

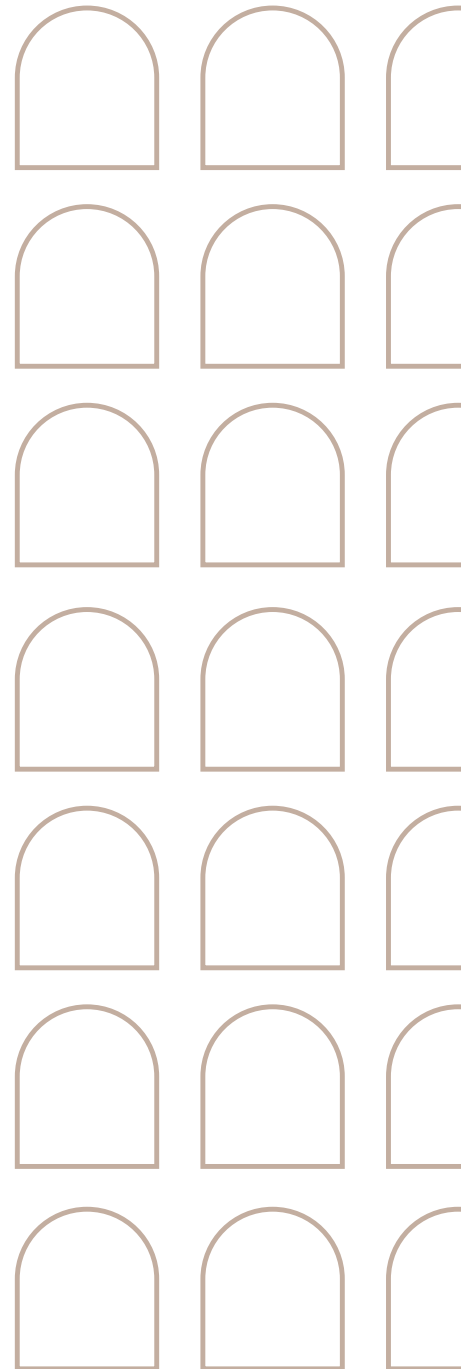
STG Policy Papers

# POLICY BRIEF

## ECOTOURISM AS A TOOL TO CONSERVE BIODIVERSITY IN THE DR CONGO, CAMEROON AND GABON

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the highest extreme poverty rate<sup>1</sup> (54%) on the continent, [biodiversity degradation](#) is being aggravated in Central Africa. This is mainly due to a growing population lacking job opportunities outside the forest. The lack of jobs leads communities near protected areas to organise poaching and trafficking of wildlife. With weak and non-diversified economies, central African countries are experiencing financial difficulties in sustaining conservation in the Congo Basin Forest.

Ecotourism has become an important economic activity. It generates jobs for local communities and funds conservation of biodiversity in developing countries. Kenya, Uganda, Botswana and recently Rwanda are great examples of what ecotourism can do for conservation and economic development. According to a recent EU publication<sup>2</sup>, visits to protected areas generate significant revenue for proper management including providing the financial capacity to sustain anti-poaching efforts.

