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## Sustainability of national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is to explore sustainability of national parks and game reserves in Kenya. Objectives are to examine the responsibility of tourism stakeholders in sustainability of national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19; explore the benefit and cost of tourism of parks and game reserves during the Covid-19; and explore the mitigating measures by tourism stakeholders on issues affecting wildlife in parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic. The methodology is based on a literature review method by deploying a systematic literature review. The findings indicated that as much as tourism is globally seen as an income generator and foreign exchange earner but was worst hit by the pandemic. If the effects of the pandemic are not mitigated early, then the effects are harmful to the resources and environment. Tourism stakeholders should ensure posterity and fame of parks and game reserves are sustained. This paper provides information on the responsibilities of tourism stakeholders in the sustainability of parks and game reserves in Kenya as a tourism destination. The outcome of this paper implies that the tourism stakeholders may look into ways of mitigating the negative effects of tourism in the Covid-19 to ensure sustainability in the post- Covid -19 pandemic.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Africa, wildlife is the biggest attraction for visitors with over 80% of annual visits motivated by watching and experiencing the wildlife in the wilderness (United Nations, 2020). Kenya has been a leading destination in Sub-Saharan Africa and a world renowned as the home of the original safari. For instance, many international and domestic tourists have visited wildlife habitat to experience nature, witness spectacular wildlife and appreciate the cultural heritage (Government of Kenya [GoK], 2019). The industry is affected by seasonality and

sensitive to external factors such as currency crunch, election cycles, terrorism, and health issues such as SARS, Ebola and the latest Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) global pandemic. Before the pandemic, the travel and tourism industry was one of the world's largest sectors, employing 1 to 4 of all the new jobs created in the world accounting to 10.3% (333 million) and 10.3% of GDP equivalent to USD 9.6 trillion (WTTC, 2022). The number of visitors to national parks and game reserves in Kenya prior to Covid-19 in 2017, 2018 and 2019 were impressive accounting to 2,385,200, 2,869,900 and 2,975,200 respectively. During the post Covid-19, the visitors numbers went down, however, in 2020 the number of tourists to the national parks and game reserves were 1,037,000 and in 2021 the number were 1,504,000 (GoK, 2022).

During the migration of the wildebeests between the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania and Maasai Mara National Game Reserve in Kenya, the national reserve receives large numbers of tourists. For example, before Covid-19 pandemic, Maasai Mara National Game Reserve received 291,200 and 286,000 tourists in 2018 and 2019 respectively (GoK, 2022; Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife [MOTW], 2020).). This translates to more income, revenue, foreign earnings and profits from tourism. This is positive to the tourism receipts of a country because of its multiplier effect in the economy. The host communities also feel the positive effects of the tourism industry during this wildebeest migration period. This is because they benefit directly through employment, sale of their farm produce to the lodges, selling of their ornaments to the tourists, and being tour guides.

However, little has been done to counter the negative impacts of tourism especially the highly visited national game reserve attractions like the Maasai Mara National Game Reserve. The pressure in the attraction is too much during this period which could compromise the posterity and fame of the National Reserve. Being a natural resource, the National Parks and game reserves attractions demands sustainability from all the stakeholders in the tourism sector. The attractions have to look into their carrying capacity versus lodges and camp sites, tourists' responsibility in the park, tour guides, tour operations, and the host community. According to Asadzadeh and Mousavi (2017) tourism has significant positive effects on the destination, however, activities of tourism in a destination can directly or indirectly leave

environmental consequences. Environment being a key component to tourism requires protection (Zakharchenko et al., 2021). In addition, in terms of protected areas and sustainability, for instance, Snyman et al. (2023) mentioned about the benefit-sharing from protected areas in tourism which results in positive linkages between national parks and development.

