

An Insight Into Natural Tourism Potential Of West Nile Sub-Region For Livelihood Improvement

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Abstract

Tourism has become a silver bullet in rekindling livelihood improvement of the local communities by providing employment opportunities, market for local products, improved infrastructure, investment opportunities and so on. The study intended to understand the natural tourism potential of West Nile Sub-Region and create awareness so that it can be harnessed to promote tourism growth for livelihood improvement opportunity of people in west Nile region.

The study adopted qualitative approach research design due to the nature of the investigation. Primary data was collected by observation, focus group discussion and interview of key informants; and secondary data was collected by literature review.

The findings indicate that West Nile Sub Region is endowed with abundant natural tourism potential that is under exploited. Most of the attractions lack basic facilities and services for visitor use, there is limited awareness about the potential, the available services and facilities are inadequate and in sorrow state, the accessibility to some of the sites are poor, there is limited capital for the improvement of the sites. The study recommends increased awareness, more investment in facilities and services to tap the potential, accessibility to some of the sites be improved, and more attention be given by the government to the sector in budget.

key words: Natural Tourism potential, Tourism growth, and Livelihood improvement.

Introduction

Tourism potential of a region refers to all exploited and unexploited possibilities that a region offers to tourism, including all resources owned by an area or place that can be developed into a tourist attraction to generate gain (Riana & Fajri, 2024) (13). This varies in time and space depending on the needs of the society, the evolution of tourist market, and socioeconomic and political context of the region that manifests sometimes as challenges to the sector. The components of tourism potential consist of the natural, anthropogenic, and material resources and conditions necessary for a destination management. The natural tourism potential of a region is based on the natural resources of the region that have the potential and attractiveness to attract both domestic and foreign tourists and stimulate the presence of tourists to the destination (Sultan et al, 2021) (17). Any natural thing that encourages people to visit a particular destination qualifies as natural tourist attraction. According to Sainu et al (2023) (14) the uniqueness of a destination

influenced by the natural environment and culture of the area determines tourist activities in that particular region. The existence of attractions, availability of facilities and infrastructure, accessibility, and promotion greatly influence the growth of tourism sector of an area that can contribute to improvement of people's welfare, preservation of natural resources and biodiversity among other benefits (Fadahunsi, 2011) (6). The purpose of the study was to provide an insight into natural tourism potential of West Nile Sub-Region for livelihood improvement. Specifically identified and looked at the status of natural tourism potential in the region and how it has been tapped for livelihood improvement. The examination of key natural tourist attractions of the selected Districts of west Nile region were done pointing out the attractive features, the status in terms of infrastructure, facilities, and services availability, challenges they face, and the way forward for growth.

Background to the study

Tourism is one of the largest industries in the world, largest export sector and most promising for future growth potential (English and Ahebwa, 2018) (11). As it is observed that before Covid-19 pandemic the sector registered a growth of about 4% contributing about 6.4% to the world economy and generated more than fifty million jobs (Mutaliyeva et al, 2020) (10). Also, Shpak et al (2021) (15) perceived tourism as determinant of many countries' economies, as it plays crucial role in driving development in the countries. Tourism plays a significant role as the primary source of income through foreign exchange that has the capacity to boost the national economy and significantly impact on community livelihood (Prajitna & Fathoni, 2023; Sultan et al, 2021) (12, 17). Yusran et al (2023) (18) views tourism as one of the most profitable industries that can champion development of a particular area and improve livelihood of people. Oliver Valentine Eboy (2017) (5) observed the multi-sectoral nature of tourism that offers a range of opportunities to improve the livelihood of the people in a particular area as it consists of activities, facilities, services and industries that deliver travel experience to travelers away from home. In a nutshell, tourism is a sum of phenomena and relationships arising from interaction of tourists and host communities in the process of attracting and hosting tourists that widens opportunities for local people (Fadahunsi, 2011) (6). It is clear the diversification of economic activities in rural areas is essential for stimulating development that improves livelihood in the area that tourism is capable of offering (Mănescu et al, 2024) (9). Soeswoyo et al, (2021) (16), complements that the development of tourist villages can be an initiative for promoting equitable growth in various parts of a region that improves community's economy and promotes conservation of environment. That is the reason the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) encourages communities to maximize participation in community-based tourism for livelihood improvement and promotion of sustainable development (Sainu et al, 2023) (14).