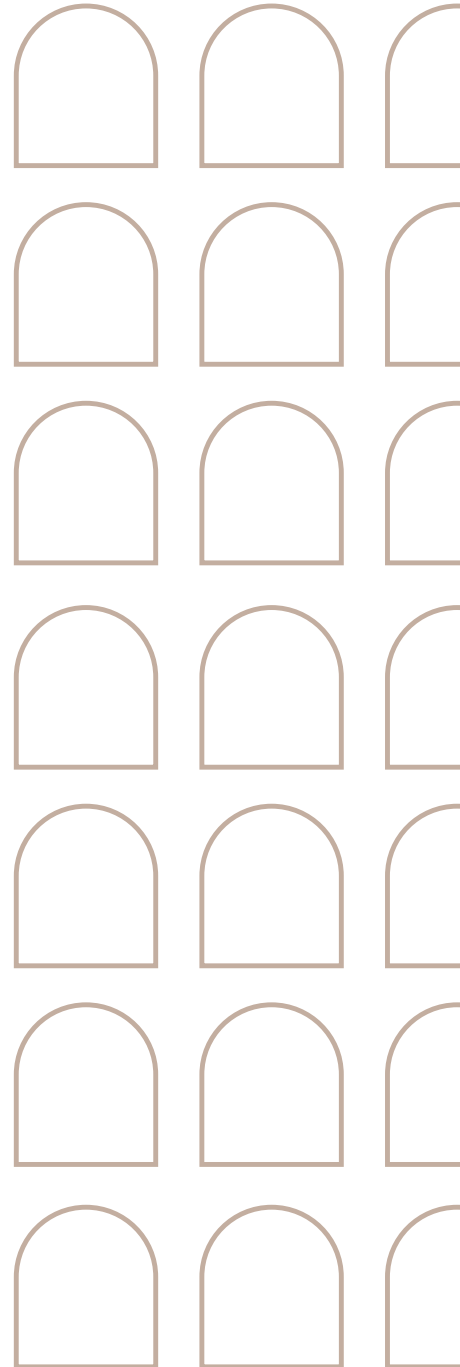
This paper first argues that boosting ecotourism in the DR Congo, Cameroon, and Gabon with visits to protected areas would generate meaningful revenue for proper biodiversity management and conservation, including providing the financial capacity to slow deforestation and sustain anti-poaching efforts. Second, the paper documents how ecotourism would lead to economic development boosting the GDP of countries involved and diversifying their extractive economies. In addition, the paper draws a line by highlighting the fact that not all forms of tourism lead to conservation of biodiversity. This is because tourism activities in one way or another can have negative impacts on the environment, contributing to changes in land cover and land use, energy use, biotic interchange and the extinction of wild species.

<sup>1</sup> ISS (13 July 2022). Africa is losing the battle against extreme poverty. Retrieved from ISS Africa at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-is-losing-the-battle-against-extreme-poverty>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2021). Tourism and visitation to protected areas amid COVID-19. Brussels: European Commission, Directorate of International Partnership.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Home to much of the Congo Basin Forest, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and Cameroon together constitute one of the most important reservoirs of biodiversity, which contributes enormously to maintaining the global balance of ecosystems. However, these countries face a difficult choice between economic development of their people and conservation of their forests.

The aim of this policy brief is to provide the abovementioned countries with an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone by leveraging ecotourism to both promote the economic development of their people and support conservation of biodiversity.

## 2. CHALLENGES TO PROPER CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

Some of the barriers to proper conservation of biodiversity are listed below.

### 2.1 Sustainable development: the balance between conservation and economic development

Development remains both an aim and a challenge faced by humanity. African countries with a pressing need to bring millions of their people out of extreme poverty are constantly balancing conservation of biodiversity and economic development. Their economic development is being hindered by climate change, which could undo even the little progress they have achieved so far.

With the [highest extreme poverty rate](#) (54%) on the continent, degradation of biodiversity generally speaking and deforestation in particular are being aggravated in Central Africa. Some countries are prioritising economic development at the expenses of conservation of biodiversity to advance the wellbeing of their people. This is severely threatening the survival of some of the forest and its biodiversity.

### 2.2 The global north's failed commitment to climate financing

In the Rio Declaration<sup>3</sup>, developed countries committed to take the lead in conserving, protecting and restoring the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. This was with reference to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities.

While the global north put emphasis on the need for developing countries to conserve biodiversity as a pathway to avoid climate disaster, these same states have failed in their commitment to [mobilise USD 100 billion](#) a year for climate actions in developing countries. The fragility of the economies on the continent, the aggravating effects of climate change and the green premium<sup>4</sup> for Africa to clean its way to development is leading to unsustainable development practices resulting in destruction of the environmental ecosystem. Out of frustration, we are now seeing countries like the DR Congo [auctioning 30 oil and gas blocks](#), opening parts of the world's second-biggest rainforest and peat lands to drilling.