The purpose of this paper was to explore sustainability of the National Parks and Game Reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya. The specific objective was to examine the responsibility of tourism stakeholders in sustaining national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya. To address the specific objective, this paper's research question was *"What is the responsibility of tourism stakeholders in Sustaining National Parks and Game Reserves in Kenya?"*

The emergence of Covid-19 in March 2020 led to the closure of Kenyan boundaries and this affected inbound tourists from accessing tourism attractions in Kenya (Masago et al., 2020). This contributed to various challenges in the industry like no foreign exchange earnings, no income generated, people lost their jobs, living standards of the host communities went down (World Bank, 2020). The tourism sector has a high climate and environmental footprint due to heavy energy and fuel consumption that places stress on land systems. This has been witnessed in the recent growth of tourism before the emergence of Covid-19 (United Nations, 2020). Tourism being a travel industry has been estimated at 5% of all the human originated emissions from transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions and this requires intervention as the industry rebounds so as to be in line with climate goals (UNWTO, 2019). Kenya's natural resource is facing degradation and exploitation affecting biodiversity and ecosystem. This is evident in the reduction of the number of wildlife populations over time (GoK, 2019).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of Sustainability of National Parks and Game Reserves

The concept of sustainability has been defined in different ways depending on the perspective or situation. For instance, the study by Kidere and Mkwizu (2022) has defined sustainability in the context of tourism education by stating that Sustainability Tourism Education (STE) is tourism programs which can sustain changes and spaces within tourism from climate changes, technological change or even unexpected shocks like Covid-19. Furthermore, STE are tourism programs that are developed, designed and offered by universities to impart knowledge to students (Kidere & Mkwizu, 2022).

Other past scholars such as Jenkins and Schroder (2013) have mentioned about sustainability in tourism. Within tourism, past literature (Kijazi, 2012; Mkwizu, 2016) have commonly referred to national parks as protected areas. Equally, the Game Reserves (GR) is when controlled areas are upgraded to GR level (Ministry of Natural Resources and Planning [MNRT], 2021). Therefore, this paper defines sustainability of national parks and game reserves as the ability of national parks and game reserves to cope with changes such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Theoretical Frame

The stakeholder theory was developed by Freeman in 1984 (Freeman, 1984; Fares et al., 2021). In the stakeholder theory, Freeman was more concerned with the relationship between organizations and its stakeholders as the central unit of analysis and a point of departure for stakeholder research (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder theory has also been mentioned in the study by Freeman et al. (2021) by comparing the theory with resourced-based view theory when examining firms with findings indicating that stakeholder theory can offer the resourced-based view theory four aspects namely normativity, sustainability, people and cooperation. This paper is more interested in the aspect of sustainability in the stakeholder

theory as this relates with the main objective of exploring sustainability of national parks and game reserves during the pandemic in Kenya.

In addition, Goyal (2020) extended the application of stakeholder theory in examining strategic management research while Lau and Sun (2020) also applied the stakeholder theory to examine cruise tourism activities in China and proposed for a responsible cruise tourism. Equally, this paper extends the use of stakeholder theory to guide the exploration on sustainability in protected areas being national parks and game reserves in Kenya during the pandemic. In this study, the focus is on a national game reserve called the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

According to Freeman (1984), a stakeholder is any group or individual that can affect or is affected by the achievement of the objectives of the organization. In exploring sustainability of national parks and game reserves, this study's point of departure in reference to stakeholders was on the interest of stakeholders particularly the tourism stakeholders in terms of their responsibilities, benefits and mitigations in the sustainability of national parks and game reserves as posed in the three research questions. Therefore, the application of the stakeholder theory to guide this paper deemed suitable.

## **Sustainability of National Parks and Game Reserves during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic affected the tourism immensely as reported in various reports and studies including Chipumuro and Chikobvu (2022), Erragcha and Babay (2022), Mkwizu and Kimeto (2022), Moodley and Naidoo (2022), Oktavio et al. (2021)., the United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] (2021, 2022) and the World Health Organization [WHO] (2020). Whilst UNWTO (2022) is hopeful that the tourism will increase, in Kenya, this study is concerned with sustainability of the national parks and game reserves during the pandemic to guide the tourism stakeholders in their sustainability efforts in the post-Covid-19 pandemic.

Sustainability literature in East Africa exists but these have mainly focused on environment, livelihoods, user-generated content, climate change and education as opposed to national parks and game reserves. Examples of these studies are by Atieno and Njoroge (2018), Barya (2021), Bagambilana (2022), Kidere (2018), Kidere and Mkwizu (2022) and Kredens and Vogt (2023). In Tanzania, Bagambilana (2021)'s contribution to sustainability involved the aspect of livelihoods and the effects of Covid-19 while Barya (2021) added the climate change in the tourism industry of Uganda. Additional contribution was made by Atieno and Njoroge (2018) by examining sustainability from the concepts of ecotourism and environmental. It is evident that the few existing studies have not expanded the literature concerning sustainability on aspects of national parks and game reserves. Hence, this avails the opportunity for this study to explore sustainability of national parks and game reserves during the pandemic in the context of Kenya.