In Uganda tourism is a key growth sector generating about US Dollar 1.53 billion in revenue, contributing nearly 10% of GDP and 6.3% of total employment and the World Bank's assessment of the country's full potential is in excess of US Dollar 12 billion annually (Ministry of Tourism, 2018) (19). That means the tourism potential of Uganda is still under exploited and west Nile region is not exceptional.

West Nile region is constituted by twelve districts and a city making total administrative units of thirteen. However, the study focused on selected administrative units namely Moyo, Madi Okollo, Terego, Arua city,

Maracha, and Nebbi Districts and selected sites were considered for the study. The region is blessed with various natural attractions classified by Garabimovic et al (2020) (7) as geomorphological, hydrological, climatic, and biological. However, most of the natural potential in west Nile region has remained unused or underused over the years due to various factors such as limited fund for the development, limited knowledge about the potential, poor accessibility, inadequate marketing, lack of government will, limited skilled personnel among other factors yet investment in the sector could translate into increased growth and improvement in the livelihood. The Annual Tourism Sector Performance Report financial year 2018/2019 (19) reported the earning of Uganda from tourism at US Dollar 1.66 billion (about 5.8 trillion). How much did west Nile get from that?

Statement of the problem

The promotion of tourism growth of a particular region requires the region goes through the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation that require assessment of the pre-existing physical condition of targeted attractions supported by social, economic, technological, legal, and other environmental factors (Irawan et al, 2023) (8). The consideration of the above-mentioned factors makes planning more reasonable, applicable, and easily implemented (Chen et al, 2021) (4) and the physical assessment of the natural attractions helps to determine prioritization of the amenities such as infrastructure and facilities development that support tourist activities.

Uganda was declared "Pearl of Africa" by one of the former presidents of USA Winston Churchill who visited the nation in 1907 because of its colorful nature and being blessed with thick forests, beautiful lakes and rivers, good climate, hot springs, water falls, snow peaked mountain, biodiversity, and friendly people that favor tourism, the reason tourism is a key growth sector in the country contributing about 10% to GDP and in 2022 the related revenue and foreign exchange earnings totaled to 2.7 trillion Ugandan shillings (US Dollar 0.736) (Ministry of Tourism, 2022). Despite the fact that the World Bank's assessment of the country's full potential is in excess of US Dollar 12 billion annually (Ministry of Tourism, 2018) (19). However, according to Nguringo Safari Experts and a team of safari experts in 2023, out of the first ten commonly visited destinations in Uganda seven are in western region, two in central, one in northern, and zero in west Nile regions that shows west Nile is really lacking behind in terms of tourism growth and yet Uganda National Development Plan III and Vision 2040 focus more on tourism development. More so there is scanty literature about natural tourism potential of west Nile region signifying limited knowledge and awareness that the study indented to bridge.

Objectives of the study

- To identify the natural tourism potential of the region that can be harnessed for tourism development to improve livelihood of the locals
- To assess the status of the natural tourist attractions of the region in terms of services and facilities
- To suggest possible way forward to improve or tap the potential for livelihood improvement

Research questions

- What are the key natural tourism potentials of west Nile region?
- What facilities and services are available to tap the potentials?
- What should be done to fully tap the potentials to improve the livelihood of people in west Nile region

Hypothesis

West Nile region is endowed with significant natural tourism potential that can be harnessed for livelihood improvement.

Methodology

The study adopted exploratory research design and qualitative methodology. The phenomena required multiple data collection methods. Primary and Secondary data sources were used. Primary data was obtained from field observation where the physical conditions of the sites, the facilities and services on the ground were observed and analyzed, focus group discussions were conducted to get the views of stakeholders; and interview of key informants specifically District tourism officers were done to sought for their inputs. Whereas secondary data was obtained from the result of literature review and documentation.

