

THE POTENTIAL OF SCIENCE TOURISM IN SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA:

PREFERENCES, DRIVERS AND SUITABLE SITES

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Abstract

Uganda's tourism sector has not attained its full potential despite the immense and largely unexploited natural resources that would support unique tourist experiences. However, the government has recognized the need to enhance, diversify and develop more tourism products in Uganda as a strategy of attaining the sector's full potential. In addition the sector tends to over rely on international tourist arrivals at the expense of domestic tourism. This partly explains why there are limited studies concerning the country's domestic market segment. Therefore, this study specifically focused on the analysis of 'science tourism' as a means to enhancing the current products, and also went ahead to compare the tastes and preferences with regards to consumption of science tourism among Ugandans and non-Ugandans of Asian and European decent (Caucasians). Enhancing the already existing tourism products through science tourism would result in products such as geotourism, herbal tourism, ornithology tourism and astronomy tourism which are the focus of this study. Therefore, it was in the interest of this study to investigate whether (1) respondents had any preferences out of four science tourism products (geotourism, herbal tourism, ornithology tourism, astronomy tourism) if developed and offered on Uganda's

market; (2) there are many outstanding factors which influence individual's participation in science tourism products in southwestern Uganda.

A cross-sectional study approach was used to investigate whether Ugandans and Caucasians, with disposable income, are significantly different in their affinity for the four assessed science tourism products (anchored in geology, ethno-botany, ornithology, astronomy) and whether there are different motivators driving the consumption of the products among Ugandan and Caucasians populations. Data was collected by use of an interview schedule from Ugandans and Caucasians, with disposable income, about their preference for each of the products and the factors with the greatest influence on the drive to consume the products. Furthermore an evaluation was carried out using an FAO Framework for evaluating land utilization types, to determine the relative suitability levels of three sites (Kichwamba Rift Escarpment, Lake Mburo, and Lake Bunyonyi) for use to offer the four assessed science tourism products in Southwestern Uganda.

A Chi-square Test Value of 0.42 ($p > 0.05$) showed that there was no significant difference between Ugandan and Caucasian correspondents in their preference for each of the four assessed science tourism products. Out of the four assessed science tourism products, geotourism was attractive

close to 77% of both Ugandan and Caucasian respondents. Furthermore, a Chi-square Test Value of 0.008 ($p < 0.05$) revealed that more Caucasians than Ugandans understand that improvement in personal knowledge would be a key benefit if their preferred science tourism products were consumed. At a weighted scale of 1 – 4.0, Ugandans disclosed that personal income (3.71), personal safety (3.69), a variety of products to choose from (3.62), value for money (3.52) and eagerness to learn (3.40) would be the top drivers if they would consume the assessed science tourism products. Other hand, Caucasians considered eagerness to learn (3.52), products pricing (3.42), availability of leisure time (3.37), hospitality of the host communities (3.33) and value for money (3.27) as the most important influential factors if they consumed the assessed science tourism products. With respect to suitability of selected sites for science tourism, based on the percentage scores, Kichwamba Rift Escarpment (KRE) was the most suitable site for science tourism followed by Lake Bunyonyi (LB) and the Lake Mburu (LM) sites. KRE was the most suitable site for science tourism due to its high geological and biological diversity that would support science tourism. The findings obtained from this study will be important for the enhancement, diversification and development of additional tourism products that may have an appeal to both Ugandans and foreign guests. The study recommends further research to assess how

the expressed interest in the science tourism products might be translated into actual demand, by taking into consideration the topmost motivational factors for each population, in order to expand Uganda's tourism sector.