

Impact of local community engagement to conservation of natural heritage sites in Rwanda

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Date of Submission: 28-03-2023

Date of Acceptance: 07-04-2023

ABSTRACT: The goal of this study was to determine the impact of community engagement to conservation of natural heritages sites. The study considered three natural heritage sites located in the Southern Rwanda namely Icyuzi cya Nyamagana, Ku bigega and Mu Gakenyeri kwa Musinga. Primary data on the engagement of local community to conservation of natural heritage sites were collected from Nyanza district were those three natural heritage sites are located and from local communities living around those natural heritage sites. Microsoft Excel and Stata for data analysis software analyzed the relationship between local community engagement and conservation of natural heritage sites. The results indicated that 84% of the respondents have visited those natural heritages sites while 16% of the respondents did not, in regards of the value attached to the natural heritage sites, the results indicated that 31% of respondents attached the conservation value to natural heritage sites, 42% attached the economic benefits value and 27% of respondents attached the education value to heritage sites, this brings to view some gaps in low levels of mobilization and sensitization efforts. Concerning the involvement or representation in any kind of dialogue on natural heritage sites management, 81% responded that they have never being involved while 19% responded that they were involved by representing others as local government authorities, this brings to view some gaps in local community involvement to the conservation and valorization of their own heritage. This calls for special emphasis on community engagement, communication strategies, mobilization and sensitization in regards to conservation.

Keywords: Natural heritage site, Local community engagement, Nyanza district, Conservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the impact of community(es) connection to heritage values and practice is

increasingly recognized in scholarship and practice (Colwell, 2008). These attempts aim to ensure that those who are most connected to heritage and have cultural ties, or other factors, see heritage as an economic resource with socioeconomic benefits as well (Higgins and Douglas 2020).

In Africa, heritage management is threatened by many factors and have got many challenges that call for African solutions (Bona and Ngesura, 2009). One of the major challenge faced is local community disengagement from managing their own heritage within their vicinity (Chitty 2017). As a result of colonial orientation, most African countries are still using the colonial template that distances local communities from taking care of their own heritage at the expense of western values and practices (Ashworth,1998). Today, many African countries are still challenged on to how to make the conservation and management of heritage more compatible with community ownership, empowerment, and engagement as mechanisms to ploughing back both the socioeconomic and academic benefits (Sherpherd, 2002). The spillover effects of colonialism aligned to the top-down management of heritage as opposed to bottom-up or grass root approach are still haunting Rwanda and Africa (Freeman, 1984). And as a result, many local communities feel neglected and abandoned in the planning process and the ideal nature of ownership, self-pride and active engagement is microscopic or seen through the eye of a needle (Kyriakidis 2019).

Rwanda, like many other African countries, has rich cultural history with strong cultural identity, common heritage, (Goulding,1999) shared values and ethics envisaged and deeply rooted in different layers of history being displayed in museums, local language, traditional music, dance and drama and heritage sites located in different parts of the country describing the natural heritage (Ngenzi,2009). Despite the 1994 Genocide Against

Tutsi that claimed many lives- living the country in shambles, the governments’ will and orientation towards the conservation of culture, history and heritage has been the Centre of focus with significant and practical efforts on ground (Alpin,2002). Recognizing the importance of cultural and natural heritage as a driving force in socioeconomic and political development has been the heart of Rwanda’s development agenda. Many people flock in the country with the urge to see, experience and learn more about the country’s vibrant and deep rooted culture (Masaba, 2017). Through resilience and hard work, the country has managed to come up with far-fetched development strategies and policies as possible solutions to the challenges being faced (Smith,2009). The call for home-grown solutions from aspects of past traditional practices like Gacaca, Umuganda, Abunzi, Girinka, Itorero, just to mention but a few, has tremendously impacted positively and enriched on reconciliation programs aligning well with the country’s needs (Masaba, 2017).

