

Eco-Lodges, a Future for Sustainable Tourism in Kenya

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism has been defined as the form of tourism which meets the needs of tourists, the tourism industry and host communities today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. As the scale of tourism grows through eco-lodge development, the resource use threatens to become unsustainable. With a degraded physical environment, the destination is in danger of losing its original attraction, increasing the levels of cheaper mass tourism and forcing more “nature-based” tourism to move on to new destinations, which are likely to be even more inaccessible and fragile. This study thus, sought to examine eco-lodge development, management principles and sustainable practices thereof in eco-lodges and the role of government in the development of eco-lodges for sustainable tourism. The study was conducted in selected eco-lodges in the Maasai Mara in Kenya. The respondents were 52, comprising of Managers of the selected eco-lodges, employees and selected key informants. Most of the data was collected by way of Questionnaires, personally administered to ensure clarification is offered where necessary. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies and averages) and by data presentation on tables. The findings acknowledged that eco-lodges contribute to overall sustainable tourism development and conservation by raising awareness among local communities, stakeholder groups and government officials, and changing public attitudes toward conservation. Efforts to preserve and enhance the natural environment should therefore be a high priority for the industry and for governments. It noted that with a growing standing in the world economy the tourism industry has “a moral responsibility in making the transition to sustainable development. Establishing partnerships with local communities is being increasingly recognized as necessary for sustainable tourism. Responsible tourism is the job of everyone involved– governments, local authorities, the tourist industry and tourists themselves.

Key word: Sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism has been defined as the form of tourism which meets the needs of tourists, the tourism industry and host communities today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. As the scale of tourism grows through eco-lodge development, the resource use threatens to become unsustainable. With a degraded physical environment, the destination is in danger of losing its original attraction, increasing the levels of cheaper mass tourism and forcing more “nature-based” tourism to move on to new destinations, which are likely to be even more inaccessible and fragile. This study thus, sought to examine eco-lodge development, management principles and sustainable practices thereof in eco-lodges and the role of government in the development of eco-lodges for sustainable tourism. The results achieved will be useful to the government and the travel and tourism industry in the development of more sustainable strategies in the tourism sector both for present and future generations, while at the same time retaining the country’s economic viability in tourism and hospitality through eco-lodge development, management and practices put forth.

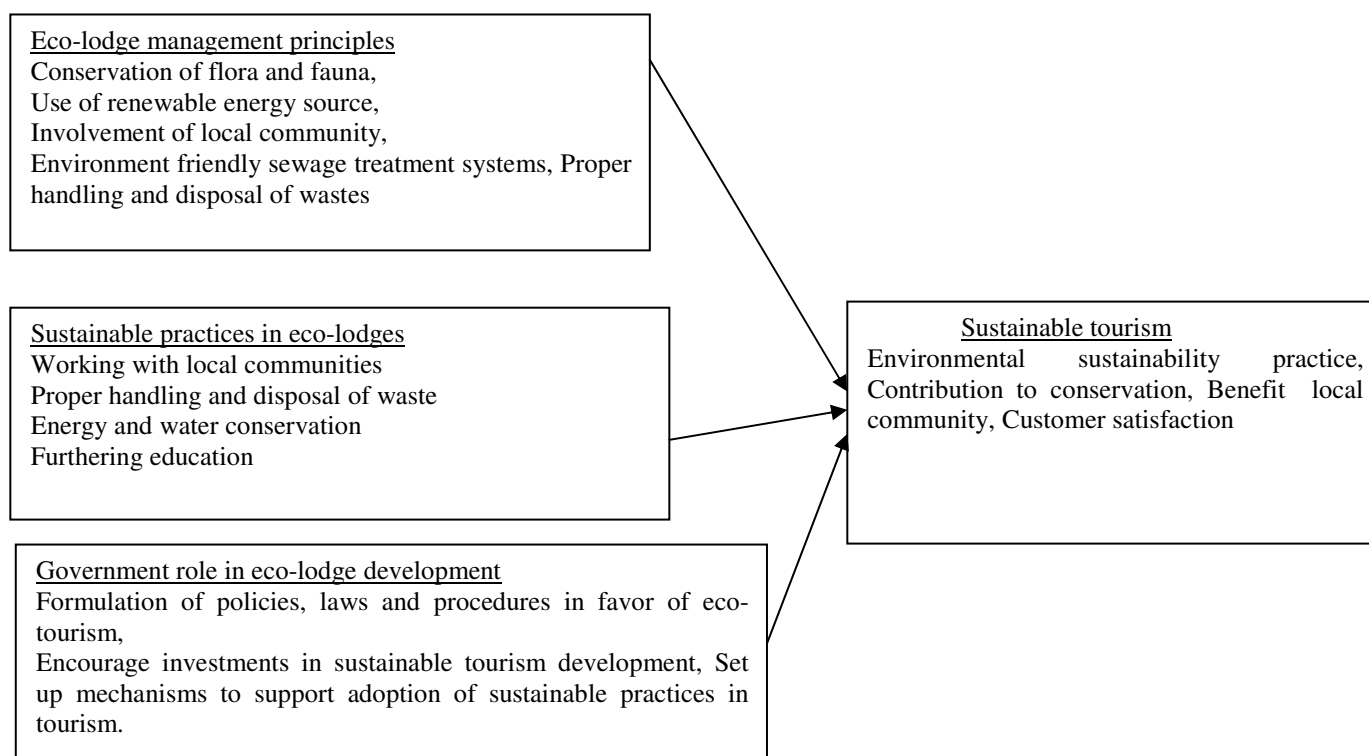
In the wake of a major tourism development, there is again a focus on developing strategies for more sustainable facilities that support ‘low-impact nature-based tourism’. Environmental setting is the single, most important factor, and contributes to overall attractiveness and relates directly to consumer satisfaction’ (Crawford, 2000). Furthermore, there is need for ‘tourism which leads to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems’. The findings acknowledged that eco-lodges contribute to overall sustainable tourism development and conservation by raising awareness among local communities, stakeholder groups and government officials, and changing public attitudes toward conservation. Efforts to preserve and enhance the natural environment should therefore be a high priority for the industry and for governments. It noted that with a growing standing in the world economy the tourism industry has “a moral responsibility in making the transition to sustainable development. Establishing partnerships with local communities is being increasingly recognized as necessary for sustainable tourism. Responsible tourism is the job of everyone

involved– governments, local authorities, the tourist industry and tourists themselves.

