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A Kenyan Experience in Ecotourism

By

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Kenya blazed the trail of ecotourism much before other countries in Africa because of policy changes that saw the creation of national parks and reserves and a subsequent ban on hunting. Unlike its unstable neighbors Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania are stable, peaceful, and fast-growing economies. Kenya especially has a choice of wildlife safaris and good beaches. The UN's [Sustainable Development Goals](#) for Kenya are like milestones to a beautiful destination!



The author's family at the Watamu beach (pic: Samuel Juma)

Kenya's tourism industry employed 1.6 million people or 10.9% of its total workforce in 2017 (UNCTAD report). When hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020,

Kenya's GDP shrunk from 24% to 8.2% due to the massive loss of jobs. The tourism sector is therefore the lifeline of Kenya's economy.

The [Ecotourism Society of Kenya](#) (ESOK) was founded in 1996 and pioneered voluntary tourism certification in the continent. The society mobilizes membership in four categories; (i) Corporate, (ii) Community-Based Organizations (CBO); (iii) Individuals and (iv) Students to promote the responsibility of protecting Kenya's natural and cultural heritage. The ESOK's advocacy paved the way for Kenya's first Environment and Management Co-ordination Act (EMCA), 1999. It was reborn as the National Environmental Policy 2013, with policy provisions to strengthen ecotourism.

Many tourist attraction sites in Kenya are in remote mountains, forests, and savannahs. The Constitution of Kenya 2010 requires local governments to develop Participatory Forest Management Plans (FMP). These FMPs have led to ecotourism in destinations like Maasai Mara, Mt. Kenya National Park and Fort Jesus which are celebrated as UNESCO heritage sites. There are hidden gems waiting to join this list.

Kenyans have had a big say in promoting ecotourism. For instance, James Wakibia, an environmentalist advocated the ban of single use plastic bags. Whilst Wakibia's focus was on environmental pollution, his efforts had a 'bystander effect' on ecotourism. The ban of single use plastic bags in 2017 positively impacted ecotourism in the country.

Yet, ecotourism in Kenya has its own set of challenges. They include unclear boundaries between human dwellings and wildlife areas, inadequate staffing to execute requisite details, lacunae in management plans and guidelines, inadequate public relations and limited strategic partnerships. Kenya is indeed a basket case of ecotourism with its local communities fully clued in.

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