Back in time, from pre-colonial, throughout colonial to post-colonial taste of time within the Greatlakes region, the country’s rich natural heritage is vivid and cross-cutting through existing physical attributes measuring up to over 500 natural heritage sites, (Bolin & Nkusi,2022). The journey into curatorship and management of these heritage places is progressive and certain -

thanks to Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy (RCHA), under the Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement (MINUBUMWE) and in close collaboration with key stakeholders; Rwanda Development Board (RDB), GIZ and district authorities. Heritage and archaeology experts at RCHA are doing incredible job in mapping sites, designing conservation plans and excavating important discoveries about human history (Claude,1997). The heritage sector is still expanding and growing to the tune of now eight museums and over 500 natural heritage sites under the custody and management of RCHA and MINUBUMWE. More vivid focus is being made and realized in drafting cultural and natural heritage policies and laws to protect and promote heritage resources of national importance (Aucler & Fairclough,2005).

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

2.1 Description of study area

Nyanza district is located in Rwanda’s province, the district lies between Ruhango and Huye straddling the main Kigali to Bujumbura road. Nyanza covers a total surface area of 672 km² and has a population of more than 32,000 people where its population density is 481 people per km². The district is divided in 10 sectors, 51 cells and 420 villages

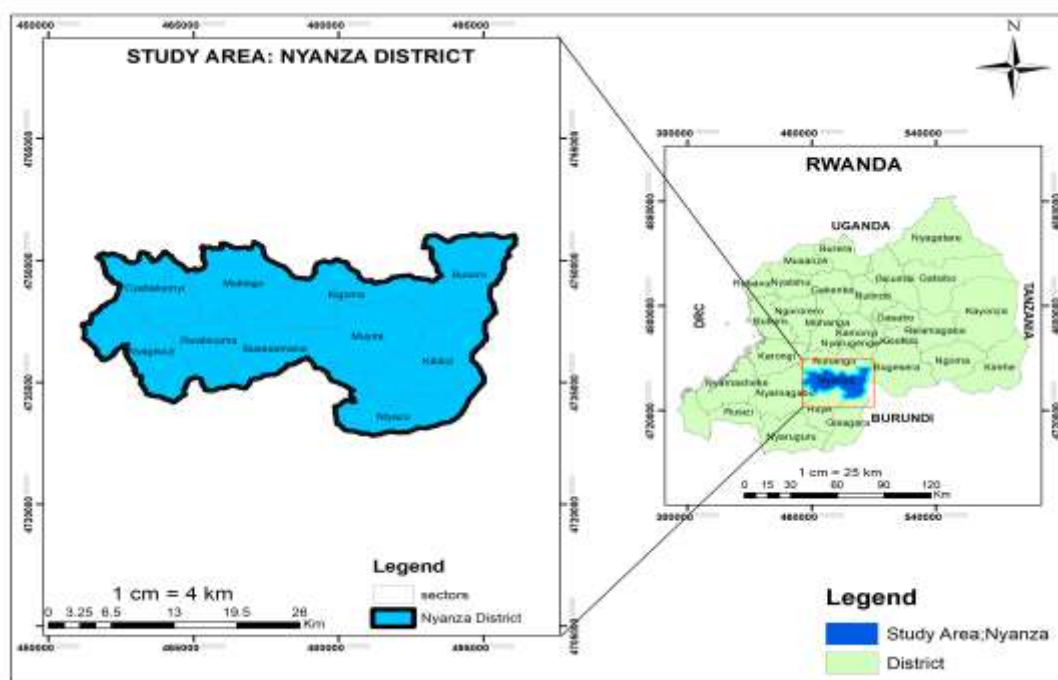


Figure 1.1: Map indicating the location of Nyanza district and its districts’ bordering.