Literature Review

The natural and anthropogenic resources of an area determine the uniqueness of the place that can be taped for tourism development in the area to improve the welfare of the locals (Riana & Fairi, 2014; Samu et al, 2023) (13/14). It is clear Tourism has the potential to provide numerous benefit if well managed signified by the role it plays in the economies of many countries and its contribution to welfare of people (Prajitna & Fathoni,2023; Sultan et al, 2021) (12/17) given its multi-sectoral nature including provision of employment opportunities for skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labor because of being labor-intensive industry, increases incomes, provides market for the local produce, utilizes the local products and resources, diversifies the local economy, increases government revenue, improves the quality of life related to a higher level of income hence improved standards of living, reinforces preservation of heritage and tradition, and justifies environmental protection and improvement. However, its overdevelopment and mismanagement can cause inflation, unbalanced economic development, social problems, degrades the natural physical environment and creates pollution, degrades the cultural environment, increases the incidence of crime, prostitution, and gambling, increases vulnerability to economic and political changes, threatens family structure, commercializes culture, religion, and the arts, creates misunderstanding, creates conflicts in the host society, contributes to disease spread and so on. There is therefore need to mitigate against these associated evils of tourism for it to effectively contribute to livelihood improvement.

There is no doubt that tourism can improve the livelihood of people in a particular region as it is one of the largest industries in the world, largest export sector and most promising for future growth potential (English and Ahebwa, 2018) (11). It is also labor intensive, utilizes the local products and resources and has the potential to provide numerous benefits if well managed (Charles & Brent, 2003) (3).

To realize the benefits of tourism, the attractions provided by the natural and anthropogenic resources of the area must be complemented by the availability of facilities and infrastructure, accessibility, and promotion (Fadehunsi, 2011) (6). The study focused on natural tourism potential which is also a requirement for west

Nile region tourism sector to contribute to livelihood of the locals. There is need to create awareness about the natural tourism potential that exist in the region to draw the attention of investors and deliberately encourage them to invest in facilities and services to tap the potential. Draw the attention of the government so that accessibility to some of the sites can be improved and budget share of the sector increased. Create awareness about the natural tourism product the region can provide to potential visitors so that they can visit.

Findings

There is a considerable natural tourism potential in west Nile region that has mostly remained untapped over the years due to several factors such as limited information on the potential, lack of aggressive marketing, lack of facilities and services for harnessing the potential, limited skilled man power, financial constraint for development, poor infrastructure hindering accessibility to some of the sites.

Some of the Natural Tourism Potential of west Nile region

Arua city	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arua hill • Abiaro and Whaa falls • Adumi rock
Madi Okollo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ajai Wildlife Reserve
Maracha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miriadua Falls
Moyo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mountain Otce Forest Reserve • Afi cave
Nebbi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aminzi Hill • Aruru water falls • Nduru rock (Got Nebbi)
Terego	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mountain Wati • Olewa water fall • The Hot Spring

The key natural attraction sites of the region are clearly highlighted district by district with their specific attractive features, available facilities and services, challenges, and the way forwards.

