

# **COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM IN THE BALE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK, ETHIOPIA: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNT**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to evaluate the obstacles and possibilities for promoting community-based ecotourism in Bale Mountains National Park (BMNP) Ethiopia and to summarize and present the lessons that European countries can learn from the empirical results. A descriptive research design was used to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The participants were chosen with the snowball sampling technique and data was gathered through a questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, and observations. Our results testify that the local community possesses a variety of ecotourism assets that might be transformed into profitable community-based tourist goods. These would comprise leisure activities, scenic attractions, and other types of entertainment. From a tourist product standpoint, the local cultures are vibrant and highly intriguing, as are the endangered animals and plants, Fincanbera tourism attraction, Bodity Mountain, rivers, and waterfall watching chances. Despite the excellent prospects and favorable environment for CBET development, the Park faces many obstacles to expanding community-based ecotourism, including low levels of local participation and benefit sharing, infrastructural, manpower, and awareness-related difficulties, policy issues, lack of stakeholder engagement, and exploitative resource use, according to this study. The study's relevance for Europe is illustrated by the fact that the demand for developing countries is gradually increasing, and the motivating factors are increasingly focused on the knowledge of the natural environment. On the supply side, the adaptability and role of grassroots, bottom-up community-based projects are highlighted.

**Keywords:** Local Communities, community-based ecotourism, Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the sectors with the fastest rate of growth in the world today is tourism, which has a significant influence on local economies, societies, and the environment (Marinello et al., 2023). Traveling is a social activity that brings people from all over the world together (UNWTO, 2008, as cited by Sochipem Zimik & Barman, 2023). In order to foster goodwill among people and, consequently, the nation's socioeconomic growth, tourism is essential. The

tourism sector employs a large portion of the workforce directly and indirectly and adds much to the nation's foreign exchange reserves. Supporting a country's handicrafts and fine arts also contributes to the preservation of the natural beauty, the nation's cultural inheritance, and soil tradition, as well as advancing the process of national integration and international fraternity (Thommandru et al., 2023). It is becoming a more significant source of income, employment, and wealth in numerous nations. Prior to now, people have only focused on the economic benefits of tourism while ignoring its ecological and sociocultural repercussions. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, people tried to pay attention to difficulties associated with tourism and ecotourism in general. Protected areas are under increasing pressure from tourism-related activities, and ecotourism is frequently created within or close to these regions. The paradox of ecotourism is that the ecosystem it depends on gets more degraded the more well-known an ecotourism location is (Lawrence et al., 1997). Increased knowledge of the world's environmental challenges is one of the primary driving elements for the dramatic growth of ecotourism. In both rich and developing nations today, ecotourism is a significant economic force (Fennel, 1999).

Nowadays national parks are being developed and operated as representative ecotourism destinations (Dangi et al. 2018) and national parks are one of the preferred destinations of ecotourism activities. National parks not only have outstanding natural environments and historical and cultural value, but they also create the opportunity for community-based ecotourism in developing countries.

The main objective of our study is to explore the potential and characteristics of community-based ecotourism in Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia. Our research questions are:

- What are the opportunities and barriers to community-based ecotourism in Bale Mountains National Park?
- How is community-based ecotourism engaged with local society and what characterizes this process?
- What lessons can European National Parks and community-based ecotourism learn from the Ethiopian experience?

Examining the potential and limitations of community-based ecotourism in the BMNP was found to be important since it reveals the gaps and opportunities for ecotourism expansion in the park. In order to support development actors, decision-makers, and policymakers in the creation of protected areas, pilot research has been done in this field. The relevance of the study and the pilot research is increased by the fact, that the Bale Mountains National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List in September 2023.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM AND THE BALE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK**

Community-based ecotourism (CBET) is considered a sustainable form of tourism that improves the quality of life of hosts at the tourist destination (Pookhao, 2014). CBET endeavours to fill the gap in ecotourism by integrating the local community in the development and operational processes. Consequently, CBET seems to be a solution for local people seeking sustainability in a tourism destination. In the past, many people were unaware of the relationship between community-based ecotourism (CBET) and ecotourism, but now a large number of people worldwide are aware of it because CBET offers the community a number of advantages. Communities can support conservation through ecotourism if they perceive some advantage (or aspire to) and if it does not jeopardize or disrupt their primary sources of income (Kiss, 2004).

CBET is concerned with the social facets of society, and through empowering them and enabling them to profit from ecotourism operations, organizes everything for them. Due to the value ecotourism activities offer to the community, whether directly or indirectly, in terms of generating income and opening up job opportunities, developing and poor countries are now paying attention to them (Guerrero-Moreno & Oliveira-Junior, 2024). Additionally, it offers visitors a top-notch cultural and environmental experience while having no negative environmental impact (Fennel, 1999). For ecotourism development to be effective, local planning and implementation are essential (Drakopoulou, 2011).

