

Tourism in Rwenzori attracted 300,000 tourists last year

By Martin Kitubi

Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has revealed that the number of tourists in the Rwenzori sub-region rose from 250,000 in 2016 to about 320,000 in 2017, following interventions by the different security organs in the country.

Of these, 82,000 tourists visited Queen Elizabeth National Park, 13,000 to Semuliki National Park and 37,000 mountain climbers among others.

Rwenzori sub-region has several tourism destinations in the country, which include the Kazinga Channel, and hot springs known for both flora and fauna.

In 2016, political turmoil in Rwenzori sub-region ranging from tribal conflicts between the Bamba and the Bakonzo, the killing of security officers and fights between security forces and cultural institutions, dragged down tourism potentials in the area.

Yesterday, Stephen Sanyi Masaba the director of tourism and business services at UWA while addressing the press said: "The sub-region is stable and we are urging Ugandans and foreign tourists to visit the different tourism activities in the area."

During the same press conference at Uganda Media Centre, Stephen Asiimwe, the chief executive officer of Uganda Tourism Board, attributed the growing numbers to the different security mechanisms put in place by the Government to counter any further instability.

"We have over 1,000 tourism Police officers in the country and these are strategically located at restaurants, accommodation areas and highways to protect tourists," Asiimwe said.

The security detail at different tourism sights includes game rangers, military and Counter Terrorism Police, with a backup of the army.

Tourism has emerged as Uganda's foreign exchange earner bringing in sh7.3b in the financial year 2015/2016, employing over 450,000 in hotels as well as transporters, guides, managers, and contributing about 10% of the GDP.

Mountain climber honoured

At the same event, the Government honoured Ravichandran Tharumalingam, a Malaysian mountaineer who spent eight days



UTB CEO Stephen Asiimwe (right), Ambassador Dorothy Hyuha and the chief guide Rwenzori Trekking Services Enoch Bwambale (left) handing over a certificate to mountain climber Rovichandran Tharumalingam during the press conference at Uganda Media Centre yesterday. Photo by Godiver Asege

Asiimwe told journalists that the Government has signed agreements with international media like National Geographic Channel, CNN and BBC travel shows and the *New York Times*, all intended to promote tourism.

"We will continue to use our foreign missions to contact foreign prominent figures to serve as tourism ambassadors," he added.

MARKETING TOURISM

climbing the Rwenzoris (Mountains of the Moon) up to Mt Stanley's Margherita Peak.

Tharumalingam said he picked interest in the Rwenzori challenge after meeting Ambassador Dorothy Hyuha

Uganda's envoy to Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur.

"I have climbed many mountains including Kenya and Kilimanjaro, but none compares to what confronts you when you climb the Rwenzori mountains."

"I appeal to the stakeholders to improve the facilities, infrastructure in the Rwenzori sub-region. Otherwise the poor conditions of the hotels and access roads would discourage tourists from visiting Uganda," Tharumalingam said.

He also urged the Government to emphasize local tourism, adding: "I did not see Ugandan tourists climbing the mountain. The place was full of Kenyans and South Africans. You can't rely on foreign tourists alone to boost tourism."

Hyuha who expressed happiness at Tharumalingam's successful expedition, revealed that, she worked with Malaysian organisations to identify a high-profile individual into promote

"The mission will use diplomacy to bring economic benefits to the country, and tourism is one of the ventures through which the country will tap those benefits," Hyuha said.

New developments

Meanwhile, the Government is set to introduce the Rwenzori Mountain Marketing Strategy, a move intended to boost tourism in the region with more emphasis on mountain climbing.

According to Masaba, a sh2b annual budget will be allocated to UWA and other tourism organs for sales promotion, marketing, infrastructure development among others.

"Mountain climbing alone can attract over 100,000 tourists annually, but it standards at 3,700 and 4,500 tourists for both Rwenzori and Elgon mountains," he explained.

UTB and UWA are set to deploy both local foreign mountaineering ambassadors a move intended to promote the activity in several parts of