AJAI WILDLIFE RESERVE



The reserve is located in Ayavu-Gazi parish, Inde Town Council, Madi Okollo District. Situated on the western bank of Albertine Nile owned by government of Uganda and managed by Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) on behalf of the government. The reserve started as a white rhino sanctuary in colonial times and later was left under the protection of by then powerful local chief Ajai who in 1937 declared the reserve as a protected zone with tough measures to stop poaching and encroachment and that is where the reserve derived its name. The sanctuary was there after upgraded to a game reserve after the death of the local chief Ajai who died in 1965, the upgrading was basically to protect the white rhinos. However, the number of the white rhinos continued to reduce due to continuous poaching and encroachment as a result of high demand for their horns leading to the extinction of the species from the reserve. The reserve gained world attention in 1910 when one of the former presidents of United States of America (USA) Theodore Roosevelt visited the reserve for a hunting expedition. The reserve up to now is endowed with a variety of bird and animal species although some of the species like white rhinos, leopard etc. got extinct from the reserve due to poaching and encroachment. But the reserve is at the process of revamping where UWA has already relocated 20 buffaloes and 226 Uganda cobs as the translocation of key species white rhino is in pipeline and manipulation activities are ongoing. Also, the attractiveness of the reserve is enhanced by the three hills namely Ajai hill recognized as cultural zone where Ajai palace will be built, Obi hill which has two crater lakes, and Eremve hill that has aggravated stones, all these make the reserve known as the cultural heritage of Madi people. From Arua city to the reserve it is about 58 kilometers and to the main tourist attraction of the region, Murchison Falls national park it is about 60 kilometers making its inclusion on the itinerary with the main attraction possible and easy. The reserve is accessed by road since the main road passes through the reserve, there is a nearby health center that is about two kilometers from the reserve headquarters, the reserve is secure to visit as insecurity cases have not been reported in the area. The common tourist activities currently practiced in the reserve include birding, nature walk, primate viewing, and hill climbing. However, there are no set tariffs. The reserve at the moment lacks facilities like information center, clean rest rooms, canteen, craft center which are essential for visitor enjoyment and comfortability. There are trained rangers who are also site guides trained and employed by Uganda Wildlife Authority. The reserve is also likely to introduce within a period of ten years Chief Ajai's trail, community tourism, ecological center, and cultural museum. The only accommodation facility near at the moment is Madi Dream Hotel, however, accommodation can be secured from Arua city which is only 58 kilometers from the reserve, Pakwach and Nebbi Districts as they are not far from the reserve. The place is busy from October to March. Currently the main benefits of the reserve to the local communities include resource off take under the supervision of Uganda Wildlife Authority officials and market for their local produce. Other challenges encountered by the reserve include encroachment by the local communities, illegal resource off takes, illegal entry, illegal fishing, the road that passes through the reserve that caused destruction and continues to affect the species in the reserve. There are already strategies in place being implemented and proposed to promote tourism growth in the reserve including feasibility study already undertaken, manipulation that is ongoing, relocation of the eleven families settled in the reserve which is in the process, land survey and valuation already done, relocation of some species to the reserve, construction of accommodation and sanitary facilities, proposed constructions of ecological center, ring roads, cultural center.

There is also need for community sensitization, privatization of projects that promote tourism, marketing the reserve as tourist destination, promoting community tourism, involving local communities in decision making, introducing more species in the reserve including species that got extinct from the reserve and establishing a tool road.

MIRIADUA FALLS

Located in Lici village, Kakua Parish, Kijomoro Sub- County, Maracha District, 2km from Arua-Maracha road in river Oluffe. The fall was at first called Yi kuru due to the noise generated by the falls. Later on, derived its name from the person who came from Oleba sub-county Maracha District called Miriadua, he camped near the falls for some time to understand the falls according to Federick ‘Yokibo, the guide at the site. The name Miriadua was given to the falls in 2016 after a German lady visited the site and suggested the site be developed as tourist site. The site has toilet facility and canteen. It is sometimes hired for parties. The management charges an entrance fee of three thousand per person to access the site and according to the guide the site receives on average about 30 visitors per week in ordinary weeks but more on public holidays and festival seasons. Locals sometimes bring local crafts to sell to visitors but there is no craft shop at the site. The site requires aggressive marketing and investment in other supporting services like craft shop, information center, guides training, investment in accommodation facility and so on. There is a construction of health facility going on about four hundred meters from the site that will eventually offer health services.



