

Tourism and Protected Areas in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Protected areas are diverse in Sierra Leone with immense potentials that are yet to be fully utilized. Government has made huge investment in the tourism industry, yet the returns are not fully realized due to the diverse needs of the various Protected Area. Efforts to address these issues include partnerships with international organizations, community-based conservation initiatives, and the development of sustainable tourism programs. It is important for government and stakeholders to continue to work together to ensure the long-term protection of Sierra Leone's unique ecosystems and biodiversity. Effective tourism and conservation efforts require continued funding, community engagement and collaboration with local and international stakeholders. there are opportunities for growth and development in Sierra Leone's tourism industry, and the country has a number of sustainable tourism initiatives that can help to support local communities and promote conservation.

Keywords: Tourist; Destination; Communities; Sierra Leone; Cultural; Heritage and Natural Beauty

Abbreviations: WWF: World-Wide Fund for Nature; SLNPA: Sierra Leone National Protected Areas Authority; MTC: Ministry of Tourism and Culture; MDA: Ministries, Departments and Agencies; NTB: National Tourism Board; IFTM: International French Tourism Market; Destination Management Company (DMC)

Introduction

Sierra Leone is located on the Atlantic coast of Africa at latitudes 6°55' and 10°00' N and longitudes 10°14' and 13°18'. Its coast is about 560 km and stretches 6°55. N to 9° N. The area of the coastal region is approximately 71,740 km². Sierra Leone has five regions - North, North West, East, South and West Regions consisting of sixteen administrative districts, namely: Bo, Bombali, Bonthe, Falaba, Kailahun, Kambia, Karene, Kenema, Koinadugu, Kono, Moyamba, Port Loko, Pujehun, Tonkolili, Western Rural and Western Urban. Sierra Leone is bordered by Guinea to the north and northeast, Liberia to the south and southeast, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west [1].

The wet season generally lasts from May to November with two periods of squally weather, in March- April and May, and again in September to October. The highest observed cloudiness from the area is 6-7 oktas and is closely related to the influence of the equatorial monsoons blowing from June to November. The cloud amount decreases to 3-5 oktas during the months of December to April. The highest amount of rainfall occurs during the rainy season. The heaviest rains are in July and August.

Average monthly rainfall peaks in July and August, with an average of 27/60 rainy days in July and August [2]. The country is divided into the following main relief areas: coastal interior plains, interior plains and mountains. The area of the shelf is 30,000 km (up to a depth of 200 meters). In the districts, there are chiefdoms each of which is ruled locally by paramount chiefs representing the various tribes in the chiefdom [1]. Chiefdom councils made up of tribal authorities (chiefdom councilors) are set up to administer the chiefdoms and to advice the paramount chiefs who in turn coordinate with district councils etc. Villages are governed by chiefs and village area committees [3]. The lowest level is the household. These socio-cultural and political structures play an important role in the development of effective coastal resource management strategies. In the Western Region, the administration is under the control of the Freetown Municipal Council, which in turn coordinates activities with the various village regional committees, tribal chiefs and district councils [1]. The tourism industry consists of hospitality (accommodation and dining), tourism (transport services through various modes of transport) and many others providing services and products

to tourist companies. Tourism is an information-rich industry. Sierra Leone's tourism industry has emerged as one of the main growth engines of Sierra Leone's service sector. It is described as a potential game changer. It is a sunrise industry, an employer, an important source of foreign exchange for the country and an economic activity that helps local and host communities [4].

Protected Areas in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has a number of protected areas, including national parks, wildlife reserves, and forest reserves, which are managed by the Sierra Leone National Protected Areas Authority (SLNPA). These protected areas are important for conservation and tourism, and they provide a range of benefits for local communities and the country as a whole.

i. Gola Rainforest National Park: Established in 1997, this park covers an area of about 700 km² and is home to a variety of flora and fauna, including the endangered pygmy hippopotamus.

ii. Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary: Established in 1995, this sanctuary is home to over 100 rescued chimpanzees and is a popular tourist destination.

iii. Banana Islands National Park: Established in 2007, this park covers an area of about 120 km² and is home to a variety of marine life, including dolphins and whales [5].