According to Bacsı et al. (2023) tourism in Africa shows faster growth than in most parts of the world, and East Africa including Ethiopia is one of the major tourism destinations in Africa, where natural resources are among the most important tourism appeals. Although local communities play a crucial role in the sustainable management of these areas, they hardly benefit from living in the most attractive nature-based destinations. The tourism industry in Ethiopia has a promising future and has been expanding gradually in recent years (Bayou and Bedane, 2014; Ketema, 2015b). Ecotourism development has a lot of promise in Ethiopia. Ethiopian ecotourism, meanwhile, is still in its infancy. On the other hand, Ethiopia's ecotourism industry is growing in popularity due to the nation's indigenous flora and wildlife, breathtaking topography, and abundant cultural heritage.

Protected areas cover 17% of Ethiopia's land area. There are 10 national parks under the protection of the federal government and 12 more managed by regional authorities. Even though the majority of protected areas are suitable for CBET development, they nonetheless run into a

number of issues with the local people that have historically slowed down the development of the area. This serves as an example of the numerous challenges that tourist development encounters as a result of a disrespect for local community involvement. Since the creation of a Conservation and Protected Area Programme in 1965, Ethiopia has struggled to maintain its incredible biodiversity and natural resources (Jacobs and Schloeder, 2001). While others have declined in size, several Ethiopian National Parks only exist on paper (Jacobs, 1993). A wide variety of natural, cultural, and paleontological resources have been added to Bale Mountains National Park (BMNP), making it ideal for ecotourism that is based on nature and culture. There are numerous potential ecotourism resources in the park and the surrounding area that could be used to create ecotourism-related goods. Bale Mountains National Park is renowned for its exceptional Afro montane biodiversity, breathtaking scenery, abundance of native wildlife, intact cultural artefacts, and presence of several migratory bird species.

However, since its establishment in 1969, the Bale Mountains National Park and the neighbourhood have encountered a number of challenges linked to the preservation of biodiversity and necessities of sustenance, such as unsustainable human activities and inefficient resource management. In Bale Mountains National Park, which has tremendous ecotourism potential but also faces serious ecological degradation and biodiversity concerns, ecotourism is defined by its underdeveloped state. The major barriers to the growth of community-based ecotourism are inadequate infrastructure and a lack of awareness, a lack of stakeholder initiatives, low levels of local participation and benefit sharing, poor park-community ties, settlement unsustainable livelihood, and exploitative resource use patterns (Hafezi et al. 2023).

Despite recent improvements in the number of visitors to BMNP, the park's ecotourism sector and rate of visitor flow remain underdeveloped in comparison to its resource base. To make natural resources more beneficial to the local population and the environment, ecotourism should be promoted. Ecotourism combines the preservation of natural areas with improving community livelihoods (Temesgen, 2015; Lemenih et al., 2009). By conducting in-depth research and documentation of potential attractions, creating sound ecotourism plans, supporting successful ecotourism implementation strategies, and generally increasing the participation and responsibility of all stakeholders, ecotourism may be created in some BMNP areas (Ayele, 2011; Aynalem, 2016;).

## METHODOLOGY

### Introduction of the case study area

The Bale Mountains National Park was designated in 1969 and legally recognized in 2014. The National Park covers some 215,000 ha and falls within Oromia National Regional State, as well as the buffer zone of some 235,121 ha, which includes all the 29 villages adjacent to the Bale Mountains National Park boundary (WHC, 2023). The BMNP is located between 6° 29' and 7° 10' N and 39° 28' and 39° 57' E, roughly 400 km south of Addis Abeba. The Oromia region's Bale and West Arsi zones contain the park. The park is surrounded by five woredas (districts, the third level of the administrative divisions of Ethiopia), including 26 rural kebeles (a minor administrative region in Ethiopia), with Adaba in the west, Dinsho in the north, Goba in the northeast, and Delo Mena and Harena Buluk in the south-east (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Location of the study area



Source: Own elaboration using the basic map of [www.freeworldmaps.net](http://www.freeworldmaps.net)

Situated at the heart of the 2,150 km<sup>2</sup> Bale Eco-region (BER), the Bale Mountains National Park is one of Ethiopia's biodiversity hotspot places (Gulte et al. 2023). The park is the greatest afro-alpine area in Africa and is situated between 1,500 and 4,377 meters above sea level (Gashaw, 2015). The uncommon, endemic, and endangered species present in the BMNP span all taxa and habitat types, contributing to its global relevance. Additionally, the hydrological system delivers water to up to 20 million downstream users, generating economic advantages (Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority, 2017). The plateau and the mountains that surround it have a chilly climate with lots of rainfall, whereas the lowland area has a tropical

climate that is warm and dry. The BMNP has a varied range of climatic conditions. The long rainy season, which runs from July to October with the highest peak in August, and the short rainy season, which runs from March to June with the highest peak in April, are both present in the eastern portion of the BMNP. Only a brief rainy season, lasting from February to June, occurs in the lowland portion of the BMNP (BMNP, 2017). The research site's lower altitude parts receive 600–1000 mm of mean annual rainfall, whereas the higher altitudinal areas receive 1000–1400 mm (BMNP, 2007). The study area experiences significant daily temperature fluctuations, ranging from -15°C to 24°C. 18.4°C is the mean annual maximum temperature, and 1.4°C is the mean annual minimum temperature. Since 1991, the BMNP has seen a significant influx of migrants, primarily due to the change in government (Stephens et al. 2001). Additionally, pull factors related to local politics and the perceived availability of land, as well as push factors related to the limited economic opportunities in the migrants' areas of origin, have contributed to the migration wave (Wakjira et al. 2015).