Miriadua Falls

MOUNTAIN WATI



Mountain Wati is located in two Sub-counties of Ayivu and Omugo in parishes of Anyufira and Erea. The nearest town and city are Leju Town council and Arua city and the nearest densely populated centers are Kubala and Wafa in Omugo and Ayivu sub-counties respectively. The mountain was gazette as a forest reserve in 1948 and it was to be managed as a communal forest reserve, but there is no clear management responsibility of the mountain and no clear tariffs. However, administratively the area is under National Forest Authority. The unique features associated with the mountain include the burial site of Banyale the great grant of lugbara community, the highest peak of the mountain known as Tibia, deep water near the peak, Andrua hill where Nile River is visible, caves, the grave of Babua who was a farmer and built his house on a hill to monitor the workers in the field easily from the hill. The Mosque built by the son at the site of his father's resident, the unique and interesting history of the site. It is believed there is a big snake living on the top of the mountain at appoint called Biacici and it is believed to be a bad omen when the snake appears since some body dies when it appears. It is also believed there were stones at the top one rolled down and stopped somewhere after some time the second stone rolled to join the first stone. Other nearby attractions include Olewa water fall, Ajai game reserve in Madi Okollo District, Yikuru, Okulacere where river Oru and Enyau meet, Miradua falls in Maracha Distict. Some of the challenges facing the site include lack of facilities such as toilets, canteens, craft shops, and inadequate trained guides. However, there are shops, there are people who make crafts nearby, and one technically trained guide by Uganda Wildlife Authority. The tourist activities common at the site include mountain climbing, traditional dances such as Duluka, Koro, Ombasia and so on. The site is mostly visited in dry season between November-March when grasses are burnt, there is also cuisine to be introduced including traditional foods like pigeon pea, pasted food, dry meat, and so on. The site requires investment in facilities like trails, information center, canteen, marketing, and training.

OLEWA WATER FALL



Located in Onjoro village, Onjoro parish, Aii-vu Sub County with part of it in Katrini Sub County. Close to the fall is a Hot Spring, believed to be having medicinal value where local people bath whenever they experience skin problem.



The Hot Spring

MOUNTAIN OTCE FOREST RESEARVE



The attraction is located in Pacoalogo village, Eremi parish, Otce Sub- County, Moyo Distict. Mountain Otce is 1,563 meters above sea level covering an area of 188km square. It was gazette as a forest reserve in 1968. The attractive features of the site include the impressive and stunning views of the River Nile as it leaves Uganda and flowing into South Sudan; views of Erende mountain ranges including Ilo, Nyeri, and Ilingwa ranges along Uganda-South Sudan border, over 168 bird species that makes the site best birding destination in west Nile region; Afi cave; vegetation cover of 261 tree species of the forest reserve and the forest reserve

was ranked 10th out of 65 forest reserves in Uganda by forest Department; species like encephalartos that is endemic to Otce; the primates such as baboons, colobus money, chimpanzees, and other species that provide opportunity for primate viewing; three unique butterfly species; shew crocidura a threatened mammal formally known to be from South Africa; crocidura only known to be in Mabira forest and here. There are also other attractions within a range of less than 16 kilometers from the site including River Nile 6km, Fort Dufile 16 km, etc. The mountain can be accessed from four different points including Eremi side, Dufile side, Laropi side and Pakai side. There are also health center threes such as Eremi and Ayaa health Centers that can provide health services to visitors and the site is secure to visit since there is police post in the area and the people are believed to be positive to visitors. However, the biggest challenges in the area include poor accessibility due to poor roads especially in rain season, lack of sanitary facility, resting facility, canteen, garbage management facility, information Centre, standard toilet, craft shop. There are also challenges of financial constraint, record keeping, understaffing, and transport challenge. There are about five local guides who are not trained in guiding that guide at the site. The nearest accommodation facility is Ara Fishing lodge and those found in Moyo town. The common activities visitors undertake at the site include bird watching, butterfly watching, mountain climbing, research, camping, cultural dances performed by youths, women, and men. The common training needs for the site include tour guiding skill, conservation skill, marketing skill, and customer care skill trainings. Local communities mainly benefit from the market provided by the visitors for their produce and cultural values.

AFI CAVE

The cave is believed to have acted as a safe haven for Madi people during slave trade and tribal wars where people could hide and live over 200 years ago, currently it's a home to thousands of bats that provides manure to the local people living around the cave for agricultural use.