### 2.3 Communities' lack of environmental and ecotourism awareness

Despite ongoing efforts to create global awareness of the importance of protecting and preserving the Congolese Tropical Rainforest, many of the [75,000,000 people](#) living in and around the Congo Basin still lack access to environmental information. However, the future of the forest in the Congo Basin relies on them.

As the saying goes, you cannot mobilise a community for a war they are ignorant about. Therefore, access to environmental information in general and awareness of the potential of leveraging ecotourism for economic development are important. In the DR Congo, for example, climate change is not often discussed, even in schools. It is not a topic of conversation; it is instead only an institutional topic.

### 2.4 The lack of job opportunities outside the forest

The exponential increase in the population in rural areas has led to the ever-growing popula-

3 United Nations (3-14 June 1993). Report of the United Nations conference on environment and development. Retrieved from the UN at [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_CONF.151\\_26\\_Vol.I\\_Declaration.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf)

4 Bill Gates (29 September 2020). Introducing the Green Premiums. Retrieved from Gatesnotes at <https://www.gatesnotes.com/Introducing-the-Green-Premiums>

tion lacking job opportunities outside the forest. Young people and rural families have no option other than low productivity agriculture involving collecting the forest's many products such as wood, food, fuel, minerals, materials and medicines.<sup>5</sup> Most of these people are ready to engage in alternative activities as soon as any plausible better option emerges.

The lack of job opportunities leads some communities near protected areas in Central Africa to organise poaching and trafficking of wildlife. Diversifying the economy and supporting smart forest development<sup>6</sup> could be an appropriate response to this.

### 3. ECOTOURISM CONSERVATION SUCCESSES

Ecotourism is defined as environmentally responsible visits to unspoilt natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature, promote conservation and provide the local population with socio-economic benefits. Ecotourism links conservation of biodiversity, local communities and sustainable travel.

Not all types of tourism are inherently beneficial to the environment. Mass tourism activities can have negative impacts on the environment, contributing to changes in land cover and land use, energy use, biotic interchange and the extinction of wild species. However, well-planned sustainably designed tourism can be used to promote the conservation of natural areas. Below are some examples of ecotourism successes.

#### 3.1 The case of Rwanda

For several years, Rwanda's image has been dominated by its sad past characterised by the genocide that took place in 1994. In 2009, however, with its Rwanda tourism policy, the country's government unveiled its vision to become a leading wildlife and eco-tourism destination and a regional conference hub. Below are some of the steps the country has taken.

- Infrastructure development. Through pub-

lic-private partnerships, the government has created infrastructure (roads, hotels, airports...) to facilitate tourism in the country.

- Marketing the country as a touristic destination. One of Rwanda's successful marketing strategies has been signing tourism promotion deals with English and French soccer clubs (Arsenal and PSG).
- Capacity building. Consistent skill development in the tourism value chain has created a skilled workforce and added jobs at all levels in the tourism industry.
- Controlling the flux of visitors. The overall Rwanda's tourism strategic vision was to focus on high-end eco-tourism rather than mass tourism. In 2010, only 17,000 permits were sold for gorilla tourism despite a far higher demand.<sup>7</sup>
- Environmental sustainability. The country's tourism strategy defined clear actions to avoid the damage that mass tourism could do to the ecosystem.
- Investment and financing. With a regulatory framework the country has developed incentives and a financial architecture that supports investment in the tourism industry.
- Revenue-sharing. 5 percent of tourism revenue from park fees are injected into local community projects near national parks. This has led the local people to see the impact of conservation in their own lives and become conservation agents themselves.

As a result, from being an inexistent sector in the early 2000s, tourism and the hospitality sector has now become one of the key drivers of Rwanda's economic growth. Revenue from tourism has grown by more than 200% from USD 209 million in 2008 to USD 445 million in 2022. Tourism is now the biggest employer of women and young people, employing a total of 164,000 people. During the last ten years, in the famous Kwita Izina celebration, Rwanda

5 Patrice Levang, Edmond Dounias and Soadoun Sitorus (2003). Out of the forest, out of poverty? Rural livelihoods, forests and biodiversity. Bonn, Germany

6 Isabella Hallberg, Elsa Reimerson, Janina Priebe, Eva-Maria Nordström, Erland Mårald, Camilla Sandström and Annika Nordin (2022). Bringing "Climate-Smart Forestry" down to the local level – identifying barriers, pathways and indicators for its implementation in practice. Forests, 1-22.

