

Effect of World Heritage Sites on Sustainable Livelihood: A Case Study of Nyungwe National Park, Bushekeri Sector/Rwanda, 2023-2024”

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ABSTRACT: The study sought to investigate the effect of world heritage sites on sustainable livelihood: a case study of Nyungwe national park, Bushekeri sector/Rwanda, 2023-2024” thus the main objective of this study was to investigate the site’s best practices contributing to the Bushekeri Sector population’s livelihood, to examine the socio-economic conditions of communities in the Bushekeri Sector, and to assess the relationship between the Nyungwe Heritage Site and community livelihoods. The study utilized both quantitative (questionnaires of 390 adult local stakeholders in Bushekeri) and qualitative (interviews with 5 NNP managers/staff, 5 Bushekeri community business practitioners partnering with NNP, and 5 tourism/hospitality professionals near NNP) research methodologies. Purposive quota sampling was used for the interview participants, while the questionnaire respondents were randomly selected. Data from questionnaires and interviews, analyzed using Excel, indicates that respondents acknowledge benefits from Nyungwe National Park (NNP). A significant portion (67.9%) cite community initiatives as a positive practice. Socio-economic conditions have improved since NNP became a World Heritage Site, with tourism-related activities being a major livelihood source (44%). Most respondents (46%) have a positive perception of NNP’s role in their living conditions. The relationship between NNP and the community is largely seen as positive and active (79%), with 85% affirming that conservation supports local economic activities. Hospitality (21%) and tourism (41%) are the most impactful sectors. NNP has contributed to economic growth through tourism, capacity building, and infrastructure development. The study emphasizes the importance of

community involvement in decision-making for sustainable development and stronger relationships between conservation and local livelihoods.

Key terms: World Heritage Sites, Livelihood, environment sustainability, wellbeing economy, outstanding universal value

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural and natural heritages are priceless possessions for mankind and their success means the success of all the world’s people. Parts of that heritage are of outstanding universal value and deserve special protection from their increasing threats and dangers. In this regard, the member states of UNESCO adopted in 1972 the convention created by a committee to complement heritage conservation programs. This committee has been associated with a World Heritage Fund operational since 1972 (UNESCO, 1994).

Sustainable use and benefit sharing are key aspects of World Heritage properties that impact regional and national economies. Beyond the inscription of exceptional buildings and places, the World Heritage List aims to recognize, inscribe, and protect outstanding testimonies of the interaction between humans and the land, of cultural coexistence, spirituality, and creative expression. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) defines sustainable use as the use of components of biological diversity without leading to the long-term decline of biological diversity. In addition, this use maintains the potential to meet the needs and aspirations of present and future generations while prioritizing a fair and equitable distribution of any benefits, sustainable practices, and innovations (UNESCO, 2012).

As per the preamble of the World Heritage Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), “parts of the cultural and natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole.” This gives a reason for a convention that promotes an effective system for collective protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value. This value is believed to be an exceptionally cultural and/or natural significance that transcends national boundaries with common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As of July 2024, in 168 countries, there are 1,223 World Heritage Sites among which 952 are cultural, 231 natural, and 40 mixed cultural and natural properties (ICOMOS, 2009).

In 1976, UNESCO convened an expert meeting that defined the concept of the outstanding universal value (OUV) and decided the six criteria to meet for a cultural property to be of outstanding universal value in 1980. According to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2023), a property must meet at least one of the Outstanding Universal Value's (OUV) criteria, the conditions of authenticity and integrity, as well as the requirement of protection and management. Also, it is prescribed that sustainable development principles should be integrated into the management system for all types of natural, cultural, and mixed-nominated properties. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa reflected on three interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development: the environmental, the social, and the economic. Furthermore, strengthening the dimensions of sustainable development may bring benefits to World Heritage sites and support their OUV, if carefully integrated within their conservation and management systems. However, Africa is confronted with enormous challenges when it comes to conserving and promoting the continent's heritage sites concerning managerial planning of various activities related to sustainable development that are sometimes incompatible with conservation goals (UNESCO, 2015; AWHF, 2020).

