

CARPE Abstract

The Potential for Tourism Based Financing of Protected Areas in the Congo Basin

D.S. Wilkie and J.F. Carpenter. 1998. Oryx (In Review)

In the debt ridden, high population growth, rentier states of the Congo Basin, conservation of biodiversity is not a national priority. Moreover, the recurring costs to manage protected areas and the opportunity costs of foregone logging and farming associated with maintaining protected areas constitute a substantial net drain on national and local economies. Consequently it is becoming increasingly important that protected areas generate, directly from user fees or from donor contributions, funds sufficient to offset the costs of maintaining them. Government and donor investment presently meet less than 30% of the estimated recurring costs required to effectively manage the protected area network within Central African countries, and cover none of the growing opportunity costs. Nature tourism, the fastest growing sector of a \$3 trillion dollar a year industry, may offer a source of revenue to help fill this financing gap. Congo Basin national parks and reserves harbor many unique and charismatic animals (okapi, lowland gorilla, drills, bongo, forest elephant, etc.) likely to attract tourists, and as a result many protected area managers are sinking capital into the development of tourist infrastructure. However, evidence from the region shows that with high infrastructure development costs, low tourist visitation rates, and continued political and military insecurity, the revenue generating capacity of tourism is marginal in the most well established and accessible sites with abundant and charismatic wildlife, and consequently prospects for a viable tourist industry in more isolated, less well endowed protected areas in the Congo Basin are not encouraging. If ecotourism is distinguished from other forms of tourism in that it a) improves protected area management, and b) provides economic benefits to local residents asked to forego resource use, then ecotourism in the Congo Basin fails to achieve the former and only marginally achieves the latter. At present ecotourism in the Congo Basin is a net financial cost to protected area management. Even the intangible value of word of mouth advertising and advocacy by tourists is unlikely to stimulate donor contributions sufficient to offset the costs to develop tourist infrastructure in isolated protected areas in the region. Consequently, organizations should conduct more thorough financial and economic appraisals of the likely value of tourism {see example in IRG 1992 ID: 3505} before sinking scarce conservation funds into tourist infrastructure development that could be spent better elsewhere.