

AVITOURISM IN ETHIOPIA: POTENTIAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS, CURRENT STATUS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Avitourism, responsible travel for birdwatching, is the act of observing and identifying birds in their natural habitat and is becoming the most rapidly growing segment of ecotourism. It is providing a new economic potential for many poor local communities and for many threatened natural areas around the world. However, only few countries currently have developed this upcoming tourism market. In this paper, I present a review of the potential socio-economic and conservation benefits of avitourism as well as an overview of its current status in Ethiopia and how this could be improved and exploited to its fullest potential. Ethiopia is mainly known for its tourist value from a cultural and historical perspective despite the existence of diverse and unique wildlife and avifauna in particular. However, the high diversity, rarity and endemism of avifauna occurring in the country, Ethiopia has huge potential to become an avitourism hotspot. In order to develop avitourism and exploit its potential benefits in the country, the following activities are required: assigning potential local organizations responsible to lead the initiative; clearly identifying the variety of products available; developing sources of information; training specialized local birding guides; initiating community development and conservation programmes at potential birding areas; and working in partnership with national tour operators and channel partners.

Key Words: *Avitourism products, birding resources, birding routes and sites, birdwatching, conservation, ecotourism.*

Introduction

Now-a-days, tourism is one of the fastest growing smokeless industries globally (Telfer, 2006), mainly due to a general increase in income, access to information technology and increasing travel options (Eagles *et al.*, 2002). Consequently tourism became the industry that had the highest value of export goods and services worldwide, exceeding that of other industries such as automotive products, chemicals and computers (UN-WTO, 2009). In most of the least

developed countries, tourism contributes more than 50% of their GDP (UN-WTO, 2009) and is creating a local incentive for conserving natural areas and enhancing the economic income of the local people (Sekercioğlu, 2002).

Avitourism is a responsible travel for birdwatching/birding, which is the act of observing and identifying birds in their natural habitat (Cordell *et al.*, 1999; Sekercioğlu, 2002; Opperman, 2008; Asefa *et al.*, 2013). It is becoming the most rapidly growing segment of ecotourism,

making a significant contribution to the socio-economic development of and combating poverty among many poor local communities and to the protection and development of threatened natural areas around the world (Sekercioğlu, 2002; Opperman, 2008). The globally rapid growth of avitourism and its high potential to generate a considerable amount of revenue for local people to preserve their natural resources draws the attention of conservationists other development sectors towards its development (Asefa, 2008; Conradie, 2010). This is especially true for developing countries like Ethiopia where rich and unique avifauna is found, but many of the birds and their habitats are facing conservation threats losing their ecological, social and economic values (EWNHS, 1996; Borghesio *et al.*, 2004; Asefa *et al.*, 2013). However, this idea has been little recognized and only few countries have been exploiting the opportunity (Sekercioğlu, 2002; Admasu *et al.*, 2013).

Developing avitourism in Ethiopia requires a preliminary understanding of the position of the country in the global avitourism market, followed by detailed avitourism development and management strategies (OTF GROUP, 2008; Nicolaidis, 2013). Having such understandings is important to enable Ethiopian tourism authorities and other relevant bodies revise their tourism policy identify and prioritize activities should be undertaken to untap the potential of Avitourism development in the country. However, the socio-economic values which birds provide mainly via avitourism activities have been little recognized in the country. As such, the objectives of this paper are to: (1) review some of the reports on the potential benefits of avitourism in some countries across the world; (2) present an overview of the current status of avitourism in Ethiopia; and, (3) provide

suggestions for improving the activity in the country. The main aim of the paper is to create and/or raise the awareness of relevant government decision makers and other stakeholders on the contributions of avitourism in socio-economic development and better environmental management in the country.

