



KADDU SEBUNYA > TOURISM

Uganda must avoid mistakes if we are to reap big from rich tourist attractions

A month ago, President Museveni hosted global tourism investors and operators to showcase investment opportunities in the country's protected areas. He invited tourism operators, investors and donors to help develop national parks and reserves in a way that catalyses economic growth and plows revenue back to the management and conservation of protected areas.

Uganda is one of the most bio-diverse countries on the planet and ranks second among all African countries in term of its biodiversity. It supports more than 50 per cent of the critically endangered mountain gorillas, important populations of chimpanzee, lion and elephant and more than 1,200 birds.

These natural assets create unique and unparalleled tourism opportunities.

In Murchison Falls National Park, for example, one can view lions and elephants in scenic savannah landscapes, boat the Nile and visit the awe inspiring falls and within a short drive, visit chimpanzee in Budongo Forest. Nowhere else in the world can a tourist combine these vistas, wildlife and experiences.

One can string together a tourism circuit that includes a hike up the volcanic and snow-capped peaks in the Rwenzori Mountains and peer into the Democratic Republic of Congo, trek and watch chimpanzee in Kibale National Park and then visit the

mountain gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

The Lonely Planet rightly describes Uganda as "basically the best of everything the continent has to offer."

From Kidepo to Queen Elizabeth to Tooro Semiliki - there is no doubt, our parks are world class; they are unique and the opportunities endless. However, as tourism operators and investors look at opportunities in Uganda, the key question we need to ask ourselves as Ugandans is, how will we distinguish ourselves as a country in tourism development? How will we develop our parks in a way that ensures their long-term sustainability? How will we design tourism so as to maintain the uniqueness?

Tourism can support conservation, but it must be designed properly in order to ensure revenue is used to support conservation and visitations do not result in a negative impact. We have a very clear choice and this requires careful planning, zoning and design by the Government of Uganda.

In some parks in Botswana, for example, tourists are willing to pay high prices because the country has created a niche, high end wildlife-based tourism product. In some parts of Kenya, for example, tourists are now paying less money per night than 10 years ago because the product has been cheapened by too many lodges, ve-

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Way to go. The government needs to invest time and resources in proper planning to ensure high quality tourism. I am not suggesting that it should all be high end, but I am urging the government to plan properly. If we want to attract some of the best tourism operators, they will demand the same. We also need to create the right incentives by providing good infrastructure, etc.

hicles and visitors. What kind of product do we want in Uganda?

Some of Africa's parks are so over-developed that wildlife viewing has become a competitive sport between vehicle operators jockeying to see certain species. Lions surrounded by more than 20 vehicles is not uncommon, not sustainable and not enjoyable for visitors. In some parks in Africa, tourists wait in a traffic jam for more than an hour in the morning at the gate to enter the park because the product has not been well designed. These are not places tourists will return to, and in the age of Trip Advisor and other trip review portals, it will dissuade others from visiting.

Uganda should not make the same mistake other countries have made by not clearly envisioning the tourism product it wants. The government needs to invest time and resources in proper planning to ensure high quality tourism. I am not suggesting that it should all be high end, but I am urging the government to plan properly. If we want to attract some of the best tourism operators, they will demand the same.

We also need to create the right incentives by providing good infrastructure, easy access in the country, financial incentives for operators, who invest in protected area management, and penalties for operators who are not fulfilling contracts or upholding the high standards we should demand in Uganda.

We have the opportunity to ensure that our parks continue to thrive in a way that protects our natural heritage and supports a world-class tourism experience. Tourism contributes nearly \$1 billion to Uganda's GDP, making it the country's second largest export. In 2011, we welcomed more than a million visitors and trips to protected areas are steadily increasing.

The revenue this brings to our country can continue to increase and enhance development in the country if we have a clear vision for the future of Uganda that includes smart development, solid conservation management, responsible investment and partners and the protection of our natural assets. Together, we can make Uganda the most sought after tourism destination.

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