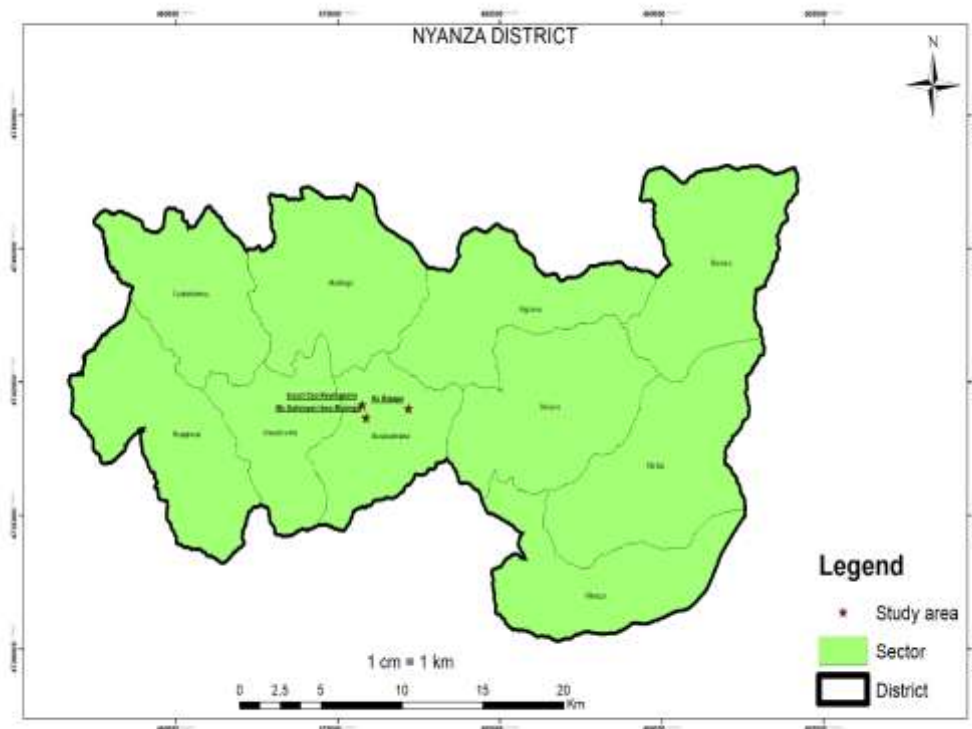


Figure 1.2: Location of icyuzi cya Nyamagana, Ku bigega and Mu gakenyeri kwa Musinga

Icyuzi Cya Nyamagana. Located 1.7 km from Nyanza town centre. It was constructed by King Mutara III Rudahigwa, with the support of Dubois, a Belgian agronomist with purpose to start fish farming and reduce malnutrition after the severe famine -Inzara ya Ruzagayura that struck the country between 1943 and 1944. At present, the site is managed by Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy and Nyanza district.

Mu Gakenyeri kwa Musinga. Located 0.7 km from Nyanza town centre. It was built in 1899 and served as the royal palace to King Yuhi V Musinga and Queen mother Nyirayuhi Kanjogera.

Ku Bigega. Located on the Kigali-Huye RN1 highway main road. The food reservoirs were built in 1946 by King Mutara III Rudahigwa after the severe famine- Inzara ya Ruzagayura that struck the country between 1943 and 1944. The purpose of its set up was to mitigate future disasters. At the time, the local people gathered cereal crops, especially beans and sorghum, then collected by the chiefs and handed over to those who managed the stores. After the demise of King Rudahigwa in 1959, the stores were used as a marketplace for food crops and other merchandise, such as cooking oil,

sugar. In 1994, the stores were robbed, after which the private sector managed them until 1998. The stores were then handed over to the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry (MINAGRI). Since 2000, these stores have been run and managed by the Rwanda Agricultural Board (RAB).

Nyanza District is home to some of the most outstanding natural heritage sites of national importance. Aligned to this, tourism business opportunities through Community Based Tourism Enterprises (CBTE's) along cultural trails and natural heritage sites have been created to booster community empowerment, improve the socio-economic status by selling of art crafts and regular incomes from employment (Plumptre et al.2003). This is a good platform to the local community in Nyanza district on ways to play their role in the conservation of natural heritage sites while creating opportunities aiming at generating incomes (Ashworth,1998).

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The primary data was used in this study by collecting data directly from sources, the tools used were mainly questionnaires and interviews and the data were in its original or raw form both

qualitative and quantitative in their nature. This study was conducted in Nyanza District in Southern province in Rwanda especially in 3 heritage sites namely Icyuzi cya Nyamagana, Mu gakenyeri kwa Musinga and Ku bigega, to mention that all those three heritage sites are natural heritage from Busasamana and Mukingo sectors. The target population was 177 local communities around those natural heritage sites and 5 employees of Nyanza district that occupied the positions in relation to the management, protection and promotion of natural and cultural heritage. The data were analyzed by using Microsoft Excel and Stata for data analysis software and were presented into

charts and Tables.

