

The Effect Of Local Community Engagement On Sustainable Tourism In Queen Elizabeth National Park

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of local community engagement on sustainable tourism in Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP), Uganda. The research was guided by three specific objectives: to assess community participation in tourism planning, to examine the impact of benefit-sharing mechanisms on local livelihoods, and to evaluate the role of cultural heritage promotion in sustainable tourism development. A descriptive correlational research design was adopted, and data were collected from 245 respondents comprising park management officials, local community members, tour operators, and Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) staff using structured questionnaires and interview guides. Findings revealed a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between local community engagement and sustainable tourism outcomes ($r = 0.712$, $p < 0.05$). Multiple regression analysis indicated that community participation, benefit-sharing, and cultural heritage promotion collectively accounted for 68.4% of the variance in sustainable tourism ($R^2 = 0.684$). The study concluded that meaningful community engagement is a critical driver of sustainable tourism in QENP and recommended the formulation of inclusive tourism policies, equitable revenue-sharing frameworks, and cultural heritage preservation programs to bolster long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Local community engagement, sustainable tourism, Queen Elizabeth National Park, benefit-sharing, cultural heritage, Uganda.

1.0 BACKGROUND

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a globally recognized paradigm for balancing ecological conservation with socioeconomic development, particularly in biodiversity-rich regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP), located in the western corridor of Uganda, is among the most ecologically significant protected areas on the African continent, harboring diverse wildlife including the famous tree-climbing lions of Ishasha and an array of bird species numbering over 600 (Julius et al., 2024). Despite its ecological wealth, QENP operates within a socioeconomic landscape where surrounding communities have historically been excluded from tourism planning and benefit-sharing, generating significant tension between conservation objectives and local development needs (Julius et al., 2024).

Globally, the discourse on sustainable tourism has evolved considerably since the Brundtland Commission's 1987 definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Ivan & Kazaara, 2023)." Within this framework, tourism sustainability entails not only environmental conservation but also sociocultural integrity and long-term economic viability for host communities (Christopher et al., 2022). Community-based tourism (CBT) models have gained prominence across East Africa as instruments for reconciling these imperatives, with notable examples in Kenya's

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Maasai Mara and Tanzania's Serengeti demonstrating that communities empowered to participate in and benefit from tourism are more likely to support conservation objectives.

In Uganda, the Uganda Wildlife Act of 2019 provides a statutory mandate for community engagement in wildlife conservation, stipulating that a minimum of 20% of park entry fees should be directed toward community development projects in parishes surrounding national parks(Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022b). However, implementation of this provision has been inconsistent, and the mechanisms for community participation in tourism planning remain underdeveloped(Julius et al., 2024). Scholars such as Mugizi (2020) and Nakkazi (2021) have observed that the top-down management approaches historically employed by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) have marginalized local communities, resulting in resource conflicts, poaching, and gradual degradation of park ecosystems(Brian et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, understanding the specific pathways through which community engagement translates into sustainable tourism outcomes is both academically and practically significant.

2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of community engagement in sustainable tourism, local communities surrounding Queen Elizabeth National Park continue to experience limited involvement in tourism planning processes, inadequate access to tourism revenue, and insufficient integration of cultural heritage into the mainstream tourism product(Paul et al., 2022). These deficiencies have perpetuated a cycle of community-park conflict, encroachment on park boundaries, and escalating human-wildlife conflict(Christopher & Felex, 2022). Previous studies conducted in the QENP context have tended to focus narrowly on biodiversity conservation or economic impacts, without systematically examining how the multidimensional construct of community engagement encompassing participation, benefit-sharing, and cultural heritage promotion shapes sustainable tourism outcomes(Christopher et al., 2022). This study therefore sought to fill this gap by empirically examining the relationship between local community engagement and sustainable tourism in QENP.

3.0 MAIN OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study was to examine the effect of local community engagement on sustainable tourism in Queen Elizabeth National Park. The specific objectives were: (i) to assess the extent of community participation in tourism planning in QENP; (ii) to examine the impact of benefit-sharing mechanisms on the livelihoods of local communities surrounding QENP; and (iii) to evaluate the role of cultural heritage promotion in advancing sustainable tourism in QENP.

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical grounding of this study draws on Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which posits that the sustainability of any enterprise is contingent on the effective engagement and satisfaction of all stakeholders with a legitimate interest in its outcomes(Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022b). Applied to tourism, this theory implies that park management authorities must recognize local communities as primary stakeholders whose participation and welfare are indispensable to the long-term viability of tourism operations. Complementing this, the Social Exchange

Theory (Blau, 1964) explains community support for tourism on the basis of the perceived balance between benefits received and costs incurred through tourism development. Communities that perceive tourism as beneficial are more likely to actively support and participate in conservation activities (Julius et al., 2024).