The African sites are criticized for their poor conservation, which results from key threats including but not limited to poaching, unsustainable levels of hunting, uncontrolled fires, logging, invasive species, and climate change. Between the 2014 and 2017 assessments, the overall outlook for African sites improvement

slightly improved. Ethiopia's Simien National Park became Africa's first natural World Heritage Site when it was inscribed in 1978. Since then, the network in Africa has grown to include 48 natural and mixed sites in 30 countries across the continent—spectacular places from the snow-capped summits of Kilimanjaro, Mount Kenya, and the Rwenzori Mountains to the dense rainforests of the Congo Basin, the wide-open spaces of Africa's great savannas, and the vast deserts of the Namib and Sahara.

Most of Communities who live in African near protected areas, including Nyungwe National Park (NNP), often face high poverty and rely on park resources, leading to negative impacts. In the NNP area, reliance on subsistence agriculture, low income, limited jobs, large families, and high population density contribute to this dependency. Poverty is characterized by low education, large families, poor housing, limited infrastructure, land shortage, and food insecurity. This poverty drives illegal activities like hunting and resource conflicts (timber, minerals, bushmeat, etc.). Lack of income-generating alternatives exacerbates these threats to wildlife conservation. Despite Rwanda's tourism revenue-sharing program (5% initially, later 10%), it hasn't fully improved community well-being around NNP, partly due to the historical exclusion of local communities in heritage management. The study highlights the need for greater community involvement in decision-making regarding conservation practices, priorities, and revenue sharing to improve livelihoods and foster sustainable development. Given NNP's World Heritage status and the lack of prior research on its role in achieving this, the researcher aims to investigate this specific aspect.

Despite the challenges related to budget constraints, shortages of personnel, and the loss of significant elements that contribute to their OUV, African sites are initially distinctive from those elsewhere for their outstanding biodiversity value and significantly fewer for their geological value. In general, terrestrial sites in Africa are bigger than those elsewhere in the world, and most African sites are suffering significant management shortcomings (Howard, and Bertzky., 2020). Nyungwe National Park was the first site in Rwanda to be featured on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and this inscription aims to serve as a vital step in ensuring long-term conservation, preserving natural heritage for future generations, and promoting sustainable development for neighboring communities. According to RDB (2023), Nyungwe National Park was officially designated as a natural World Heritage Site on

September 19, 2023, by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee. The same source asserts that this inscription is a vital step in ensuring long-term conservation, preserving the natural heritage for future generations, and promoting sustainable development for neighboring communities.

In the pursuit of sustainability, the government of Rwanda promoted responsible natural resources management to recognize the crucial role of ecosystem services and civil society participation in policy elaboration and implementation as well as the engagement of local and Indigenous populations (Ruticumugambi, et al, 2020).

It is very key to note the role of heritage sites to their neighboring population. Bolin & Nkusi (2022) assert that communities that are engaged with and benefit from heritage, including economically, are more likely to protect and ensure the survival of heritage resources that they value. Following the same path, the current study seeks to explore the effect of Nyungwe National Park as a World Heritage site on the livelihood of the park's adjacent communities.

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

2.1 Description of study area

Nyungwe National Park (NNP) is a tropical mountain rainforest located in southwestern Rwanda and a biodiversity hotspot of