iv. Mamunta-Mayosso Wildlife Sanctuary: is a game reserve in Tonkolili District, Northern Province, Sierra Leone. It is one of the few areas in the country that protects the threatened Dwarf Crocodile as well as being home to 252 bird species despite its small size. It is situated between Magburaka (30 km to the Northeast) and Yonibana (35 km to the Southwest). The site is important for the economy and culture of the local people and is the first site to be managed as Wildlife Sanctuary in Sierra Leone. Eight species of primates are known to occur in this sanctuary, in addition to other big game such as bushbuck, bushpig, genets and duikers. The threatened primate species are Western Chimpanzee (En) and Red Colobus monkey (Vu). Other threatened fauna are Pigmy Hippo (NT) and Dwarf Crocodile [6].

v. Tiwai Island National Park: Established in 2007, this park covers an area of about 12 km² and is home to a variety of wildlife, including monkeys and birds.

vi. Loma Mountains National Park: Loma Mountains Non-hunting Forest Reserve was identified as a key area in the national protected areas system and was declared a National Park (LMNP) in 2012 to off-set the environmental impact caused by the creation of the Bumbuna dam on the Seli River. As part of a long-term plan to provide an environmental offset for biodiversity losses resulting from inundation of the Bumbuna hydro-electric project catchment area, a rapid survey was conducted in 2008 to assess large mammal diversity at Loma [7].

vii. Outamba Kilimi Hills National Park: is located in northwest Sierra Leone near the border with the Republic of Guinea. The park is divided into two areas, Outamba (741 km²) and Kilimi (368 km²). The area became a game reserve in 1974, and was formally gazetted as a National Park in October 1995 (Munro,2015). The park is named after its highest peak in one part, Mount Outamba, and its longest river in the other, River Kilimi. The area was originally chosen for preservation as it contains a large number of chimpanzees. The vegetation is called woodland savanna, with a mixture of jungle and savanna [8]. There are several protected areas within the wetlands of Sierra Leone including 3 more proposed categories for protection; National Parks (Lake Sonfon, Lake Mape, and Lake Mabesi), Game Reserves (Yawri Bay, Bagru – Moteva creeks, Sewa – Wanje and Kpaka); Game Sanctuaries (Mamunta-Mayoso).

Status of Protected Areas in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has several nature reserves to protect its diverse ecosystems and wildlife. As of 2021, the country has 12 officially recognized protected areas covering about 4.1% of the country's total area. Despite the existence of these protected areas, conservation efforts in Sierra Leone face several challenges. One major problem is insufficient funding and resources to manage parks and enforce conservation laws. This has led to problems such as poaching, illegal logging and encroachment of protected areas [9].

In addition, the encroachment of human settlements into protected areas can lead to human-wildlife conflicts, which are common in most protected areas. Poaching remains a significant threat to many species in Sierra Leone's protected areas. Deforestation and habitat destruction are a serious threat to many species in Sierra Leone's protected areas [10]. Climate change is likely to have significant impacts on Sierra Leone's protected areas, including changes in rainfall and an increase in extreme weather events. The Sierra Leone National Parks Authority (SLNPAA) is responsible for the management of the country's protected areas, which presents significant challenges to an agency with little or no funding [11].

The government has created several conservation programs to protect endangered species, such as the chimpanzee conservation program. The World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) worked with the government to develop conservation plans for several protected areas [12]. Local communities are involved in conservation efforts through initiatives such as community-based conservation programs. Efforts to address these issues include partnerships with international organizations, community-based conservation initiatives, and the development of sustainable tourism programs. It is important for government and stakeholders to continue to work together to ensure the long-term protection of Sierra Leone's unique ecosystems and biodiversity.

Tourism in Sierra Leone

Tourism is an important sector of the economy of Sierra Leone and the country has several popular tourist attractions. Some of Sierra Leone's most popular attractions include beautiful beaches, protected forest areas, islands, mountains, national heritage sites and vibrant nightlife. Its natural forests and mountains offer incredible wildlife that can be found in several tourist attractions. Tacugama, for example, is home to various species of chimpanzees; The Kangar Hills are home to wildlife such as chimpanzees, monkeys and a small group of elephant populations; Gola and Kambui Hills Forest Reserves are home to several species of mammals, birds, reptiles and plants [13]. Other tourist spots include the peninsula in the western region with beaches such as No. 2 rivers, Lakka and Tokeh; several islands including Banana, Bunce, Turtle, Sherbro and Tiwai and many night clubs, bars and restaurants.