## **DATA COLLECTION**

The main objective of the study is to identify the barriers to and potential for community-based ecotourism development in the BMNP. Because of this, the descriptive approach was utilised to gather reliable and pertinent information about the subject of the study, and the design is distinguished by the creation of a clear research question in advance. The descriptive approach is used to gather information at a certain period to characterize the nature of present circumstances or to ascertain the connection between particular events. These factors led to the determination that descriptive tactics were more persuasive than qualitative ones.

Both primary and secondary sources provided the information used in this investigation. Among the important sources are the local community, community members, park officials and managers, lodge, government representatives, NGOs engaged in conservation activities, and lecturers. In order to support the analysis, it was also necessary to look into secondary sources, which included books, published and unpublished materials, and annuals. The researchers selected the local woredas and Bale Mountains National Park as a study area. In order to gather the necessary data for this study through interviews, scouts, lodge owners, NGOs, government officials, lecturers, and other stakeholders were specifically chosen. Household samples were acquired by employing networks and the snowball sampling approach. Due to the importance of informal relations in the local economy, the snowball sampling method was the most optimal and efficient sampling method for the research.

According to the directorate of Bale Mountains National Park, a total of 1500 people live in the park, dispersed throughout all five woredas. As the population of the national park live in separate statistical units, official data on the demographic characteristics of the national park population are not available. The researchers selected two woredas Goba and Dinsho for the study sample, where majority of people reside. To determine the sample size for the questionnaire, the researchers adjusted an equation from Yamane (1967).

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where; N = the total population that will be studied

n is the number of people who must be included in the sample.

e = the precision level (which is 10%).

Where Confidence Level is 95% at P = ± 5% (maximum variability)

Accordingly, the total number of sample size for the questionnaire was 75 from two districts (*woredas*). Together with 15 key informants and 75 respondents, the total sample size was 90 persons.

Three various procedures, including the distribution of questionnaires, interviews, and field visits, were used to collect the data. The non-representative pilot study including empirical questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews has been carried out between March and October 2022. The participants were questioned in an unstructured manner. An interview guide in the form of a list of questions was created. In order to get their opinions on the challenges and prospects for fostering community-based ecotourism in the BMNP, community members, park officials, lodge owners, lecturers, travel agencies, NGOs, and government officials were questioned. A questionnaire survey was used for local households. The questionnaire was designed primarily to gather data on socioeconomic traits, community involvement and participation, perceptions of the park and wildlife, attitudes towards issues of community-based ecotourism and resource use, and the stream of benefits provided by the park. A note-taking camera was also used to capture important information. During park visits, observation served as the main technique of data collection in order to, among other things, monitor the state of biodiversity, visitors, guides, tourism facilities, management of environmental attitudes, and feedback from a variety of local residents' consciousness and lifestyles.

Graphs, percentages, frequencies, and other descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyses the quantitative data from the questionnaire. The sociodemographic make-up of respondents and issues with community-based ecotourism in the Bale Mountains National Park

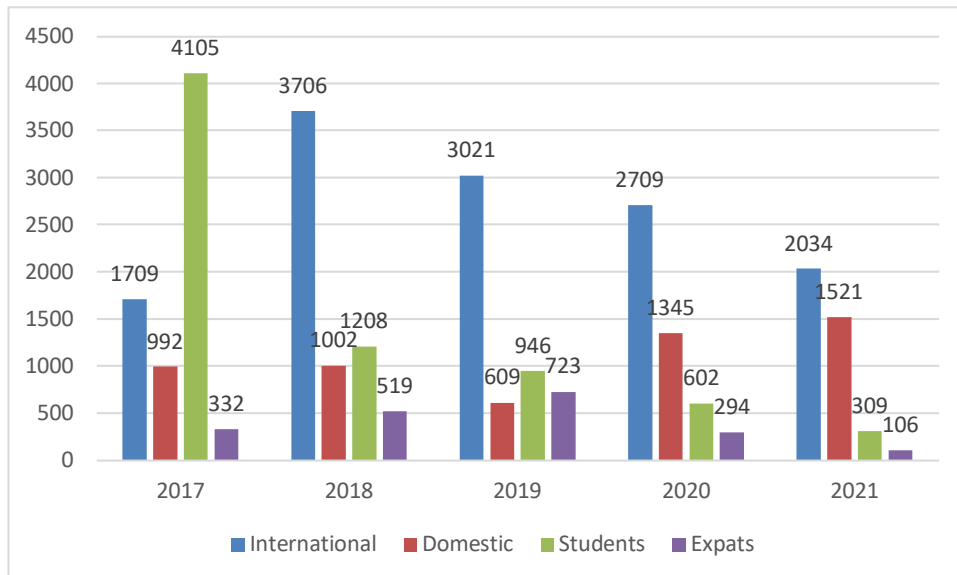
were tested using SPSS 22.0 version software. Narration was used to analyse the qualitative data that was acquired through fieldwork and interviews.