III. RESULTS

The results in Figure 2.1 showed that 84% of responded visited Icyuzi cya Nyamagana, Ku Bigega and Mu Gakenyeri kwa Musinga as natural heritage sites, while 16% of responded have never visited those natural heritage sites. This means that the large number of the local communities in Nyanza district valorize their natural heritage and are willing to protect and conserve it for future generations.

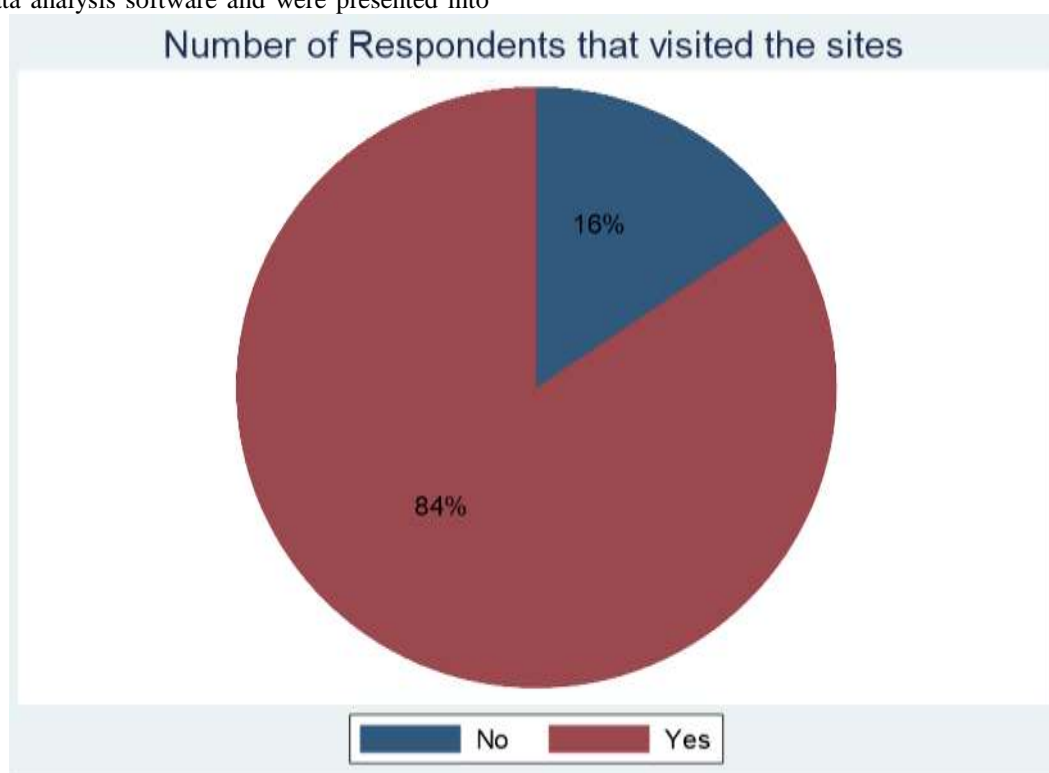


Figure 2.1: Number of local communities visited natural heritage sites

Source: Research data (2023)

According to the results in Figure 2.2, 31% of respondents attach the Conservation value to Nyanza natural heritage sites, 42% attach the Economic benefits value while 27% attach to Nyanza heritage sites the value of Education. This

indicates that Nyanza district local communities are committed to the protection and conservation of their heritage. This also indicates that the conservation of natural heritage sites is an advantage for economic benefits.