the Albertine Rift. Nyungwe is an area of large conservation importance in research and an excellent tourism destination in Rwanda and across eastern Africa due to its large size, pristine habitats, rich biodiversity, physical characteristics, and conservation efforts. The Park extends to an area of 1013 km² of the main forest block; it is sometimes estimated to cover 1019 km² while including the Cyamudongo, a small forest relic located 10 km away from Nyungwe forest, and some other associated forest patches such as Gisakura natural forest. Nyungwe is known for its diversity of primates, including ones found on the global list of threatened species such as the 'endangered' eastern chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii* and the 'vulnerable' Hamlyn's monkey *Cercopithecus Hamlyn*. A group of Angolan black-and-white colobus monkeys' lives in Nyungwe in an exceptionally large group that can be made of more than 300 individuals. Nyungwe forest is a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) and an Important Bird Area (IBA) among the few ones known in Rwanda. Nyungwe forest in Rwanda is contiguous in the south to Kibira National Park in Burundi (Majyambere M, et Al. 2018). Economically, subsistence agriculture was the main activity for the communities around Nyungwe National Park. Low agricultural income, limited access to job opportunities, the large size of local households (6 people per household), a high density of the population, imply a dependency on natural resources.



Figure 2.1: Bushekeri Sector and NNP

Bushekeri Sector is in Nyamasheke District, and it is one of the sectors that are

connected to Nyungwe National Park. The total population is 29,680 on 105.5 km² of the area of

94.8 rural settings. Considering the age groups, 15,585 are 15-64 years old (2022 census, National Institute of Statistics Rwanda).

2.2 Data collection and analysis

In research, a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection is was using and then the data was gathered by using questionnaire through google form and face to face interviews for in-depth insights from stakeholders on environmental

challenges, focus group discussions to gather community perspectives, field observations was done to directly assess the issues, thereafter, the collected data analysis of the were analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and finally presented in table with the form of descriptive, statistical tables and percentages. Data interpretation and discussions were carried out in a manner that answered the research questions and the objectives of the study.

Table 2.1 Sample size

Respondents	Number
NNP Park management and staff	5
Tourism and hospitality professionals	5
Bushekeri non-tourism community-based business practitioners	5
NNP adjacent local community	390
Total	405

Source: Primary data 2025

III. RESULTS

3.0. Occupation of the respondents

The respondents were described in terms of their occupation using both the interview and questionnaires. The data are presented below:

Table 3.1 Occupation of the respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Eco-rangers/forest rangers	90	22
Tour guides	75	19
Hospitality and lodge staff	65	16
Traders	45	11
Sustainable agriculturists	40	10
Wildlife monitoring and research staff	25	6
Educators	25	6
Public servants	25	6
Others	15	4
Total	405	100

Source, Primary data 2025

The data above shows that rangers are the majority of the respondents 22%. This finding confirms how the community's livelihood is impacted by the presence of the NNP as a World Heritage site. This is so because the rangers are usually sourced from the nearby community. This is followed by the respondents who come from the tourism 19 % a hospitality 16%.

The data above are confirmed by Fahad et al (2020) who argue that forestry can be a source of economic growth and employment, in forest-rich countries.

This finding entails how much the NNP impacts livelihood through the occupation in

different sectors related to the NNP works, tourism and hospitality sectors.

3.1 NNP practices and their impact on livelihoods

The respondents who are associated with the parks were asked about the conservation practices that are in use at the NNP. In addition, the respondents revealed how NNP contributes to the success of their livelihoods thanks to different practices that are in place. These include conservation law enforcement, restoration of critical ecosystems and research & monitoring

3.1.1 Benefits associated with conservation law enforcement

The interviewed respondents described the contribution of the conservation law enforcement

practices as far as livelihood is concerned. The benefits associated with law enforcement are presented as follows:

Table 3.2. Benefits from the law enforcement

Benefits from law enforcement	Frequency	%
Ownership of the community	7	47
Reduced conflicts	5	33
Accountability of the stakeholders	3	20
Total	15	100