## RESULTS

### National Park visitation – basic statistics and facilities

In 2017 the park welcomed 1709 foreign visitors and 992 domestic visitors in addition, 332 expats, 4105 students from various Ethiopian universities, 26 researchers, and 2 filmmakers (Figure 2). The number of international tourists peaked in 2018 (3706 visitors) and has been decreasing since then. In 2017, more than 4000 university students visited the park, and the number has been decreasing since then. After a slight increase, the number of expats has been decreasing since 2019. Despite the negative trends, there is some optimism that the number of domestic tourists has been growing dynamically in recent years. This shows that there has been a change in the trend in park visitation and that the importance of the park is increasing in the eyes of domestic tourists. This trend confirms the potential of community-based ecotourism in the country as well.

**Figure 2** Number of different visitors in the Bale Mountains National Park



Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained from BMNP (2021)

The COVID-19 epidemic, travel restrictions, and other precautionary measures taken in reaction have resulted in a decrease in the number of visitors to Bale Mountains National Park. Despite the park's wealth of potential tourism resources, they aren't up to industry standards of development. The park doesn't use any specific marketing strategies and isn't well advertised.



The park's instruction manuals, bird booklet, brochure, and website are all excellent places to start, but they still require further attention and updating.

Few hotels in adjacent towns like Robe and Goba cater to tourists, while the park itself only has two lodges (Dinsho and Bale Mountains Lodge). The luxury Bale Mountains resort is situated in the Kach clearing of Harena Forest and offers opulent and luxurious accommodation as well as a welcoming staff. The Dinsho lodge is situated at the headquarters. The Gusa Mountains, as well as the bamboo forest behind the lodge, the nearby plateaus, and the Harena forest, can all be seen from its advantageous location. Only three of the park's approximately 20 satellite campsites have sufficient amenities. The remaining campsites are unfinished and unequipped, which shortens guests' time in the park and decreases their enjoyment. The aforementioned accommodations and facility issues restrict tourist flow, and travellers to Bale have lodging issues, which lowers the park's potential economic worth (Abayneh, 2020).

### **Socio-economic characteristics and results**

According to the data gathered from respondents to the surveys in Table 1, there were 65.3% more male respondents than female respondents (34.7%). However, because the targeted participant was men predominantly engage in ecotourism and other activities at the Bale Mountains National Park, the survey respondents' gender distribution showed that men exceeded women by a significant margin.

**Table 1** Respondents distribution based on gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Female	26	34.7	34.7	34.7
Male	49	65.3	65.3	100.0
Total	75	100.0	100.0	

Source: own survey

Between the ages of 26 and 35 made up the bulk of respondents (53.3%), followed by 36 to 45 (25.3%), 18 to 25, and 46 and over (8%). The statistics show that 91.9% of respondents are between the ages of 18 and 46, which is the prime working age. The targeted participants ranged in age from 26 to 46. According to data from respondents to the surveys in Table 2, adults and dependents made up around 8% of the total respondents (46 and above).

**Table 2** Respondents distribution based on age groups

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-25	9	12.0	12.2	12.2
	26-35	40	53.3	54.1	66.2
	36-45	19	25.3	25.7	91.9
	46-54	6	8.0	8.1	100.0
	Total	74	98.7	100.0	
Missing System		1	1.3		
Total		75	100.0		

Source: own survey

Regarding the ethnic composition of respondents, the Oromo ethnic group accounts for 70.7% of the respondents, while the remaining 28% and 1.3% are from the Amhara and Somali ethnic groups, respectively. Most of the Oromo-speaking population in the area are farmers and cattle herders. Afan Oromo is the official tongue of the Oromo people. More than 25 million Oromos speak this Cushitic language as a lingua franca. However, some Bale Mountains residents also speak Amharic (Richman and Admassu, 2013). Among the four communities in and around BMNP, Islam (49%) is the most common religion, followed by Orthodoxy (30%), Protestantism (10%), and Waaqefataa (6%). According to Richman and Admassu (2013), Protestantism (1%), Orthodox Christianity (20%), and Islam (77%) are the three most prevalent religions in the Bale Mountains.