Potential Socio-economic and Environmental Benefits of Avitourism

The potential benefits of avitourism can be perceived as social, economic and/or environmental and generally have the same benefits as any ecotourism activity as well as a few specific to its niche. Generally, ecotourism can generate local tax revenues, open new foreign exchange markets, can diversify local economies through employment and creating small business opportunities and contributes to natural resources conservation (Kerlinger and Eubanks, 1995; Sekercioğlu, 2002; Admasu *et al.*, 2011). Ecotourism development is usually accompanied by improved infrastructure, telecommunications and other public utilities which can lead to improved living conditions of local people (Wiedner and Kerlinger, 1990; Cordell *et al.*, 1999; Neto, 2002). It can also serve as one of the poverty and unemployment reduction strategies. Sekercioğlu (2002) reported that in USA, birdwatching activities alone had contributed to the employment of almost 800,000 people in 1996.

Further, increasing livelihood and business opportunities of local communities inhabiting around avitourism destination areas can be an incentive for them to protect their environmental resources, and environmental education for visitors can advocate changes in conservation attitudes and behaviours (Sekercioğlu, 2002; Sharpley 2006; BirLife South Africa, 2008).

Birdwatchers form the largest group of ecotourists, and are, on average, well-

educated and wealthy, which makes them good potentials to improve the financial and environmental well-being of local communities, educate locals about the value of biodiversity and create local and national incentives for successful protection and preservation of natural areas (Wiedner and Kerlinger, 1990; Sekercioğlu, 2002; BirdLife South Africa, 2008). For instance, income generated from birdwatching-related expenses were estimated to be over US\$23 billion in USA in 1996 and it was estimated that 41% of the US\$1 billion tourism income in Costa Rica was from birdwatching tourists in 1999 (Sekercioğlu, 2002). Even in Africa, a penguin colony near Cape Town in South Africa attracted 200,000 people in the 1996-97 tourism season, generating a revenue of over US\$2 million to the regional economy, and the annual value of birding-related activities in the whole country was estimated at US\$15--33 million (Turpie and Ryan, 1998). More recently, it is estimated that South African birders spend a total of US\$19 million per year, and the Zulu Land and Limpopo Birding Routes in the country are estimated to be collectively worth US\$6.5 million per annum in direct economic values to the regions (BirdLife South Africa, 2008).

Current Status of Avitourism in Ethiopia: An Overview

The tourism sector in Ethiopia generally is largely underdeveloped and underexploited compared to its African counterparts, and wildlife-based ecotourism is contributing merely to the sector. Because presently the country is mostly known for its tourist value from a cultural and historical perspective, the diverse and unique wildlife resources, avifauna in particular, of the country have been received less attention as a major component of ecotourism products of the country. In fact Ethiopia still remains

among the lowest tourism beneficiaries in Africa sharing only 0.58% of arrivals in 2003 (Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism [EMCT], 2015).

The major challenges for avitourism development in the Ethiopia are lack of recognition and understanding of its potential and the lack of preservation of important bird areas (Asefa, 2008; Asefa *et al.*, 2013). However, despite these issues there are many positive opportunities that exist for avitourism development in Ethiopia; inclusion of tourism in its Growth and Transformation plans as one major tool to poverty-reduction (EMCT, 2015). But, to ensure this, Ethiopia needs to diversify its tourism activities by introducing new ones such avitourism while as promoting the more popular ones such as trekking and cultural tourism for example.

There is massive potential therefore, to develop the ecotourism sector of Ethiopia, especially avitourism. The country houses about 21 National Parks, 12 wildlife reserves, 2 wildlife Sanctuaries and about 69 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) (EWCA, 2015; EWNHS, 1996). Apart from harbouring many unique, rare and endemic bird species, these protected areas and IBAs encompass the largest area of Afroalpine on the continent and rare montane forest, while also providing spectacular scenic values in the Highlands. The country is one of the top African countries to host high diversity of avifauna including several endemic, rare and/or range-restricted species (Urban, 1980; EWNHS, 1996; Vivero Pol, 2001; Spottiswoode *et al.*, 2011). At present Ethiopia harbours about 861 bird species, including 16 endemics and over 14 near endemics and several rare or several globally threatened and localized bird species (EWNHS, 1996; BirdLife International, 2014). Some regions of the country have already been identified as