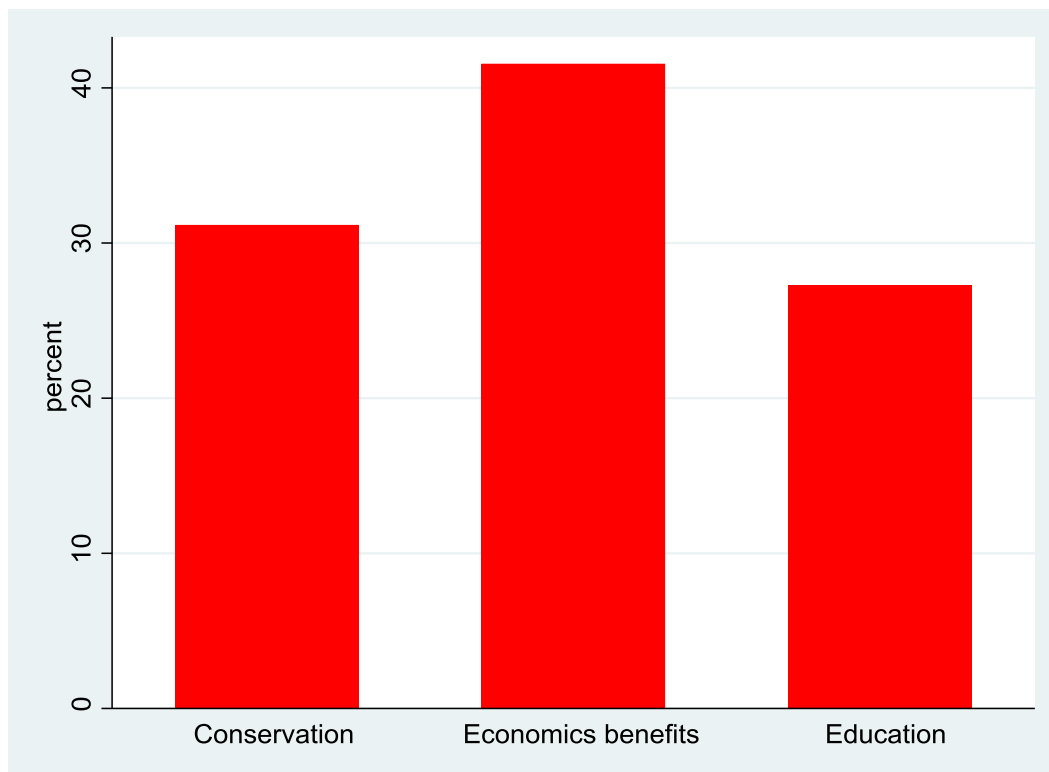


Figure 2.2: Values attached to Nyanza natural heritage sites

Source: Research data (2023)

The results in Table 2.1, indicates that 81% of respondents have never been involved in any kind of dialogue on planning and management of natural heritage sites at Nyanza district, while 19% of respondents have been involved in

dialogues at the district. This shows that the engagement of local community to conservation of natural heritage sites is too low. And yet local communities should be the decision makers in the engagement process about natural heritage

10. have you ever been involved or represented in any kind of dialogue or planni	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
no	62	80.52	80.52
yes	15	19.48	100.00
Total	77	100.00	

Table 2.1: Involvement in any kind dialogue on planning and management of natural heritage
 Source: Research data (2023)

Furthermore, the authors analyzed the contribution of Nyanza district as a territory that host the three mentioned natural heritage sites by also having the mandate to protect, safeguard and valorize its heritage. Therefore, as illustrated in

figure 2.3, it was noticed that 80% of responded agreed that Nyanza district has a framework of natural heritage sites management and conservation, while 20% respondents said that there is no existing framework at the district level.

This means that in collaboration of key partners such as Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy and GIZ, a development of a sustainable framework on natural heritage sites has been developed, but few

of local communities are not aware, communication strategies should be key to build strong and sustainable relationships.