Table 3 shows that many respondents (45.3%) went to elementary school, followed by (25.3%) secondary school, (16%) were illiterate, (6.7%) had no formal education, and (6.7%) had earned a college graduation. This table reveals that the majority of the population went to primary school.

**Table 3** Distribution of residents by educational background

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid College	5	6.7	6.7	6.7
Illiterate	12	16.0	16.0	22.7
No formal education	5	6.7	6.7	29.3
Primary	34	45.3	45.3	74.7
Secondary	19	25.3	25.3	100.0
Total	75	100.0	100.0	

Source: own survey

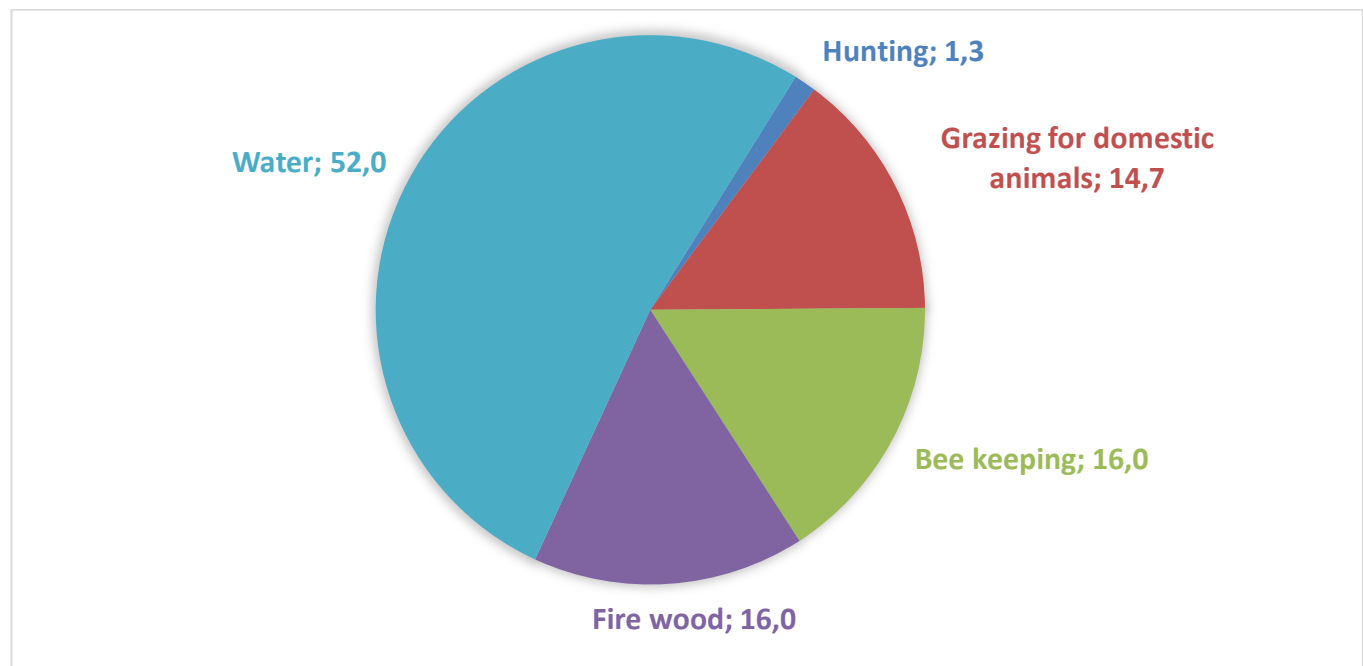
Table 4 shows agriculture accounted for the majority of respondents (68%), who were then followed by those who were involved in petty trading (12%), cooking (10.7%), agriculture and park scouting (4%) and students (2.7%), as well as those who were engaged in both agriculture and tourism (1.3%) and ecotourism (1.3%). The results of the study showed that the majority of respondents (68%) worked in agricultural businesses.

**Table 4** Distribution of respondents by occupation

	Frequency	Percent Valid	Percent Cumulative
Valid Agriculture	51	68.0	68.0
Agriculture & Tourism	1	1.3	69.3
Both agriculture and park scout	3	4.0	73.3
Cooking	8	10.7	84.0
Employed in ecotourism	1	1.3	85.3
Petty trading	9	12.0	97.3
Student	2	2.7	100.0
Total	75	100.0	100.0