'hotspot' birding sites in Africa (Spottiswoode et al., 2011). For example, the Bale Mountains region is identified to be the fourth top birding site in the African Continent (African Bird Club, 2013). This implies, in the presence of other tourism segments like game viewing, trekking and historical and/or cultural sites, that the country has enormous potential to exploit avitourism activities. Despite this, although data on avitourism in Ethiopia is scarce, the share of avitourism to the overall tourism products in the country appears to be very low. For instance, in recent surveys in the Bale Mountains National park it was found that most tourists visit the park for the Ethiopian wolf, Mountain Nyala and Mountain trekking, and only less 1% for bird watching (BMNP, 2007).

Suggestions for Future Improvement of Avitourism in Ethiopia

From the foregoing discussions it appears that avitourism can potentially contribute to sustainable development of Ethiopia and that the country has high potential to exploit this opportunity. Therefore, exploring the crucial actions required to develop avitourism in the country is an important step. These actions are discussed as follows.

Identifying Potential Leading Organization

The idea of avitourism development in potential destination countries in general can only be realized if all the key actors (government tourism agencies, relevant conservation and development NGOs/funding organizations, protected area managers, private sectors and local communities) work together synergistically during the planning, implementation and monitoring stages (Asefa, 2008; Martin Taylor, Personal communication, 2008; Nicolaides, 2013). However, in the first place, it requires that there should be an organization responsible to take the leading role in its initiation and

implementation (BirLife South Africa, 2008; OTF GROUP, 2008; Nicolaides, 2013). In Ethiopia, while government tourism and conservation agencies can play an obvious crucial role in realizing avitourism development in the country, NGOs (indigenous or international) found primarily working towards the sustainable conservation and utilization of birds and their habitats are supposed to be the leading implementer bodies.

Key Actions to be Undertaken to Implement Avitourism Initiative in the Country

Once such potential organization is identified to initiate and implement Ethiopian avitourism, the following eight key actions suggested to be undertaken in order to successfully implement the initiative and ensure the potential contribution of avitourism to livelihood and environmental development in the country.

1. Clearly identify avitourism products and services available along potential IBAs

Lack of awareness about Ethiopia's birding product is the primary reason why birders and channel partners are not coming to Ethiopia. When selecting a destination, both direct birders (who plan their trips by their own) and channel birders (who plan their trips by the assistance of channel tour operator partners that are international or regional tour operators working in partnership with local/national tour operators in the destination country) (OTF GROUP, 2008; Adam Riley, Personal communication; Conradie, 2010) place the most value on the availability of special birds and other wildlife. Ethiopia's wealth of endemic and rare bird species, as well as several range-restricted species, is untapped resources that Ethiopia should highlight to encourage birders to visit and should be promoted actively.

2. Establish birding routes and designating birding sites

Among the specific birding resources requested by birders at visitor destination areas, the most highly relevant resource appears to be a clearly defined birding route (BirdLife South Africa, 2008; Kruger to Canyons Birding Route, undated). For example, in South Africa there are seven established birding routes in different regions of the country, which are initiated and developed by the Avitourism Division of BirdLife South Africa (BirdLife South Africa, 2008; Biggs *et al.*, 2011; Nicolaidis, 2013). The 'Birding Route' concept in the country is successful in realizing the role birds play in providing ecosystem services and economic values, which means, the need to conserve birds and their habitat, and the role local communities play in conserving birds and their habitats (BirdLife South Africa, 2008; Biggs *et al.*, 2011). The 'Birding Route' model developed by BirdLife South Africa is currently being implemented in several countries worldwide such as in Namibia, Australia and Malaysia (BirdLife South Africa, 2008). Although differences may exist in socio-economic, political and environmental aspects [that potentially affect tourism activities in any country] between Ethiopia and South Africa, such a model can and could also be replicated in Ethiopia.