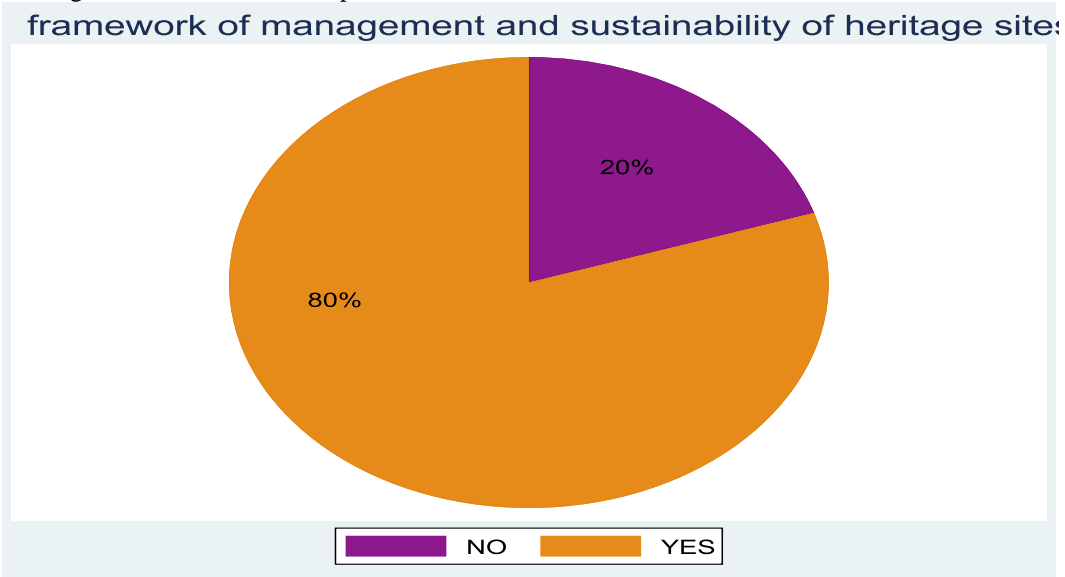


Figure 2.3: Framework of management and conservation of Nyanza natural heritage sites
 Source: Research data (2023)

After having a look on the framework, the authors wanted to know more from Nyanza district respondents if they use to engage local communities in management and conservation of natural heritage sites. The figure 2.4 indicates that 40% of respondents said that local community are engaged through their authorities at village level, 20% respondents said that they are engaged through their destination manager, 20%

respondents said that they are represented through their sectors representatives while 20% respondents clarified that local communities engagement is not well organized, this shows how local communities do not really want to be represented but want to express their views and ideas in regards to the conservation of their own property or natural heritage sites.

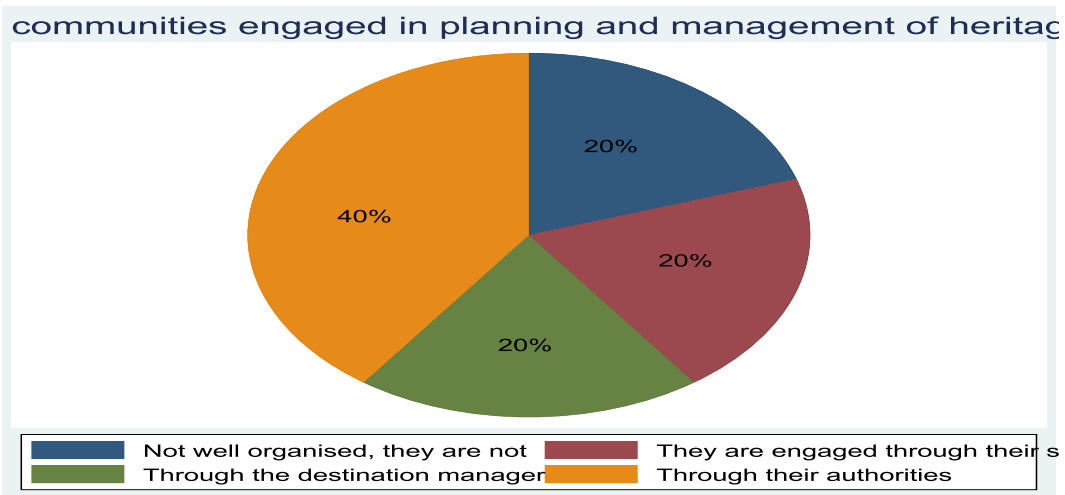


Figure 2.4: Local community engagement in management and conservation of natural heritage sites
 Source: Research data (2023)

To end the research made, the authors also wanted to know what will happen if the local communities will be given a chance to manage the three natural heritage sites. 14% of the respondents said that they will but in place Community based tourism enterprises (CBTEs) along those natural heritage sites, 19% of respondents said that they will put in place business activities, 30% of respondents would promote community awareness

and youth involvement, other 13% of respondents would create leisure tourism activities, while 23% of respondents would put in place programs on the protection and conservation of natural heritage sites. All those results indicate how local communities are committed to protect and conserve natural heritage sites and generate income through them.

businessbusiness. Given a chance to manage one the heritage sites in Nyanza dist	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
CBTE	11	14.29	14.29
business	15	19.48	33.77
community awareness and youth involvm..	23	29.87	63.64
leisure tourism activity	10	12.99	76.62
protection and consrvation of the site	18	23.38	100.00
Total	77	100.00	

Table 2.2: Local community engagement in management and conservation of natural heritage sites
 Source: Research data (2023)

IV. DISCUSSION

Heritage site management framework call for a holistic and multidisciplinary approach that caters for site interpretation, visitor management, conservation, education, economic and finance to inform the planning, marketing (promotion), and sustainability strategies (Blundel, 1996) highlighting the role played by local communities in decision-making and engagement process about heritage resources (Adams & Hulme, 2001).