Source, Primary data 2025

According to data from the interview, the majority of the respondents 7 assert that conservation law enforcement practice gives ownership to the community. In addition, 5 respondents point out that thanks to law enforcement conflicts in the form of poaching are reduced while 3 respondents associate conservation law enforcement with improved accountability of the stakeholders. Conservation law enforcement guarantees the establishment and respect for national wildlife. It also supports the management of sustainable natural resource use, mitigates human-wildlife conflict, and brings about stability in the area. It is thanks to law enforcement that Nyungwe's eco-ranger team which acts as a facilitator between conservation law enforcement and communities, forming a link between the

community and the park team, was made up of community members. Many of them have renounced their previous involvement in illegal activities, and have contributed to the removal of 60% of all poachers'snares from the forest. The park is building a sense of ownership of conservation among the people who live around it, and developing an ecologically healthy and financially self-sufficient asset (African Park, 2025).

3.1.2 Benefits associated with the restoration of critical ecosystems

The interviewed respondents described the contribution of restoration n of critical ecosystems practices as far as livelihood is concerned. The collected data are listed below:

Table 3:3 Benefits from the restoration of critical ecosystems

Benefits from the restoration of critical ecosystems	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Job creation	6	40
Nature protection	5	33
Modern ways of action	4	27
Total	15	100

Source, Primary data 2025

The restoration practice mobilizes the community through job creation (6 respondents), inclusion in nature protection (5 respondents) and providing new ways of action like sustainable agriculture, minimized energy consumption, etc. (4 respondents). In fact, in 2020 African Parks was invited by the Rwandan government to sign a 20-year agreement to manage Nyungwe. Thanks to this, a great job is being done to restore and protect biodiversity, engage with the local communities,

and develop opportunities to improve the economic sustainability of the park (African Park, 2025).

3.1.3. Community's sense of sustainability

Respondents from the community revealed their level of awareness of the conservation practices advanced by the NNP from the perspective of sustainable livelihood. Responses for the questionnaires on how the community experience the conservation practices applied by the NNP are in the following table:

Table 3.4 Indicators of sustainability awareness

Sustainability awareness through	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Job creation	130	33
Modern infrastructure	80	21
Capacity building	65	17
Safe environment	50	13
Modern ways of action	40	10
Ownership	25	6
	390	100

Source, Primary data 2025

Data in the table above show that 33% of the community is aware of the park conservation practice through the job created, 21 % through accessing modern infrastructure like electricity, health and educational services, 17% through opportunities for capacity building, and 13% through an experienced safe environment. Ownership of the NNP operations and other ways of doing things like sustainable agriculture, and energy minimization in cooking are other aspects of which the community are aware of the NNP conservation operations. For example, a mushroom farming community project, funded by Nyungwe National Park, is becoming a thriving local enterprise (African Park, 2025). Other community-led initiatives mentioned include involvement in ecotourism. For example, groups from the community manage tour guides, nature walks, and cultural experiences. Also, locally made crafts and souvenirs sold to tourists visiting the park and the efforts to engage the local community in

sustainable tourism and activities that emphasize conservation and environmental education are other initiatives that are associated with NNP.

3.2 Socio economic condition of the community adjacent to NNP

Different aspects of livelihood were investigated considering how they are impacted by NNP that has become a world heritage site. Data from the interview and the questionnaires were presented both table and charts.

3.2.1 NNP contribute as the main sources of livelihood

Respondents were asked about their primary sources of livelihood in terms of their income from activities that are impacted by the NNP. Data from both the interview and questionnaires are presented below:

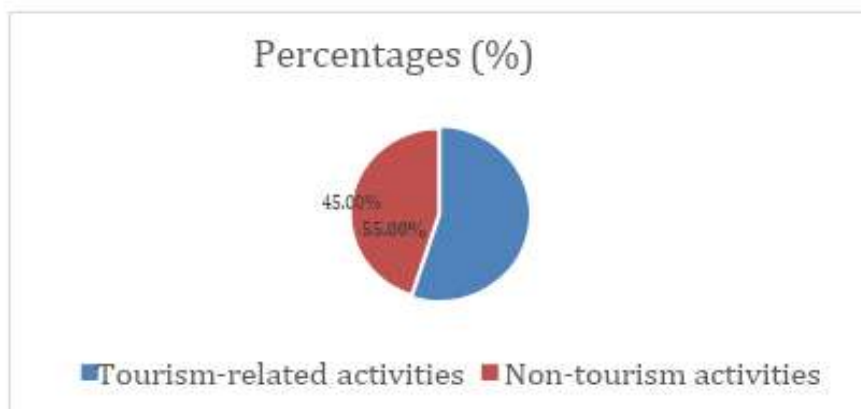


Figure 3.1 NNP as a source of income Source, Primary data 2025

The data show that tourism-related activities, driven by the presence of Nyungwe National Park, are a significant source of livelihood for the community (55%) followed by non-tourism activities (45%). Tea plantation is one of other activities that mobilize member of the community

in Bushekeri sector. To sum up, NNP is a very important factors for income generation among the community of Bushekeri which entails that their livelihood depends upon the presence of NNP. The above is some of the factors to confirm the general perception that tourism in World Heritage Sites

provides essential economic opportunities for local populations. This is also confirmed by fact that the broad objectives should be mutually understand by the stakeholders to ensure success in sustainable development (Govan, et al., 1998).

3.2.2 Household economic conditions as impacted by the NNP

Respondents have different perceptions on how their living conditions have improved as a result of engaging with the parks. Data from both the interview and questionnaires are presented below:

Table 3.5 Living conditions as impacted by the NNP

Impact on the living conditions	Frequency	%
Moderate	185	45.68
Poor	99	24.44
Very poor	59	14.57
Well-off	62	15.43
	405	100

Source, Primary data 2025

The data indicate that the majority of respondents 46% well perceive the role of NNP in their living conditions. This underscores the importance of sustainable economic opportunities, like those provided by Nyungwe National Park, to improve these conditions. Following a successful partnership with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) in Akagera National Park, in 2020 African Parks was invited by the Rwandan government to sign a 20-year agreement to manage Nyungwe. Together, we are working to restore and protect biodiversity, engage with the local communities, and develop a strong tourism offering to improve economic sustainability of the park. Today, the park is building a sense of ownership of conservation among the people who live around it, and developing an ecologically healthy and financially self-sufficient asset. The facts above align with the major measurable economic impacts of heritage through jobs and household income;

small business incubation; center city revitalization and property values (Tüzün, and Luigi, 2011).

3.3 Relationship between NNP and its stakeholders in the Bushekere sector

The touchpoints between the NNP and its impacts were investigated in terms of how the stakeholders from the community perceive their involvement in the NNP operations and their expectations form NNP, especially since it has become a world heritage site was assessed.

3.3.1 Perceptions on the relationship between the NNP and the community

To assess the relationships between the NNP and the community. Respondent were asked how active and positive they perceive their relationship with the NNP in terms of livelihoods. Data from both the interview and questionnaires are presented below:

Table 3.6. The relationship between the NNP and the community

Active and positive relationship	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Agreed	383	95%
Disagreed	14	3%
Neutral	8	2%
	405	100%

Source, Primary data 2025

Regarding the impact of Nyungwe National Park on daily life in the past two years, 95% of respondents reported a positive and active impact, with many citing increased employment opportunities, better infrastructure, and improved access to markets. However, 3% disagreed, mainly

due to land-use restrictions imposed by the park, which limited agricultural activities for some households. The data above clarify that the community and the NNP have a strong and active relationship.

Table 3.7 Opportunities availed by the NNP

Opportunities availed by the NNP	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education and training	40	9.90
Employment in conservation	55	13.60
Improved infrastructure	60	14.80
Hospitality jobs	85	21.00
Tourism boosted sales	165	40.70
	405	100.00

Source, Primary data 2025

Hospitality (21%) and tourism (41%) are the most population impactful sectors at NNP. Employment and development of infrastructures are other aspects though with the engaged with NNP in this aspect. A developed conservation infrastructure helps the stakeholders to have access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water in the Bushekeri sector. These findings indicate that the park plays a key role in improving local livelihoods through diverse channels.