Source: own survey

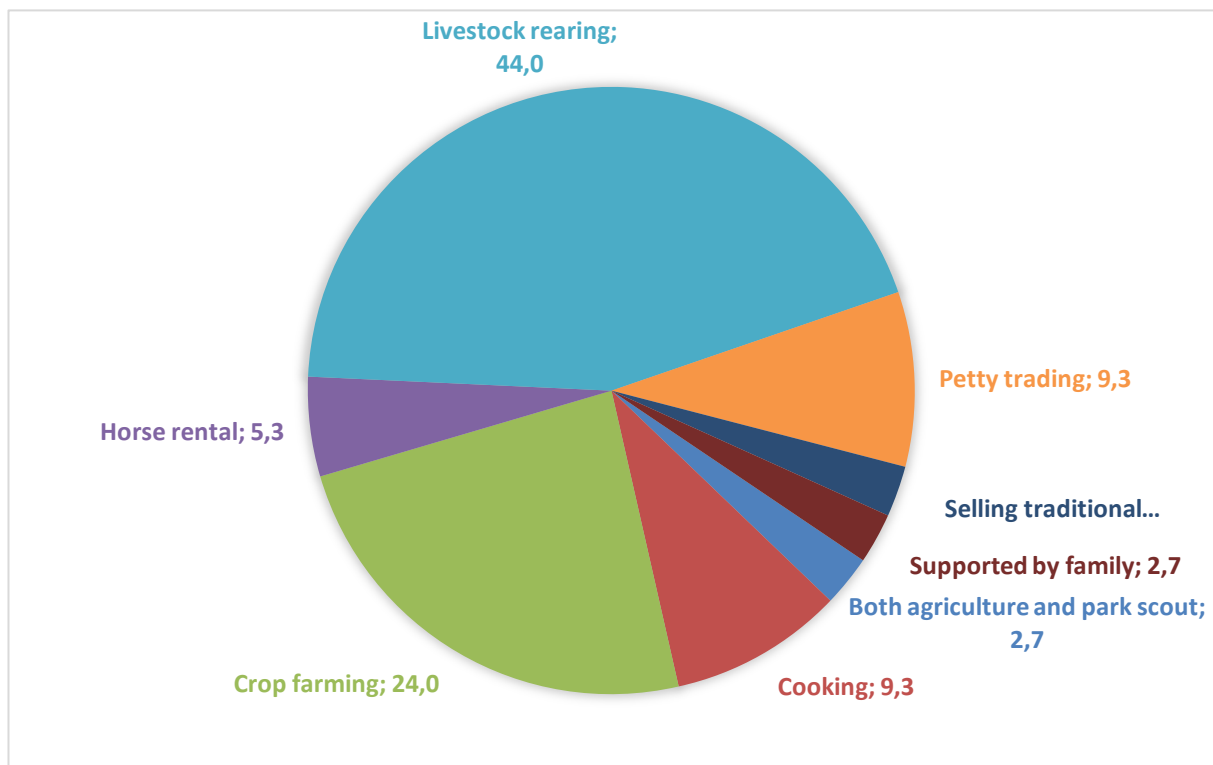
The natural resources of the BMNP area are used by locals in a variety of ways to support their way of life. Figure 3 shows that the park's most valuable resource was its water supply (52%), which was followed by firewood (16%), beekeeping (16%), pasture/grazing (14%), and hunting (1.3%). Although it is forbidden to collect fuel wood in the BMNP, some people (16%) do so to meet their own needs for home energy or to sell. Park scouts chase away people who are attempting to collect dry wood from the park, even though it is difficult to stop them from doing so. According to the results of key informant interviews, another noteworthy factor is that since its establishment, BMNP has helped the local population through ecotourism-related activities including the sale of goods, leisure or relaxation, and environmental preservation. Water, pasture for domestic animals, and other advantages are still provided by the park to the locals.

**Figure 3** Distribution of existing natural resources used by local communities (per cent)

Source: own editing, N=90

Figure 4 demonstrates that almost all interviewees agreed that the main economic activities in the study area were raising livestock (44%) and farming crops (24%) as well as cooking (9.3%), small-scale trading (9.3%), renting horses (5.3%), working in both agriculture and parks (2.7%), being supported by family (2.7%), and selling traditional handicrafts (2.7%). The Oromo and Amhara people who lived in and around the BMNP relied primarily on raising cattle and cultivating crops for a living.