Huge investments made by the government were made in the hotel industry where, among others, the Bintuman Hotel, Brookfields Hotel, Radisson Blu were renovated and Cape Sierra Hotel was started to be converted into a Hilton Hotel [14]. Consequently, with the country's eco-tourism potential and relative peace and stability for almost two decades, international tourist arrivals have been increasing. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MTC) has the primary responsibility for drafting policies, laws and regulations. coordinate and link with other government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) in the promotion of tourism initiatives; ensure the promotion of the tourism assets, products and services of the country both locally and internationally and create a favorable environment for the success of the tourism industry. A conscious effort has been made to strengthen collaboration with old and new stakeholders in the field.

The government promoted fairs, cultural events and the entertainment industry and reformed the country by renewing tourist destinations and representation at international tourism events [4]. This is consistent with the key targets for the sector in the MTNDP (2019- 2023) which include to develop and upgrade at least three strategic historical and cultural sites, increase skill competence in the hospitality industry by 25 percent, and boost annual revenue and contribution to GDP by at least 100 percent (GoSL, 2015) [15]. In 2019, the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report rated Sierra Leone as the best country in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of airport transportation and land and port infrastructure [16]. Recently, MTCA and the National Tourism Board (NTB) engaged in promotional and rebranding activities by participating in the International French Tourism Market (IFTM) 2019 in Paris, France; 2019 World Travel Market in London, UK and 2020 FITUR International Tourism Fair in Madrid, Spain. Two important events were organized in Freetown in 2020: a rally with about 700 participants from Budapest to Bamako ended in Freetown and Sierra Leone was visited by 300 Danish tourists [17].

Challenges and Opportunities

The sector is challenged by a poor regulatory environment, weak policy framework, outdated tourism master plan, weak institutional capacity, limited access to finance, poor service delivery, inadequate infrastructure, poor maintenance of tourist destinations and corruption. There is a need to restore historical landmarks, restore the country's image, provide sector-specific training and address issues of deforestation, desertification, mining, encroachment of sensitive areas, poor sanitation and waste management systems, and declining wildlife [18]. COVID-19 was one of the external shocks, that also grounded the tourism industry in Sierra Leone. Furthermore, the lack of destination brand awareness, both domestically and internationally. In addition, the low recognition of the target brand both domestically and internationally. Invest Salone surveyed a number of African tourism experts and 80% knew little about Sierra Leone or its tourism assets. They had a mainly negative perception of the country due to past events such as the civil war and Ebola and the belief that "there is nothing exciting to do in Sierra Leone".

There are no direct flights from the UK [18]. The airport is small, often congested and inefficient. There is no reliable quality control of tourism services and products, and no hotel classification system to raise standards and reassure travelers. Availability of vehicles to transport large groups (eg cruise ship passengers) to tourist destinations is limited and infrastructure is generally inadequate. There is a need to provide sector-specific training, improve waste management and tackle illegal activities such as poaching and logging, which can lead tourists to boycott the country for ethical reasons. Most tour operators will only work with a Destination Management Company (DMC) as there is a high chance that arrangements will fail. This increases costs [18]. With the current trends of things in Sierra Leone, increased of tax on imported drinks will eventually cause business not to order. As a result, they will disappear from the local market because of low demand. When tourists realise that these items such as beer is not available in the Sierra Leone market and want to enjoy drinking it when they visit the country.

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to encourage and attract investment in the sector. After recognizing tourism as one of the diversification growth sectors along with agriculture and fisheries, the government formulated the National Tourism Policy and the National Ecotourism Policy as sustainability plans for the sector, with the goal of attracting 20,000 international and 30,000 domestic ecotourism. 2025. renovation and reconstruction of existing hotels and establishment of new hotels and eco-centers both in coastal areas and in tropical forests. The general objective of the government is to increase tourism income and jobs through the promotion of international image and culture, improvement of the country's cultural heritage, historical sites, skills and infrastructure development; marketing promotion; diversification of tourism products; and attract investors to the sector [18]. There is significant potential for growth in the tourism industry as the

country showcases its tourist sites and natural resources. Building human capacity in the tourism and hospitality industry provides prospects for investment in this sector.

Conclusion

Although Sierra Leone has made significant progress in establishing protected areas, many problems remain in these areas. Effective tourism and conservation efforts require continued funding, community engagement and collaboration with local and international stakeholders. Sierra Leone has a rich cultural heritage and natural beauty that makes it an attractive travel destination. The country has several protected areas, such as national parks, nature reserves and forest reserves, which are important for nature conservation and tourism. However, the country's tourism industry faces several challenges such as infrastructure, security and marketing. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for growth and development in Sierra Leone's tourism industry, and the country has a number of sustainable tourism initiatives that can help to support local communities and promote conservation.

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