They are also confirmed by a clear link between tourism and world heritage sites asserted by Farid (2015) that tourism is boosted at the World Heritage Site and its revenue may reduce

poverty by stimulating business development and job creation that is in principle compatible with biodiversity conservation as well as enhancing local services, and through improved education empowering local people to advocate for the protection of the natural environment.

3.3.2 The park's support to its stakeholders

The role of NNP is diversified as demonstrated by the respondents who have been supported within the period of 12 having 12 months. Data from both the interview and questionnaires are presented below: Table 4:10 Kinds of support provided by the NNP

Kinds of support provided by the NNP	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Training in leading community initiatives	45	11.10
Direct incentives	101	24.90
Tourism management training	119	29.40
Workshops on sustainability	140	34.60
	405	100.00

Source; Primary data 2025.

In short, **Objective one:** To investigate the site's best practices contributing to the Bushekeri Sector population's livelihood. Different practices including conservation law enforcement, restoration of critical ecosystems and research & monitoring are in use at the NNP. The majority of the respondents 7 assert that conservation law enforcement practice gives ownership to the community. In addition, 5 respondents point out that thanks to law enforcement conflicts in the form of poaching are reduced while 3 respondents associate conservation law enforcement with improved accountability of the stakeholders. In other words, functional conservation law entails there is productivity translated into improved livelihood of the stakeholders.

Data also demonstrate that the restoration practice mobilizes the community through job creation (6 respondents), inclusion in nature protection (5 respondents) and providing new ways of action like sustainable agriculture, minimized

energy consumption, etc. (4 respondents). This confirms that the community benefits from the restoration practice and therefore their livelihood is positively impacted. As far as the practice of research and monitoring is considered, data in Table 4: 5 demonstrates that the majority of respondents perceive job creation as the first takeaway of the community from the course of research and monitoring followed by the implantation of modern infrastructure and technology and then capacity building. Since the NNP became a World Heritage Site a lot has been done to ensure solid research and monitoring and the community is included to ensure success. This confirms that the community benefits from the NNP research and monitoring activities through employment, opportunities for training and improved infrastructure. In addition to the above, data shown that 33% of the community is aware of the park conservation practice through the job created, 21 % through accessing modern

infrastructure like electricity, health and educational services, 17% through opportunities for capacity building, and 13% through an experienced safe environment. All of these are indicators that local community in Bushekeri sector benefits from the conservation best practices explored above.

Objective two: To examine the socio-economic conditions of Bushekeri community thanks to Nyungwe National Park. As per data in Figure 4-3 the sources of income for the 55% of community in Bushekeri sector is from tourism-related activities, while non-tourism activities account for 45% all driven by the presence of Nyungwe National Park. Therefore, NNP is a key driver of income among the community of Bushekeri for success of their livelihood. In addition, Table 4:7 confirms how the majority of respondents 46% well perceive the role of NNP in their living conditions. This underscores the importance of sustainable economic opportunities, like those provided by Nyungwe National Park, to improve these conditions. As a conclusion, NNP contribute to the social economic success of the community in Bushekeri sector.

Objective three: To assess the relationship between Nyungwe Heritage Site and community livelihoods. According to data shown the majority of respondents 95 % reported a positive and active relationship that exists between NNP and the community. In addition, data in Figure demonstrates that more respondents (85%)' economic activities are supported by the NNP therefore their livelihood is positively impacted. Outlines the opportunities availed by the NNP whereby Hospitality (21%) and tourism (41%) are the most population impactful at NNP. The relationship between the NNP and date adjacent community is also highlighted by the types of supported that the community benefit from as per data, in few words, the community livelihood is impacted by active relationship that exists between NNP and the community in Bushekeri sector.

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