

CONFERENCE TOURISM IN KENYA: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, DIVERSIFICATION AND EXTENSION

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ABSTRACT

Kenya lies along the East Coast of Africa covering an area of 586,350 square kilometers with an estimated population of 33 million people. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy but Kenya is in the process of establishing an industrial base with import substitution and processing industries being established. The country aims at joining the newly industrialized nations (NIC) status by the year 2020. Tourism is currently the second largest contributor to the economy after agriculture. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates, tourism in Kenya contributes eight percent to GDP, provides employment for 470,000 people or 1 in every 15 jobs and generated twenty percent of total exports in 2001.

Tourism in Kenya dates back to the 1930's when overseas visitors and explorers started coming to Kenya mainly for big-game hunting expeditions. At that time, there was limited tourism infrastructure. Despite increased competition from other destinations, Kenya is still one of the foremost tourist destinations in Africa. Approximately 10% of the country is utilized for conservation of wildlife and biodiversity. Game viewing is popular since most visitors to Kenya are mainly interested in seeing "the big five" (the Elephant, Rhino, Lion, Buffalo, and the Leopard) and other smaller and unique game. Given the potential significance of the tourism sector, the Government formulated Sessional Paper No.8 of 1969 on the Development of Tourism in Kenya that defined growth targets for the industry. In the 1960's the goal of the government was to encourage specialized groups from the upper segment of the market to visit the country for big game hunting expeditions. The focus was shifted in the 1970's to target the middle income segment of the market to visit coastal resorts which today account for over 60% of visitors to Kenya. Tourists took advantage of the inclusive package tour arrangements to visit the country in large numbers giving rise to mass tourism. This resulted in over-concentration of tourist activities in certain areas of the country, notably along the coast and in some National Parks and Game Reserves.

Therefore, Kenya is predominantly a nature-based tourism destination with wildlife (concentrated in the southern part of the country) and beaches (along the Indian Ocean) accounting for over 85% of the international tourists visiting the country. Other attractions are based on the physical landscape of the country and the culture of the people. Unfortunately, the full potential of conference tourism has not been exploited. The over-concentration of tourism activities in wildlife protected areas and on the coastal zone has had inherent problems that include severe environmental degradation. There is need to diversify tourism activities and spread them to other parts of the country by putting more emphasis on non-traditional ones such as conference tourism. Conference themes can take advantage of the existing tourism attractions by either using them as subjects of discussion or for recreational purposes during conference periods.

Conference tourism can also minimize seasonality problems in the industry and spatially spread the benefits of tourism across the country.

KEY WORDS: Tourism, attractions, wildlife, beach, culture, conferences, Kenya