

REINVESTED: As a result of gorilla tourism, more than Shs900m is reinvested in development projects in communities that live around Bwindi and Mgahinga national parks.

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Gorilla tourism spurs growth in Kigezi region

Mountain gorilla tourism has not only contributed huge sums of money to the national economy, it has immensely sparked development in the Kigezi sub-region.

More than 18,000 gorilla permits are sold annually, which translates into an annual collection of more Shs38b. Each permit costs Shs2.16m (\$600). According to John Justice Tibesigwa, the Bwindi and Mgahinga National Park acting conservation area manager, mountain gorilla tourism started in 1961 when the area was still a sanctuary.

In 1991, it was strengthened and was later, in 1994, recognised as a heritage site.

Tourism, Tibesigwa says, has not only benefited government but enabled Uganda Wildlife Authority to contribute Shs900m annually to communities around Bwindi-Mgahinga for development projects.

The Bwindi-Mgahinga area has more than 14 gorilla groups and only eight tourists are allowed to visit a gorilla group per day.

Available data indicate that the Bwindi-Mgahinga area has half the world's population of mountain gorilla.

This, as a result, has attracted tourists in the area and has had a spillover effect in terms of service development, especially in hotel and hospitality and the transport sector.

Source of employment

More than 100 hotels and camp sites have been established and provide employment to more than 10,000 people.

Hotels such as Accadia Cottages, Bunyonyi Overland Resort Camp, Entusi, Bushara and Sharp Island Gorilla Lodge, among others are a good addition to the Kigezi tourism.

In the transport sector, an airstrip has been established in Kihiihi, Kanungu District and another is under construction in Rubanda District. The two will be an addition to the already existing Kisoro Airfield.

"Tarmacking Kabale-Kisoro road has also facilitated development. However, government should improve internet connectivity, provide electricity, especially in the national parks," Ivan Mbabazi Batuma, a member of the Kigezi Tourism Cluster, says.

Other tourism features such as Lake Bunyonyi, Mt Muhavura, and Queen Elizabeth National Park, Batuma says, should be promoted to create alternatives as well as establishing a special desk at border points to handle tourists.

Nicholas Byengoma, the vice chairperson of the Kigezi Tourism Cluster, says whereas government has injected money into the tourism sector, more needs to be done.



"Encourage the establishment of domestic air transport to ease movement, especially for tourists visiting different destinations," he says.

Tourism, as already stated, employs more than 10,000 people in the Kigezi sub-region and this, according to Seith Byarugaba, an investor in accommodation, is a big achievement that government should leverage on.

"There is need to habituate other animal species such as chimpanzees, red monkey and birds to diversify," he says.

Government, Fideli Kanyamunyu, the director of Wagtail Tourism Investments in Kisoro District, believes should return much more to local communities instead of the current 20 per cent.

"... giving us only 20 per cent of the entrance fees, which is only \$40 out of the \$600 should be revised," he says and appeals to government to consider giving soft loans to community members to improve the quality of their products.

But beyond looking at government, Akankwasa Barirega, the acting commissioner for Wildlife Conservation at the Ministry of Tourism, advises local communities and members in the Kigezi Tourism Cluster to be more innovative, especially in regard to creating tourism amenities.

For instance, he says, people should think of establishing facilities such as house boats on Lake Bunyonyi, zip lines crossing the interlocking hills, cable cars on Mt Muhavura and hot air balloons, among others.

"You earn a lot because there is a ready market [tourists]," he says.

Silver Baguma, the vice chairperson of Rubanda District, thinks that stakeholders meetings such as the one held recently, provide good engagement.

However, he argues, for employment opportunities, residents must be considered as the first priority.

900m

THE AMOUNT OF MONEY IN
SHILLINGS THAT IS GIVEN TO
COMMUNITIES AROUND BWINDI-
MGAHINGA FOR INVESTMENT