2. Conceptual Framework Illustrating Eco-Lodges Development Principles, Measures and Practices for Sustainable Tourism

Looking at the concept of sustainable tourism, three sets of variables were used to establish the role of eco-lodges in the development of sustainable tourism namely: eco-lodge management principles, practices and the role of the government. Sustainable tourism involves several factors. The chosen set of variables helped assess the development of sustainable tourism as shown in the diagram below (Figure 1):

Figure 1



(Source: Author’s Review of Literature, 2010)

3. Methodology

A 5-point Likert-type scale, described by ‘strongly agree’ (= 5) and ‘strongly disagree’ (= 1) was used by the researchers to measure the three constructs, as follows:

3.1 The concept of Sustainable Tourism and Eco-lodges

The researchers used four variables to describe sustainable tourism: adoption of sustainable practices, contribution to environmental conservation, benefiting the local community and promoting customer satisfaction. These factors were obtained from researchers’ literature review on sustainable tourism and eco-lodges.

3.2 Sustainable Practices in Eco-lodges

The researchers used four variables to describe sustainable practices in eco-lodges: proper waste handling and disposal, energy and water conservation, working with local communities and ensuring minimal environmental impact.

3.3 The Role of the Government in the Development of Sustainable Tourism

The researchers used three variables to describe the role of the government in the development of sustainable tourism: Formulation of policies, laws and procedures in favor of eco-tourism, encouragement of investments in sustainable tourism development, setting up of mechanisms to support adoption of sustainable practices in tourism. The items related to what the respondents' view as the role of the government in sustainable tourism development.

4. Findings

The researchers noted that there existed a positive relationship between sustainable tourism(Y) and all the three independent variables. The sample of eco-lodes and employees selected by the researchers for this study was assumed to be representative of the population of eco-lodges and employees in Maasai Mara and therefore this argument applies to all of them. Based on discussions, sustainable development recognizes the interdependence of environmental, social and economic systems and promotes a sense of global citizenship. 'Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, and biological diversity and life support systems.

The issue of sustainable tourism development can be easily understood by the employees in eco-lodges as they are educated. This can be achieved greatly through awareness in form of training and educating the employees on the concept of sustainable tourism. On the adoption of eco-lodge management principles, eco-lodges have mostly adopted the principles of environmental friendly sewage treatment systems (44%), proper waste disposal (29%) and conservation of flora and fauna (28%). This can be attributed to the fact that they understand sustainable tourism development in the context of environmental conservation and protection. It is clear however that the involvement of local communities (3%) in the management of eco-lodges has not been adopted, yet this is equally an important principle in the management of eco-lodges for sustainability.

The findings of the study show that eco-lodges majorly engage in some practices more than others. For example, the eco-lodges handle their waste properly. Other adopted practices include minimal environmental impact through minimal interference with the natural habitat of wildlife. Shrubs, bushes and trees which form habitats for some wildlife are not cleared nor cut even if found within the eco-lodges. The eco-lodges are still working on modalities to conserve water by reduction of its consumption. In order to conserve the environment, the eco-lodges involve the local communities in activities such as tree planting and environmental cleaning on a regular basis. However utilization of renewable energy like solar energy has been adapted to a lesser extent, maybe because the eco-lodges have not realized this is a move towards sustainability. Electricity is still being used to supply energy by a good percentage instead of purely renewable energy. This is indicated by utilization of solar energy (57%), electricity (33%) and other energy sources such as biogas by 7%. This calls for eco-lodges to adopt renewable energy sources in their operations if sustainable tourism development is to be realized

The eco-lodges seemingly do not involve the locals in the decision making process which is very crucial in the debate of sustainability despite employing the locals. If the locals are involved in decision making, they will embrace further development of the eco-lodges and contribute further to the success of these organizations. Governments have the greatest potential to delimit tourism in the sense of promotion, planning, management and regulation, since it is the only actor that can provide long term planning and management through legislation and juridical protection of natural protected areas. Its ability to enforce environmental regulation sets the framework and therefore can assists in minimizing the negative impacts in Ecotourism practices. Government policy and planning should be based in the management of the proper guidelines and standards (Wearing, 1999:24). The government should also encourage the use of natural resources in a manner to preserve the resources for future generations and create awareness on the need for sustainable tourism development.

5. Conclusion

Eco-lodges contribute to overall sustainable tourism development and conservation by raising awareness among local communities, stakeholder groups and government officials, and changing public attitudes toward

conservation. The natural environment is an important resource for tourism. With increasing urbanization, destinations in both industrialized and developing countries with significant natural features, scenery, cultural heritage or biodiversity are becoming increasingly popular sites for tourist destinations. Efforts to preserve and enhance the natural environment should therefore be a high priority for the industry and for governments. It noted that with a growing standing in the world economy the tourism industry has “a moral responsibility in making the transition to sustainable development. Establishing partnerships with local communities is being increasingly recognized as necessary for sustainable tourism.

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