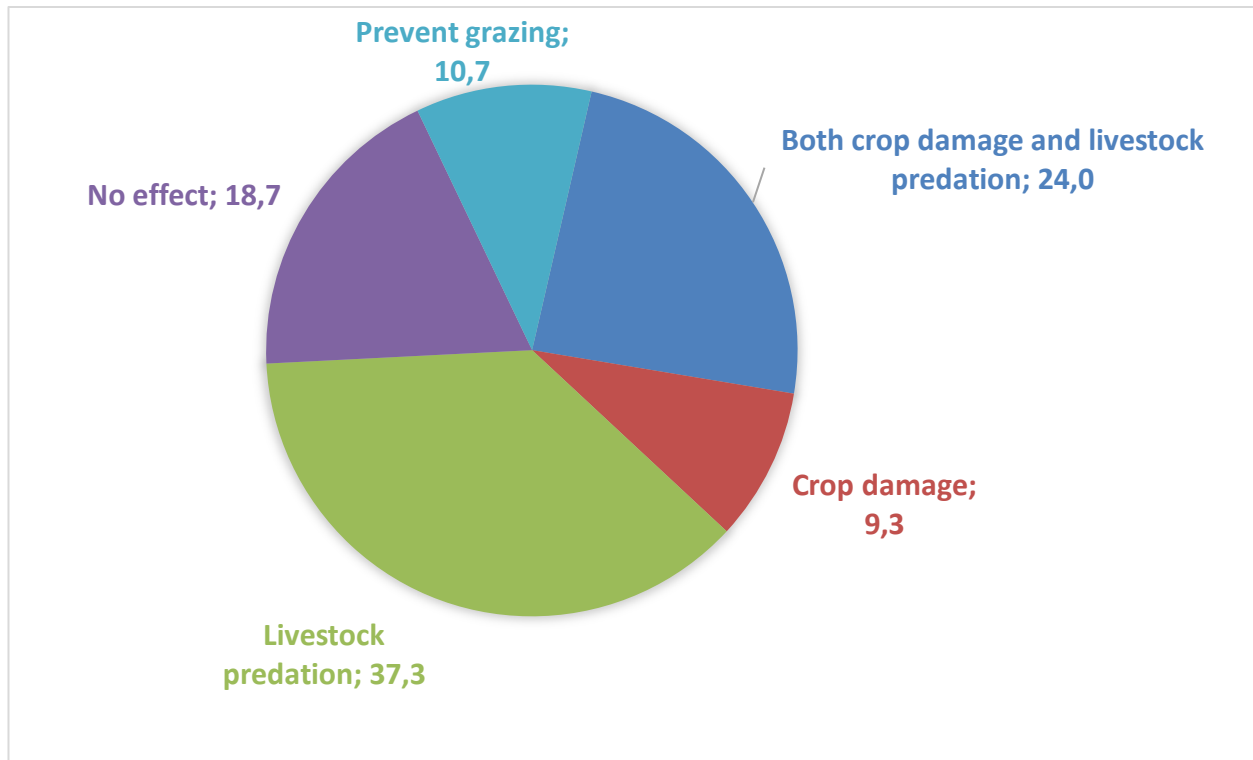
**Figure 4** Major source of income for the local communities in the case study area (per cent)



Source: own editing, N=90

Furthermore, as shown in Figure 5, 10.7% of the community complained about park restrictions on grazing their animals during droughts, cutting grass for thatching and as fodder for their livestock, and a high penalty if caught with their cattle grazing in the park. 37.3% further claimed that the park caused their livestock to be preyed upon by Spotted Hyena and Common Jackal. 9.3% of respondents indicated crop destruction, 18.7% indicated no adverse effects, and 24% indicated both crop damage and livestock predation.

**Figure 5** Distribution of negative effects of the park to local communities



Source: own editing, N=90

The results of the statistical data and our empirical questionnaire survey can be summarised as follows:

During the period under review, the composition of visitors to the national park changed significantly. In 2017, foreign visitors were still predominant, but in a few years the trend reversed and in 2021 domestic tourists played the dominant role. It is encouraging to see that the national park has gained importance among domestic visitors. However, there is concern that the decline in interest in the national park and the lack of capital-strong foreign tourists could hurt the long-term operation and funding of the park.

The underdevelopment of tourism infrastructure, with higher quality commercial accommodation located in larger settlements or favourable natural geographic locations away from authentic cultural areas, is an obstacle to ecotourism development.

The respondents' composition reflects the composition of the high mountain rural population in sub-Saharan Africa: young men, predominantly Muslim, with low education levels, agricultural occupations, and mostly engaged in pastoral livestock and crop production. Services, selling of local products, and other activities are under-represented, making it difficult to promote and disseminate community-based ecotourism in local communities.

## DISCUSSION

### **Opportunities and Obstacles for Developing Community-Based Ecotourism**

Enhancing linkages between agriculture and tourism would be inevitable for stimulating local production, retaining tourism earnings in the locale. Findings of Welteji and Zerihun (2018), however, revealed that there is still no economically profitable coexistence between agriculture and tourism in the Bale Mountains National Park. Promoting and disseminating the practice of community-based ecotourism in the local community could be an important breakthrough in this process. Currently, the tourism plan for Ethiopia does not have any implementation procedures and does not place any emphasis on ecotourism or community-based ecotourism. Instead, it focuses on broad-based developmental frameworks, the creation of both new and existing tourist attractions and products, the expansion of necessary infrastructure and tourist services, ensuring that the country benefits from the sector by maintaining a competitive position in the global tourism market, and addressing the industry's severe capacity issues.