AMINZI HILL

Located in Aminzi village, Pachaka parish in Erussi Sub County along Erussi Goli road 15 Km from Nebbi Town. It is one of the spectacular wonders of Nebbi District clearly visible from far places when you are in the district and within. The attractive features include the magnificent rock standing at an altitude of 1,521 that provides beautiful sceneries of the surrounding places including the Democratic republic of Congo, the visibility of the colonial boarder point between Uganda and DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo), Caves

beneath the rock with cultural attachments where people do often go to offer sacrifices to their gods and perform rituals, and the gentle slope with a number of vegetation species most important being the aloe vera. But the area is still unexploited as accessibility to the top of the hill is difficult with no clear trekking trails and facilities. Other challenges include destruction of natural features by illegal activities, frequent bush burning during dry season, Border dispute between Uganda and DRC, and lack of clarity on who should be in charge of revenue collection.

However, the site is good for rock climbing/hiking, scenic viewing, photography and video shooting, wildlife viewing, and visiting the border point of Uganda and DRC on top of the hill. Despite the challenges the site receives visitors both domestic and foreign charging a small fee that has caused conflict with the sub county. There is therefore need to resolve the border dispute and administrative conflict between the village and sub county, conserve the resources of the area, and prioritize the development of the area as tourism site.



Aminzi Hill

ARURU WATER FALLS

The location of the falls is shared between the two villages of Aryego in Oweko parish on the western side and Okebu village of Abar east parish on the eastern side. But the fall is clearly visible from Aryego village, Oweko parish in Ndhew sub county, 3km from Aryego trading center along Nebbi-Erusi road and 18 km from Nebbi town. The main attractive features are the two beautiful waterfalls falling down the two cliffs of different heights, the hill offers climbing opportunity with wonderful experience, and the beautiful scenery of the area viewed from top of the hills provides attractive photo opportunity. There are no support services at the site. The management of the area is under the Area Local Council 1 of Aryego village and the clan of Jupukok who owns the land where the waterfalls occur. The accessibility in terms of main connection from Nebbi town is okay but the challenge is difficulty in accessing the falls as no proper route/trail leading to it exist only footpaths. The area can support nature walk, scenic viewing, hill climbing, photography, and community tourism. However, there is need for elaborate community engagement, sensitization of stakeholders, development of local road network including trails, training of relevant personnel, lobbying for increased budget for the sector from the government.



Aruru water falls

NDURU ROCK (GOT NEBBI)

Located at Opano village, Central Division, Nebbi Municipality on the eastern side of the Municipality, 2km from the round about. The key attractive features include the magnificent rock at different heights and elevation, the spot where Nduru left his drum, Kom pa Nduru (the stool), the cave, the spot of the mass grave of the people killed by Arabs, wildlife such monkeys. The site is capable of supporting activities such as rock climbing/hiking, scenic viewing, cave exploration, photography and video shooting, wildlife tracking, Visiting the nearby tombs of Agudi and Openja, and that of Nduru in Laji to enhance visitor satisfaction. There is a access road but no any other support service at the site.



Nduru rock captured from the western side

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, West Nile region has a considerable natural tourism potential that has remained underexploited over the years due to several factors including lack of awareness, lack/limited marketing, lack of facilities and services at the sites, limited skilled man power, financial constraint for development, poor infrastructure hindering accessibility to most of the sites. Addressing these challenges can change the history of nature-based tourism in the region that can improve the economy and livelihood of the people since the sector has the capacity. However, the natural tourism potential in the region is not comparable to those in the western, eastern, central, and northern parts of Uganda since the mentioned regions have the main national parks, forest reserves, big water bodies and mountains of the country. That is partly the reasons for the regions to have the top ten visited destinations in the country.

It is recommended to conduct more research in the region especially on the psychometric combination of the potentials, attitude of the people, the contribution of the sector and so on to generate information planning purpose. As the sector has become increasingly relevant in every region's economic system playing a crucial role in driving the economic development of many countries. There is information gap evidenced by the limited literature on the region that need to be bridged by encouraging more research.

Awareness should be intensified to make the stakeholders understand the availability of the potential in order to attract their support and contribution. And effort should be put on promotion of the region through aggressive marketing.

More investment should be encouraged in facilities and services to fully tap the potential since most of the sites lack the basic facilities and services.

Accessibility to the sites should be improved especially accessibility to Mountai Otce Forest Reserve, Olewa fall, are very poor in rain season among other sites.

More budget for the sector should be lobbied from the government to address part of the financial constraint challenge.

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