7 Hannah Nielsen and Anna Spenceley (2010). The success of tourism in Rwanda – Gorillas and more. ResearchGate.

has named [350 newborn gorillas](#) during the last 15 years, accounting for around 30% of the mountain gorillas born during the same period. The number of existing mountain gorillas has gone from 200 in 2010 to more than 1000 in the Virunga Transboundary Park.

The revival of gorilla tourism demonstrates that with the right strategy and instruments a post-conflict country can successfully focus on high-end tourism, thus creating a funding avenue for conservation and contributing to poverty reduction with the involvement of communities as a priority.

### 3.2 The case of Botswana

Botswana's wildlife is regarded as some of the best, if not the best, in Africa, in terms of both variety and numbers. In 1990, the government published its Tourism Policy, which highlighted the role of tourism in diversifying the economy from reliance on diamond mining. Wildlife and wilderness are Botswana's outstanding tourism assets.

The Botswana policy framework had four main pillars.

1. Ecological/economic sustainability. Being aware that if not properly planned and controlled tourism tends to destroy natural assets, one of the policy's strategies was to control the numbers of visitors by promoting an influx of high-spending travellers.<sup>8</sup>
2. Public-private partnership. In 2009, the Botswana Tourism Organisation was created to promote and implement policies with an emphasis on boosting public-private partnerships.
3. Community participation and empowerment. A [National Ecotourism Strategy](#) was set in place with a focus to minimise the negative impacts tourism could have on the society and culture. It emphasised the importance of involving local communities so that they could partake in the economic benefits of tourism.
4. Product diversification. The 1990 tourism policy provided guidelines to include cul-

tural tourism, business and conferencing tourism as a way to diversify the country's tourism product offering.

As a result, the tourism industry in Botswana is a large source of employment, especially for rural communities, and it is the second largest source of government revenue. In 2018, Botswana's tourism revenue was USD [575 million](#), up from USD [177 million](#) in 1995. The introduction of ecotourism led to a decrease in poaching incidents in the Okavango Delta in comparison to non-ecotourism areas. Local attitudes to wildlife conservation have also been changed as a result of the nation's prioritisation of ecotourism with local communities supporting conservation. The country has attained its goal of diversifying its economy from over-relying on diamonds. Ecotourism is now the second biggest contributor to government revenue, contributing up to 25%.

## 4. POTENTIAL ACTIONS TO BOOST ECOTOURISM FOR CONSERVATION IN THE DR CONGO, GABON AND CAMEROON

Below are a set of actions which should be taken to leverage policies to boost ecotourism for conservation and economic development.

### 4.1 Infrastructure development

It is undeniable that tourism infrastructure directly impacts the tourism sector as a whole. In Rwanda, for example, roads have opened up the region by providing access to its tourist sites. An international airport served by a strong national airline has opened the country to all corners of the planet.

A comprehensive tourism investment plan should be established with the overall aim of making destinations and services increasingly attractive. The plan should accommodate public-private partnerships to attract funding from the private sector and some foreign direct investment. For this to happen, a set of policies incentivising investment in tourism infrastructure should be put in place.

8 Madeline Beyer (2020). The Rise of Ecotourism in Botswana. Washington, DC: The Uplifting Africa Program.

A potential challenge to this policy recommendation could be corruption. Many African countries fail to pay back infrastructure debt to international lending institutions (IMF, BIRD...) and/or fall into a debt trap with China because of corruption. In some cases, the money received to build infrastructure is embezzled with no infrastructure built. In others, revenue streams generated from built infrastructure which were intended to pay back the debt are misappropriated by government officials. To succeed in anti-corruption endeavours, Rwanda and Botswana have established specialised anti-corruption agencies to combat both corruption and economic crimes.