Furthermore, Kidere (2018) conducted a study in Kenya by examining sustainability of the flower industry and opined that studies on sustainability within developing countries are limited. In support of this opinion as well as the need to expand literature on sustainability, this study explored sustainability from the perspective of national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic using a systematic literature review approach. This paper's main objective involved exploring sustainability of national parks and game reserves in Kenya. In order to address the main objective, this paper developed three specific objectives by first, examining the responsibility of tourism stakeholders in sustainability of national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya. Secondly, exploring the benefit and cost of tourism of national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic, and third is exploring mitigating measures by tourism stakeholders on issues affecting wildlife in national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, this study posed three propositions based on the three specific objectives which are;

**Proposition 1:** What is the responsibility of tourism stakeholders in sustaining national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya?

**Proposition 2:** What are the benefits of tourism that can increase while minimizing the costs of tourism in national parks and game reserves in Kenya?

**Proposition 3:** What are the mitigating measures taken by tourism stakeholders on issues affecting wildlife in national parks and game reserves in Kenya?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology approach is a literature review method. The paper is based on a literature review method by deploying a systematic literature review. AJHTL was the preferred journal due to the fact that the articles undergo a peer review process hence the quality of the selected articles is reliable. This study selected articles from AJHTL were between the year 2020, 2021 and 2022 as this is period during the pandemic era. The search words in selecting the relevant articles from AJHTL were “sustainability”, “national parks”, “game reserves”, “Covid-19 pandemic” and “Kenya”. From the search, this paper obtained a sample of 3 articles out of 279 covering 2020 and 2021 that were relevant in exploring sustainability of national parks and game reserves in Kenya during the pandemic. In addition, for 2022, there were no relevant studies to match the topic of interest to this paper and therefore, the articles for 2022 were excluded.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic literature review from articles based on the African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure (AJHTL) to address the three specific objectives of this study in exploring sustainability of national parks and game reserves during Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya in Table 1 have revealed that there are few studies from Kenya. The study by Ariya et al. (2020) used quantitative approach and found that factors such as wildlife resources had a strong association with satisfaction at L. Nakuru National Park. The remaining 2 studies conducted in Kenya during the pandemic both used a review approach of documents or literature. Ezra et al. (2021) noted that efforts were made to boost domestic tourism during the pandemic by



reducing fees in attractions with a good example where due to the reduced fees, more locals were able to visit Maasai Mara National Reserve as noted by Wanjiru (2020). These studies imply that the Government of Kenya, tourist guides and local tourists have made efforts as stakeholders to support domestic tourism.

However, Osiako and Szente (2021) noted that there is knowledge gap in research related to domestic tourism with most studies still focusing on factors influencing choice of attractions and therefore, recommended for other topics to be researched. This can further explain why even in the journal by AJHTL there were very studies from Kenya which suggests that more research is still needed.

**Table 1. Selected Articles from AJHTL 2020 to 2021**

| No. | Source                   | Country                                       | Method                        | Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Ariya et al. (2020)      | Kenya                                         | Quantitative                  | The sampled tourist guides revealed a strong association between (wildlife resources, cost of attractions, park image and park accessibility) and satisfaction at Lake Nakuru National Park. But a weak association between satisfaction and revisits.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 2   | Ezra et al. (2021)       | Covers Kenya and other East African countries | Review of secondary data      | Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife (MOTW, 2020) projects Kenya's tourism-related businesses will experience job losses, employee redundancy, and temporary closures in the short term. The government of Kenya turned to the domestic market to boost visitation; most destinations reduced visitor user fees. For example, there are reports that more locals are using ground-tour safari companies to visit Maasai Mara National Reserve to witness the annual wildebeest migration (Wanjiru, 2020). |
| 3   | Osiako and Szente (2021) | Kenya                                         | Integrative literature review | Trends analysis from 1990 to 2020 revealed a wide gap in scientific knowledge for domestic tourism with majority (47%) of studies focusing on factors influencing choice of attractions by domestic tourists.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