Despite the huge potential of sites in ploughing back the economic benefits to communities, having a deeper sense and great efforts to decolonize heritage in Africa, and Rwanda in particular,(Machercher,2022), evidence still bring to view the muteness or non-existence of local communities in the planning process of heritage resources in the country (Sarkis,2001) As a result, due to lack of active community engagement in the planning process to instill self-pride and ownership mind-set,(Poria & Rerchel,2006) the protection and sustainability of heritage sites is at stake and witnesses show an imaginable destruction of the same on a large scale (Apostolokis,2003). More strategies and interpretations ought to be designed for effective and proper management of heritage sites to assure

future access and sustainability. And this is possible through community engagement (Chirukure & Pwiti,2008).

Major findings bring to view the significance of community engagement in the management and sustainability of heritage sites in Nyanza District. Activities like Nyanza cultural trails, development and mentorship of CBTE's have had an upper hand in raising awareness and increasing the number of visitors. The majority of local communities are aware of these unique assets not because that they are actively engaged with them but because of the cultural and historical set up of the district.

Much as there are vivid existing gaps heritage sites management and sustainability and local community engagements, to some extent there is a robust strategy by Nyanza District to actively revamp the tourism status from being a transit to a destination level. This upgrading comes with "Nyanza District Tourism Destination Management Plan" that outlines clearly stakeholders' mapping that accommodates local communities voice in heritage and tourism businesses. The plan is still new but the district has felt and is still witnessing great impact of improvement with regards to local community attitude and mind-set change towards the

management and sustainability of heritage sites in Nyanza District.

V. CONCLUSION

Nyanza District is largely shaped by history and culture. The district has got rich, unique and diverse spectrum of heritage in the paths of time. Nyanza present a huge potential in imaging the country's cultural identity with enormous opportunities in the tourism industry that in one way or the other benefit local communities.

However, this huge potential, value attachment and sense of belonging is destined to vanish, if nothing is done to seize the opportunity before much is lost (Burns,2004).

Generally speaking, a lot is being said than done in heritage site management, conservation and planning. There is lack of skilled personnel in the field of heritage studies and management, not only in Nyanza District but also in the country at large; with the exception of the very few with hands-on-experiences in museums and heritage studies in Rwanda. The heritage industry is still demanding and its management and development calls for skills related to the field. This has in a way has dragged cultural and heritage tourism sector into the hands of unskilled labour. There is need to train more staff to match and level with what their work attributes call for.

In regards to conservation of natural heritage sites in Rwanda, through the research study, gaps and missing links prevailed and the best way to bridge them, is to but not limited to:

- 1) **TRUST & COMMUNICATION:** In building stronger and sustained relationships, there is need to put in place more sufficient communication networks to enhance on better communication results.
- 2) **LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY:** This mainly concerns about gathering support and resources. Management and sustainability of heritage sites should not be left to heritage owners or cultural institutions alone. The more stakeholders involved the more valuable it becomes.
- 3) **OWNERSHIP & EMPOWERMENT:** For local communities to actively be engaged in the management and sustainability of heritage sites for economic benefits, there is need to give them the ability to be able to say or be heard about their heritage. There is need also, to let them be identified with a particular heritage to enable them cultivate a sense of pride and social inclusion.
- 4) **MOBILISATION & SENSITIZATION:** Communities cannot own what they do not

understand. Experience in tourism vividly shows that raising public awareness through outreach and education programs greatly impact greatly in the management and sustainability of heritage sites by bringing them closer to local communities

- 5) **ACTIVE ENGAGEMENTS IN THE PLANNING PROCESSES:** Working with communities in their own language and in a place they related enables them to know and understand better. There is need to co-produce and manage decisions together. Site-community partnership is core to the management and planning processes of heritage development and management to ensure the sustainability.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank all data providers which facilitated the completion of this research.

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