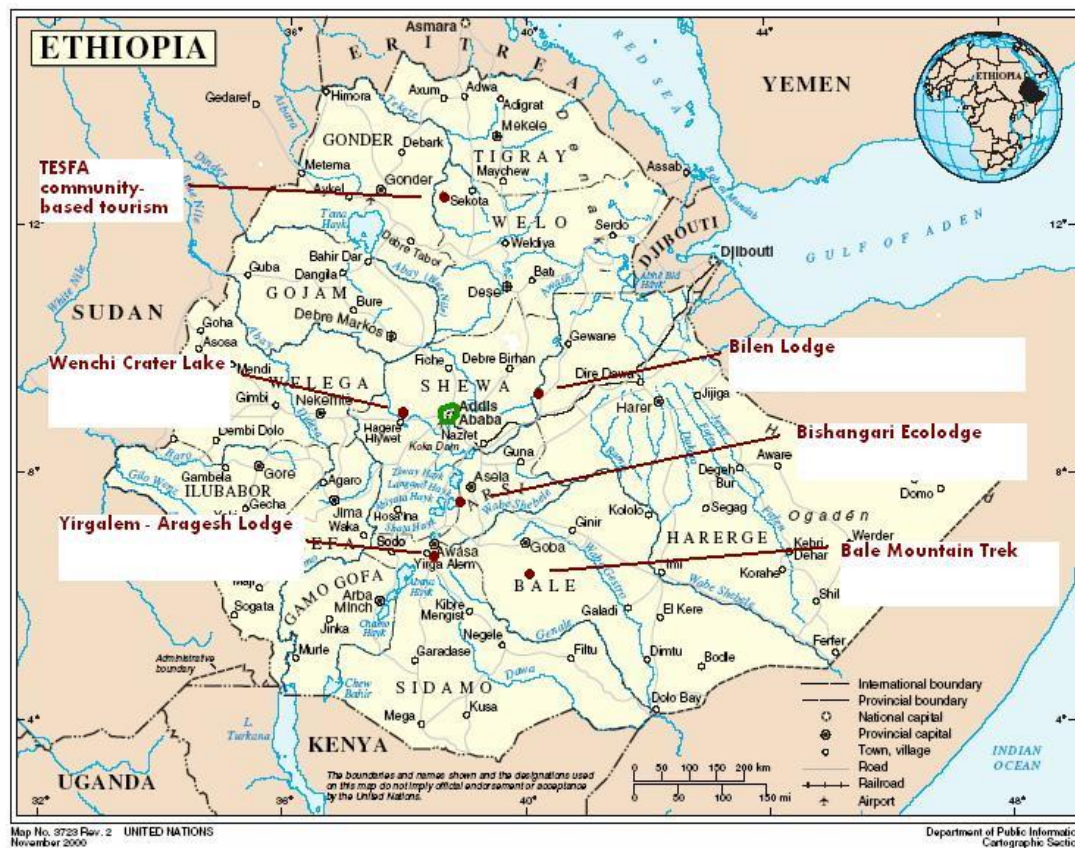
- *The community-organised, aid agency supported* – in some cases there was a private investor involvement in the past; currently organised and owned by the community with technical support (e.g. in financial management or marketing).

These projects are in different stages of development (from planning to exit stage) and different models are examined.

- *The community based and owned, supported by NGO* – here as well, different parts of the community own different parts of the project (e.g. accommodation, horse treks, etc.); and a small NGO, supported by several donors (embassies or bigger NGOs) helps with marketing, capacity building of management, tourism training, and so on.

Set against this background, the research aimed on defining the Ethiopian ecotourism paradigm and constructing a model of stakeholder collaboration that would be suitable for the current Ethiopian socioeconomic conditions. Also, to present and interpret the views of stakeholders interviewed and make recommendations which could be implemented in existing or future projects. Although ecotourism is normally a rural tourism activity and often nature based, most stakeholders and various people with interest in ecotourism in Ethiopia, are based in the capital Addis Abeba itself.

At the time of the research there were approximately 5 to 10 projects and businesses, which defined themselves as ecotouristic and had at least some ecotourism components. Also, at the time of the study there were another 10 to 20 ecotourism business/projects in different stages of development. The ecotourism projects researched were located all over the country (See figure below). All of the above destinations have management, ownership or some kind of marketing representation in Addis Abeba; thus, the Ethiopian capital was chosen as the study area.



Map 1, The red dots indicate locations of ecotourism projects in Ethiopia; where as the green circle, the capital Addis Ababa is where the research was conducted.

Key research conclusions include the following:

- There is a positive change from the previous “Wild West” situation. Most stakeholders acknowledge the need to work together in order to succeed, they also have ideologies and agendas that are closer to each other than to other ecotourism practitioners around the globe.
- Ethiopian communities do not currently have the capacity to develop or fully manage ecotourism business by themselves.
- Through collaborative ways of work, stakeholders can achieve ecotourism targets in the short term and in the long term enable community-based or community-organised ecotourism in Ethiopia.

- True sustainability in tourism can be achieved through government providing regulations and incentives; responsible private sector ownership and management of hospitality; non-profit sector supporting environmental and social parts of the business and building community capacity; community members participating in ecotourism development and slowly learning related skills.



Tukul (traditional housing) serving as reception at a Local Ecolodge

In addition the study recommended:

- The expansion of the activities of the Ecotourism Association of Ethiopia and opening it to people and organisations outside the private sector.
- The creation of regulatory frameworks for the development of ecotourism.
- The diversification of ecotourism activities

Most stakeholders are waiting for the newly established tourism ministry to be more powerful and more active in creating the much needed regulatory framework. Although, the current situation allows stakeholders relative freedom in their operations, it is an obstacle when it comes to development of sustainable ecotourism. The exception is the province of Oromia working locally on the development of ecotourism codes of conduct with the German technical corporation GTZ.

The last of these crucial prerequisites is diversification of types and levels of ecotourism practices. At the moment, most of the Ethiopian tourism market revolves around the country's history, culture and nature, and the relatively new Ecolodges are simply based in places of natural beauty. This large and beautiful country can and should have field schools and interpretation centers; coffee ecotourism; more established bird watching and other Rift Valley related ecotourism; more conservation programs as the Simian Fox UNDP initiative; and improvement of the country's national parks. Such variety can also include various types of stakeholders' interactions within the development culture of the country. Considering the current development stage of the rural

Ethiopian societies this dependency of host communities on outsiders and stakeholders on each other is necessary. Nevertheless, most people in Addis Ababa believe in the social evolution that is rapidly taking place in Ethiopia right now; therefore, in 15 to

20 years the findings of this research may change considerably.

However, the main ingredient is political stability. At the current instability much of the efforts spent on tourism development in Ethiopia are suspended; both development money and tourist revenue money have slowed down and in some cases completely stopped. The researcher's last visit to Ethiopia included staying in an Ecolodge with 20% hut occupancy, in the midst of the usually popular Christmas week!

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This article is derived from Mr Leshem's BSc (Honours) Ecotourism Degree dissertation on "Ecotourism Stakeholders Collaboration in Ethiopia" (June 2006) which won the prize for best dissertation in the Department for Environmental Management of the University of Central Lancashire, Preston UK. Prior to studying ecotourism, Mr Leshem worked and studied in various sectors of the tourism industry, in New Zealand, China, Poland and Israel, and as a consultant to an environmental NGO in Ethiopia, studying the potentials and constraints of establishing a community based ecotourism in two destinations near Addis Ababa. He can be reached at [asafleshem\[at\]gmail dot com](mailto:asafleshem@gmail.com).