Source: Compiled by authors

Further analysis based on the specific objectives are as follows;

## **Responsibility of Tourism Stakeholders in Sustaining National Parks and Game**

### **Reserves during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya**

In the first specific objective of this study, the findings indicated that in sustaining the national parks such as L. Nakuru National Park and game reserves like the Maasai Mara

National Reserve, it is important for stakeholders including the government and tour guides to cooperate in order to strengthen domestic tourism. Due to the loss of international tourists resulting from the pandemic, the government's action to concentrate and boost domestic tourism was a positive move for the sustainability of national parks and game reserves in Kenya. This was evidenced by Ezra et al. (2021) whereby more locals visited Maasai Mara National Reserve to witness the famous wildebeest migration. Whilst past studies like Zakharchenko et al., 2021 were concerned on environmental consequences arising from tourism activities, the pandemic brought another awakening of few tourists. To curb this adversity and with the guide of the stakeholder theory, the findings have shown that tourism stakeholders like the Government of Kenya and tour guides/operators sustained the national parks and game reserves by boosting domestic tourism.

### **Benefits of Tourism Increase while Minimizing the Costs of Tourism in National Parks and Game Reserves in Kenya**

Further findings from the reviews indicated that benefits of tourism vs minimizing costs in national parks and game reserves were mostly evident when the government not only wanted to boost domestic tourism but also giving the directives to reduce fees meant that the cost of tourism in terms of fees were made affordable to the locals and the benefits of tourism could be seen as more locals visited attractions such as the game reserve known as the Maasai Mara National Reserve. Again, the act of reducing fees supports the study by Ariya et al. (2020) which found that cost of attraction had an association with satisfaction. Guided by the stakeholder theory, it is clear that the stakeholders in tourism being the Government of Kenya and those that implemented the directive to reduce fees enabled more locals to benefit from tourism by visiting national parks and game reserves in the absence of the international tourists as way of sustaining the national parks and game reserves during the pandemic.

## **Mitigating Measures Taken by Tourism Stakeholders on Issues Affecting Wildlife in National Parks and Game Reserves in Kenya**

From the review, it is revealed that wildlife resources have the strongest association with satisfaction compared to cost of attractions or park image/accessibility as indicated by Ariya et al. (2020). This implies that tourism stakeholders such as the Government of Kenya, tour guides and tour operators should ensure that for sustainability of national parks and game reserves, it is important to consider the wildlife resources more compared to other mitigating measures like park accessibility and image of the national parks and game reserves. From a stakeholder theory perspective, this finding means that the Government of Kenya, tour guides, tour operators and other stakeholders within the tourism industry should put more emphasis on wildlife resources as opposed to image and accessibility.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this paper was to explore sustainability of national parks and game reserves during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya. The findings from the systematic literature review shows that, the Government of Kenya boosted domestic tourism by reducing the park fee, making it affordable to the local tourists and tourism was able to earn some income. Tourism stakeholders should collaborate in ensuring national parks and game reserves are sustained for customer satisfaction and future generations, this is because the Kenya's natural resource is facing degradation and exploitation affecting biodiversity and ecosystem. This can be done through partnerships, training, research and sensitization.

## **Implications**

This paper provides a practical implication on the sustainability of national parks and game reserves in Kenya. Tourism stakeholders in Kenya both private and public should work in collaboration in ensuring that national parks and game reserves are sustained for the future generations and customer satisfaction since the natural resource in Kenya is facing decline.

## Recommendations

This paper has some recommendations: a) In the context of Kenya, the tourism stakeholders should be responsible strengthening the domestic tourism in order to have sustainability of national parks and game reserves during pandemics; b) Minimizing costs of tourism such as reducing fees is essential to have increased benefits of tourism; and c) Mitigation by tourism stakeholders (Government of Kenya, tour guides and tour operators) should focus more on wildlife resources in relation to satisfaction.

## Limitations and Direction for Further Studies

This study had limitations in the use of literature review as a research methodology by attempting to provide literature review perspective on the issue of sustainability in the national parks and game reserves. There was no literature on sustainability in national parks and game reserves in East Africa, those available only focused on environment, livelihoods, climate change and education as opposed to national parks and game reserves, thus affecting literature review. The same study should in future use mixed method to advance the understanding of sustainability in national parks and game reserves in the post Covid-19.

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