The first step in establishing birding routes is the selection of areas qualifying the basic necessary conditions for birders. Selection of routes depends on four main interlinked factors (Asefa, 2008; Asefa *et al.*, 2013). These are: (1) The route should encompass some of the areas identified as Important Bird Areas of the country and cover as many different biomes with various habitats as possible so that the number of species potentially observed is maximised, paying particular attention to endemics, biome or range restricted,

rare/elusive and threatened bird species. Meanwhile, identifying and designating birding sites along the birding routes, where birdwatchers undertake their birding activities, is equally as important as establishing the routes (Asefa *et al.*, 2013). For the most part, it is generally agreed that birders prefer visiting areas with high bird species diversity and little known and endemic species; (2) Accessibility to birding sites influences the interests of birders to plan their trip to the destination site as birdwatchers typically wish to cover wide areas within their single trip (OTF GROUP, 2008). Thus birding sites should be selected along or nearby the routes and be easily accessible by vehicle and/or foot; (3) Most bird watchers are people with a reasonably high income and so often require appropriate if not luxury accommodation facilities (Sekercioğlu, 2002). The presence of suitable accommodation along the routes (e.g. in towns along the route and community/private lodges at birding sites) are crucial to attract this customer base; and (4) Finally, as is true for any kind of tourism, the safety and security at destination sites is paramount in determining site selection. As such, changing Ethiopia's overall past-present presumed negative images and publicize its security advantages will be critical in helping to develop avitourism initiatives.

3. Developing the most basic of birding resources

Almost all birders look for specific resources available at the destination areas to decide on their booking preferences (Conradie, 2010). The most highly relevant birding resources are: clearly defined birding routes, species checklists, maps (showing the routes and birding sites, as well as accommodations and facilities and infrastructures), sign boards and birding guidebooks (BirdLife South Africa, 2008). However, only few descriptive materials

are recently available in Ethiopia (Spottiswoode, 2011; Asefa *et al.*, 2013). Hence, Ethiopia must first focus on developing the most basic of these birding resources.

4. Promotion and marketing

Depending on booking methods, birders can be categorized in to two broad types: direct birders, who plan their trips by their own, and channel birders, who plan their trips by the assistance of channel tour operator partners (are international or regional tour operators working in partnership with local/national tour operators in the destination country) (OTF GROUP, 2008; Adam Riley, 2008, Personal communication). While website and friends/colleagues-word-of-mouth are the two key most important sources of information for direct birders to plan their trip, for channel birders, tour operators (first), websites (second) and birding trade fairs (third) are the major sources of information (OTF GROUP, 2008; Conradie, 2010). It is, therefore, important that a detailed customer analysis and identifying which market the country wishes to exploit should be undertaken to develop a detailed marketing strategy to target those customers. Thus, primarily focussing on providing website information, and targeting bird fairs and serving channel tour operators should be the first steps in promoting Ethiopia as an avitourism destination.

5. Launch community bird guide development programme

The important role that local communities can play in conservation of birds of Ethiopia and birds' habitats should be recognized. This has shown to work best when the economic benefits from conservation are maximised to the communities. Avitourism, through the use of community bird guides has the potential to generate significant income for the local communities. Community bird guides

provide a source of security and can facilitate logistics locally, however, it is their valuable information on where elusive and special bird species may be found that will be the main draw for birding enthusiasts (Asefa, 2008). A community-bird guides training programme in Ethiopia should be launched in collaboration with appropriate institutions to ensure the participation of and creation of better job opportunities for poor rural inhabitants.

Such initiatives have been undertaken in South Africa and found to be successful. For instance, over 400 community guides received basic guide training from 2001-2008 in the country and are providing efficient guiding services, thereby promoting their income and conservation in their region (BirdLife South Africa, 2008). For example, Biggs *et al.* (2011) reported that trained local bird guides in South Africa earn on the average US\$362 per month compare to US\$144 per month before they were trained

6. Identify existing and develop new and appropriate accommodation facilities along the routes

Appropriate existing accommodations along the routes should be registered by the Ethiopian avitourism initiating organization as 'birder-friendly'. Being 'birder-friendly' means that they provide maximum services for birders, and are expected to be involved in community and conservation development projects that aimed to work towards the mutual sustainability of birds and their habitat and socioeconomic well-being of the community (Asefa, 2008; BirdLife South Africa, 2008). Improving existing and developing new accommodation facilities will need the cooperation of organisations and projects and other actors to identify national and international private sector investors that are able and willing to

develop such tourism services at birding destination sites.