#### 4.2 Training and education

A major constraint on the development of ecotourism is the quality of tourism services. Lack of professionalism and tourism knowledge leads to poor service quality hindering the tourism sector. In a quest to boost ecotourism, the countries involved should strive to educate and train enough personnel to meet the needs of the sector at all levels and in all regions, even in rural areas and for all occupations.

An integrated tourism education and workforce development strategy should be put in place. The strategy should involve cooperation and/or coordination between various ministries in the government. Training courses should offer comprehensive preparation to educate and train enough of personnel to meet the needs of the sector at all levels: low, middle and high. This will allow the countries involved to make sure that the airport, conference facilities, and attractions provide quality services offered by trained and competent locals at all levels of the tourism value chain, from wage earners to high-paying jobs. Countries should not over-rely on expatriates, as in the cases of Botswana and Rwanda.

The potential problem with this recommendation is that if tourism is not seen as a priority by the government, not enough funding could be availed to create a curriculum, build the capacity of teachers and promote vocational schools that are necessary to create personnel with employable skills at all levels in the tour-

ism value chain.

#### 4.3 Environmental and tourism awareness

Environmental awareness is still very low in the DR Congo, Gabon and Cameroon, yet conservation of the rich biodiversity in the Congo Basin Forest will heavily depend on the 75 million people who use the forest daily. Rural communities should be sensitised to climate change and environmental protection. Rwanda has been doing this using the Kwita Izina celebration. It is an annual gorilla-naming ceremony which gathers more than 40,000 local people and visitors from around the world. The ceremony is combined with a series of activities ranging from conservation, business, culture and entertainment. It is coupled with the launch and/or inauguration of a set of projects (schools, hospitals...) funded by revenue from tourism to show residents how tourism is positively affecting them.

Awareness should go beyond those working in tourism. It should reach everyone in communities from immigration officers to the police, army officials and public servants. This is because when visiting a country visitors meet different categories of people, who may act wrongly if they are not sensitised about what tourism could represent for the country.

Additionally, the concepts of the environment and conservation of nature must be emphasised in a particular way in the basic school curriculum so that young schoolchildren, the leaders of tomorrow, are trained to participate actively in the management of the environment and to protect nature. [Programme Utalii Kwetu](#) is a pilot being carried out in 25 schools around Virunga National Park in which children are sensitised to ecotourism and nature conservation, and they also go on learning expeditions to explore protected areas. Awareness from an early age will shift the perceptions of the children of today and turn them into the leaders of tomorrow who will protect and conserve the Congo Basin Forest.

#### 4.4 Visa Regulation

Visa policies are among the most important

government policies influencing international tourism. The development of policies and procedures for visas is closely linked to the development of tourism. The DR Congo for example, which is a neighbour of the East African Community, which receives around 10 million visitors every year, could benefit from that just by easing its visa process.

A new visa policy<sup>9</sup> should be put in place targeting not only the world's top spenders (China, the USA, Germany, the UK and France). Additionally, a liberal visa policy should facilitate regional tourism targeting the growing middle class in African countries and in line with Africa Agenda 2063 advocating the free movement of people in Africa.

This policy recommendation could pose a security risk with the increasing presence of terrorist groups on the continent. Being a post-conflict state, many argued that Rwanda's visa on arrival policy for all world citizens since 2018 would pose serious problems including security threats, erosion of culture and economic vulnerability. However, thanks to a good intelligence system, well-organised national police and multifaceted cooperation with various African countries for intelligence sharing Rwanda has not registered cases of insecurity or international terrorism as a result of the open-visa policy.

#### 4.5 Marketing

Working consistently on country marketing can lead to a huge success of tourism, Rwanda has set the case for post conflict countries by, in a matter of few years, changing its image at the international level with a set of coordinated actions. Countries in the Congo Basin can even do better given that they have unique specificities thanks to the rich biodiversity of the Congo Basin Forest home to endemic species like the Okapi, the Bonobos the Eastern Lowland Gorillas. This can be done by allocating a sufficient budget to the tourism sector, to then sign promotion partnerships with famous sports companies and position their respective destinations in the hearts and minds of prospective visitors.