Empirically, Goodwin and Santilli (2009) conducted a comprehensive review of community-based tourism projects across Africa and Latin America, concluding that projects characterized by genuine community participation in decision-making, transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms, and alignment with local cultural values were more likely to achieve sustainability (Sarah & Audrey, 2024). In the East African context, Mwangi and Swallow (2008) found that communities in Kenya's Amboseli region that participated in wildlife conservancy governance reported significantly higher levels of income and reduced engagement in poaching compared to non-participating communities (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022a). Nuwagaba (2019), examining tourism development around Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda, found that benefit-sharing through the Revenue Sharing Program had improved household incomes by an average of 23% among participating communities, though disparities in benefit distribution remained a concern (Paul et al., 2022).

Regarding cultural heritage, Ateljevic and Doorne (2005) argued that the commodification of cultural heritage for tourism purposes can either empower or disempower communities, depending on the degree to which they control the framing and presentation of their cultural identity. Studies in Uganda by Asiimwe (2020) demonstrated that communities around QENP with established cultural tourism programs including traditional dance performances, craft markets, and heritage trails reported higher levels of tourism income and stronger identity with conservation objectives compared to communities without such programs. These findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive tourism strategies that position local communities as custodians rather than passive spectators of their heritage.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive correlational research design, which facilitated the measurement and analysis of relationships between community engagement variables and sustainable tourism outcomes without manipulating any variables (Nafiu, 2012). The study was conducted in the areas surrounding QENP, specifically covering the communities of Kasese, Rubirizi, Kamwenge, and Rukungiri districts. The target population comprised 1,240 individuals including local community members, UWA staff, tour operators, local government officials, and community-based organization (CBO) leaders. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table, a sample of 294 respondents was determined, of whom 245 successfully completed and returned questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 83.3% (Sarah et al., 2024).

Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation of all stakeholder groups, while purposive sampling was applied to select key informants for qualitative interviews. The primary data collection instrument was a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire, supplemented by an interview guide for in-depth information from selected respondents. The questionnaire was pretested on 30 respondents outside the main sample to assess validity and reliability; Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.71 to 0.89 across the sub-scales, confirming adequate

internal consistency(Olanrewaju et al., 2021). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25.0; descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis were employed to address the research objectives(Nelson et al., 2022). Ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the study.

6.0 RESULTS

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis presented in Table 1 summarizes respondents' perceptions of local community engagement and sustainable tourism variables. Community participation in tourism planning recorded a mean score of 3.12 (SD = 0.88), suggesting a moderate level of participation that falls short of active and meaningful engagement. Respondents frequently cited limited inclusion in Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), exclusion from park management board deliberations, and inadequate consultation during the development of tourism products as key barriers to participation(Nelson et al., 2023). Benefit-sharing mechanisms recorded a mean of 3.45 (SD = 0.76), indicating moderate satisfaction with existing revenue-sharing arrangements, though qualitative data revealed persistent concerns about the transparency of fund allocation and the limited geographic reach of community development projects funded through the UWA Revenue Sharing Program. Cultural heritage promotion recorded the highest mean score among engagement variables at 3.67 (SD = 0.71), reflecting growing awareness and appreciation of cultural tourism activities in QENP communities. Respondents acknowledged the positive role of the Katwe Cultural Heritage Site and community-run cultural enterprises, though they noted insufficient marketing support from UWA and tour operators. Sustainable tourism outcomes, measured across ecological, economic, and sociocultural dimensions, recorded an overall mean of 3.54 (SD = 0.82), indicating a moderate level of sustainability perception among respondents.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 245)

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Community Participation in Planning	245	3.12	0.88	1.00	5.00
Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms	245	3.45	0.76	1.00	5.00
Cultural Heritage Promotion	245	3.67	0.71	1.00	5.00
Sustainable Tourism Outcomes	245	3.54	0.82	1.00	5.00

Source: Primary Data, 2025

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients examining the bivariate relationships between community engagement variables and sustainable tourism outcomes. The analysis revealed that all three dimensions of community engagement were positively and significantly correlated with sustainable tourism(Julius et al., 2024). Community participation in tourism planning demonstrated a strong positive correlation with sustainable tourism outcomes ($r = 0.624$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that communities with greater involvement in planning processes tend to report more favorable tourism sustainability outcomes(Sarah & Audrey, 2024). Benefit-sharing mechanisms showed the strongest