7. Initiate community development and conservation programmes at birding sites

The rationale of linking conservation and development is to encourage support for conservation among local communities by involving them in management and decision-making, and by providing benefits to offset the costs of protection (Biggs *et al.*, 2011). From a benefit point of view, apart from community guides, local communities living at or around the birding sites/IBAs can be involved in different types of development activities, which are directly linked to avitourism. Offering birders services like community eco-lodge, local artefact shops, coffee ceremony and traditional dancing are a few of the economic generating community development activities that are potentially applicable in most of the IBAs of Ethiopia (Asefa, 2008).

Once established and developed, the avitourism initiative should contribute to the conservation of birds and their habitat. This can be achieved by creating awareness of the whole community on the values of conserving birds and their habitats. Local community members, who involved in the avitourism initiative, may play a crucial role in the awareness campaign (BirdLife South Africa, 2008). For example, community bird guides can create a wider awareness of conservation issues among their community and can establish Site Support Groups (SSGs) at birding destination sites to monitor conservation issues. Further, each guide can 'adopt' a school and run education and awareness projects within schools in their community. For instance, in the Republic of South Africa the Zulu Land Birding Route alone has reached about 20 000 school children from 2001-2008 (BirdLife South Africa, 2008; Biggs *et al.*, 2011).

8. Design and establish systems for monitoring and evaluating the impacts of avitourism activities

While avitourism can clearly bring enormous economic benefits to individuals, communities and nations, as well as the conservation and management of natural resources, there are drawbacks associated with an influx of relatively wealthy visitors to an area. For example, avitourism overuse can degrade roads and tourist sites, produce waste and litter and cause bird disturbances. Moreover, exposure and contact with people from other countries, whilst beneficial in many ways in introducing and widening the horizons and knowledge of local communities, can have a detrimental impact on the culture and social wellbeing of communities. Begging children and the erosion of core community values are clearly undesirable side-effects of any tourism (Sekercioğlu, 2002; BMNP, 2007; OTF Group, 2008). Therefore a nationwide monitoring and evaluation programme should be developed to ensure that any potential negatives are identified early and actions curbing the negative impacts are implemented at the earliest appropriate time. In addition to potential negative impacts, positive impacts and benefits should also be monitored and reported. For example, trends in tourist numbers, benefits to communities and local businesses and so on.

Tourism administration systems need to be developed that support and inform avitourism management actions in the country. Computerised databases should be developed on revenue collection, tourist management, visitor evaluation and satisfaction surveys, regulation enforcement systems and tourist movement monitoring. This information will be collated and summary reports, when deemed necessary, produced in order to improve the quality of the countries

avitourism experience. In addition, bird sighting reports from birders should be managed appropriately and they have to be encouraged to report their sighting reports to the relevant local or national conservation organizations. Since most birds are responding to the current land degradation worldwide (BirdLife International, 2014), this information is useful to understand changes in species distribution might occur that used to update country bird atlas.

Conclusion

The current rapid rate of environmental degradation and economic crisis in most of developing countries merits development of existing and potential alternative revenue generating and conservation projects that mutually and equally benefits local communities and their surrounding environment. This review paper showed that avitourism is one of these important socio-economic and conservation activities, with high potential for significant contribution to the local and national economic development and environmental conservation including birds and their habitat. Given the presence of the diverse and unique avifauna and other tourism segments in Ethiopia, it would be possible to run successful avitourism project in the country. This in turn requires indentifying potential organization responsible to lead the initiation and implementation of avitourism development project. Information presented in this paper is believed to create and/or raise the awareness of relevant government decision makers and other stakeholders on the contributions of avitourism in socio-economic development and environmental protection in the country. It would also enable these decision makers and stakeholders revise their tourism policy and prioritize activities should be

undertaken to develop Avitourism in the country.

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