Investing tens of millions of dollars in trying to improve a country's image could be seen as irrational, especially for a country with one of the world's poorest populations. For example, the slogan 'Visit Rwanda' emblazoned on Arsenal players' shirts cost the small landlocked country around 34 million euros but it led to a 20% increase in tourism revenue only between 2018 and 2019. Clarity of vision and a coordinated implementation of actions translating into economic prosperity and job creation can help the population understand the rationale for important marketing expenditure. Rebranding countries as destinations should be done after all the other recommendations have been implemented.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Preserving the Congo Basin Forest while pursuing green, resilient and inclusive development that sustains livelihoods and boosts economic diversification in central Africa is the right conservation and development strategy. Therefore, implementing policies to boost ecotourism in the DR Congo, Cameroon and Gabon with visits to protected areas is essential. It would be ideal for each of the above countries to develop tourism infrastructure, to improve the quality of tourism services with training courses and education, to encourage environmental awareness, to ease visa regulations and rebrand themselves as tourist destinations. To be effective, adequate funding should be allocated to the tourism sector to support investment in infrastructure, marketing and education. Moreover, specialised anti-corruption agencies combatting both corruption and economic crimes should be created. Finally, the visa openness policies should be backed with well-organised national police and multifaceted cooperation with various African countries for intelligence-sharing to ensure security is maintained.

<sup>9</sup> Anyasor Marcus, Okocha Rejoice, Agina Emeka and Nwankwo Ugochukwu (2021). Effectiveness of visa facilitation and international openness as strategies for tourism development: a comparative study of Nigeria and selected African countries. *European Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 28-44.

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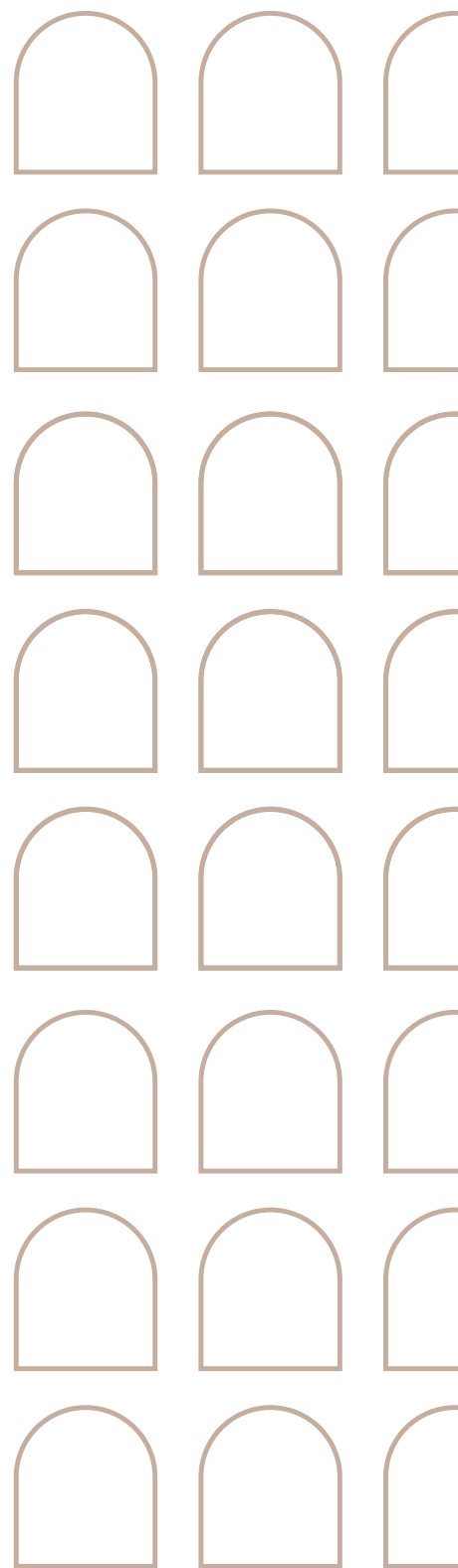
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