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correlation with sustainable tourism among the three predictors ($r = 0.698$, $p < 0.01$), underscoring the centrality of economic benefits to communities' support for and contributions to sustainable tourism. Cultural heritage promotion was also significantly and positively correlated with sustainable tourism ($r = 0.571$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that communities that actively promote their cultural heritage through tourism experience better sustainability outcomes (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). The inter-correlations among predictor variables ranged from $r = 0.34$ to $r = 0.51$, which are below the threshold of $r = 0.80$ commonly used to indicate multicollinearity concerns, suggesting that the predictors are sufficiently distinct to be included simultaneously in a regression model.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix | ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Variable	Comm. Participation	Benefit-Sharing	Cultural Heritage	Sustainable Tourism
Community Participation	1.000			
Benefit-Sharing	0.428**	1.000		
Cultural Heritage	0.345**	0.510**	1.000	
Sustainable Tourism	0.624**	0.698**	0.571**	1.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

6.3 Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the collective and individual predictive power of the community engagement variables on sustainable tourism outcomes. Prior to regression, assumptions of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and independence of residuals were tested and confirmed. The results of the regression model are presented in Table 3. The overall model was statistically significant ($F(3, 241) = 174.35$, $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.684, indicating that community participation, benefit-sharing, and cultural heritage promotion collectively explained 68.4% of the variance in sustainable tourism outcomes in QENP. The adjusted R^2 of 0.680 confirmed the robustness of the model. Among the individual predictors, benefit-sharing mechanisms emerged as the strongest predictor of sustainable tourism ($\beta = 0.412$, $t = 8.94$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that each unit increase in the quality and inclusiveness of benefit-sharing arrangements is associated with a 0.412 standard deviation increase in sustainable tourism outcomes. Community participation in planning was the second most influential predictor ($\beta = 0.298$, $t = 6.82$, $p < 0.001$), followed by cultural heritage promotion ($\beta = 0.211$, $t = 5.23$, $p < 0.001$). The constant term was 0.584, and all beta coefficients were positive, confirming that all dimensions of community engagement make meaningful positive contributions to sustainable tourism.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Coefficients | $R^2 = 0.684$; Adj. $R^2 = 0.680$; $F(3,241) = 174.35$; $p < .001$

Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	β	t	p-value
(Constant)	0.584	0.218		2.679	0.008
Community Participation	0.312	0.046	0.298	6.82	< .001

Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms	0.438	0.049	0.412	8.94	< .001
Cultural Heritage Promotion	0.224	0.043	0.211	5.23	< .001

Source: Primary Data, 2025

7.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm the central proposition that local community engagement is a powerful determinant of sustainable tourism outcomes in QENP. The dominance of benefit-sharing as a predictor ($\beta = 0.412$) aligns with Social Exchange Theory, which predicts that communities will support tourism and conservation efforts commensurate with the tangible benefits they receive from these activities. This finding resonates with Nuwagaba's (2019) Bwindi study and the broader African literature, which consistently identifies economic incentives as the primary motivation for community cooperation with conservation authorities. The moderate mean score for benefit-sharing (3.45), however, signals that current arrangements are insufficient, and that strengthening benefit-sharing mechanisms represents the single highest-leverage intervention for improving sustainable tourism outcomes in QENP (Nelson et al., 2023).

The significant effect of community participation on sustainable tourism ($\beta = 0.298$) corroborates Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory by demonstrating that meaningful inclusion of communities in decision-making processes enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of tourism management. The relatively lower participation mean (3.12) compared to benefit-sharing and cultural heritage scores suggests that participatory governance remains the most underdeveloped dimension of community engagement in QENP. This structural gap necessitates deliberate institutional reforms within UWA to transition from consultative to collaborative governance models. The contribution of cultural heritage promotion ($\beta = 0.211$), while the smallest among the three predictors, is nonetheless statistically and practically significant. This finding validates the cultural economy argument advanced by Ateljevic and Doorne (2005) and demonstrates that cultural heritage serves not merely as a tourism product but as a driver of community identity, pride, and sustainability ownership.

8.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that local community engagement encompassing participation in planning, benefit-sharing, and cultural heritage promotion is a statistically significant and practically important determinant of sustainable tourism in Queen Elizabeth National Park. The regression model explained 68.4% of variance in sustainable tourism, confirming that interventions targeting community engagement will meaningfully advance sustainability goals. The study recommends that the Uganda Wildlife Authority institutionalize community participation in all stages of tourism planning through the establishment of permanent Community-Park Co-Management Committees with clearly defined governance roles and decision-making authority. Additionally, UWA should reform the Revenue Sharing Program to increase the proportion of tourism revenues allocated to surrounding communities to at least 30%, ensure transparent fund management through community-led accountability mechanisms, and expand the geographic coverage of funded projects to reach underserved parishes. Furthermore, a comprehensive Cultural Heritage Tourism Strategy should be

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developed for QENP in partnership with local communities, local governments, and cultural institutions, incorporating dedicated marketing support, training in cultural enterprise management, and heritage site infrastructure development.

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