There are numerous ideal settings for starting CBET in the BMNP and the neighborhood. A few of the acceptable requirements for developing community-based ecotourism in the area include the presence of several potential natural and cultural ecotourism resources, the existence of suitable local institutions within the local community, local community interest, and CBET supportive policy. According to the findings of interviews, almost all of the communities have a positive attitude towards the development of community-based ecotourism in the BMNP and surrounding areas despite their low awareness, perception, and knowledge. The Ethiopian governments environmental policy is written in an approachable manner that encourages local community involvement in resource management and environmental protection. If environmental projects endanger the way of life of the local population, it gives them the right to not just complete consultation but also to take part in and have an impact on the decision-making process. Community-based ecotourism development needs strong institutional foundations on the local level, like the Gada system. The local population is more effectively mobilised for CBET development by traditional systems than by woreda and kebele governments. In contrast to the majority of other national parks in Ethiopia, BMNP is rich in natural and cultural resources that can be exploited to develop ecotourism that is focused on both nature and culture. The park and its surroundings contain a wealth of ecotourism resources that could be developed into ecotourism goods. Rivers and waterfalls, Bodity Mountain, local culture, endangered species of flora and animals, Fincanbera, a popular tourist destination, and

the park itself are all potential ecotourism resources that might be turned into ecotourism-related products.

As Bacsí et al. (2023) state, pastoralism, as a traditional lifestyle, can contribute to the cultural heritage and cultural appeal of developing countries. Pastoralism has a significant role in income generation, which is reflected by its share in the national GDP, and in the tourism-related income of Ethiopia. According to the constitution, pastoralists in Ethiopia have the right to unencumbered land for grazing and cultivation as well as the right not to be ejected from their own grounds. Our results show that the state's environmental programmes, which include the creation of national parks for tourism purposes, have most severely impacted pastoral villages. Their lands were essentially regarded as no man's land because they do not have sedentary lives. Thus, the issue of pastoralism in the Bale National Park needs to be reconsidered.

The development of pastoralism could also be a good entry point for community-based ecotourism. According to Pookhao (2014) local participation is essential for the growth of community-based ecotourism, which supports biodiversity protection. Benefits received from CBET operations affect the community's attachment and involvement towards sustainable tourism development. As Bekele (2008) pointed out, Ethiopia's environmental policy places a strong emphasis on encouraging local population to get involved in the creation and administration of protected areas, both inside and outside of them. In order to promote sustainable environmental development, it also emphasizes the need for communities to acquire the authority to decide for themselves on issues that have an impact on their quality of life and the environment.

The Wildlife Policy of Ethiopia promotes community involvement in managing protected areas and benefit sharing with local communities, however it lacks more detailed procedures that specify how these general ideas should be put into practice on the ground. Although the proclamation emphasizes the value of community involvement at the municipal level, it does not provide any specific rights or avenues for participation. With its emphasis on wildlife management for poverty reduction and private investment, it seems to stress the ecological and financial aspects of conservation in protected areas.

If a protected area is to accomplish its conservation objectives, it must have the support of the neighborhood, and in order to have the support of the neighborhood, people must be involved. Some participants mentioned throughout the interview the value of community involvement in the growth of community-based ecotourism in the BMNP. However, they acknowledged that including locals might provide a substantial challenge. Regarding their

involvement in the park, the respondents were questioned. Majority of respondents (84%) said they were willing to engage in ecotourism activities when asked, while the remaining 10% and 5% said they were already engaged in ecotourism activities and were not willing to engage in such activities, respectively. The 5% who weren't interested in tourism or activities associated with it.

According to our observations and conversations with influential people, there is a significant personnel gap between park employees, the local community, government administrative authorities, and woreda, zonal, and regional tourism offices, notably in the field of community-based ecotourism. The number of ecotourism experts or consultants overseeing ecotourism or community-based ecotourism efforts, for instance, is insufficient among the relevant organizations.

Despite some initiatives by regional tourism organizations in the Oromia region, local youth are serving as local guides for excursions outside the park without the proper training. Due to this gap, locals need increased CBET training to diversify ecotourism products, participate in alternative income-generating activities, and establish community-based tourism businesses.

Community-based ecotourism are relatively recent notions (e.g. Kunjuraman et al., 2022; Annas et al. 2024; Guerrero-Moreno and Oliveira-Junior, 2024). Our results demonstrate that 57.33% of respondents were unaware of community-based ecotourism and ecotourism development projects in the park. Thus, the local population of BMNP are rather ignorant of the ideas of ecotourism and community-based tourism. Unfortunately, most residents aren't familiar with ecotourism or community-based tourism yet.

## **Relevance of the Results in European Context and Links to European Trends**

### ***Demand side***

There are two basic processes that influence the evolution of the demand side. First, ecotourism, sustainable and responsible travel becoming an industry standard. Second, there is a fundamental increase in interest in community-based tourism in the European market, with this type of trips appearing in the offer of OTAs (Online Tourist Agencies) and in direct sales. Research conducted by CBI (Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries established by the Netherlands Ministry Foreign Affairs) in 2022 found that, on average, 96.2% of respondents planned to travel abroad and 21.6% planned to travel to developing countries. The European countries that offer the most opportunities for CBT in developing destinations are the UK (24.7%), Spain (23.2), France and Italy (21.7% each), the Netherlands, Germany,



and more recently Sweden (cbi.eu 2024a). Overall, the three main motivations of EU citizens to choose a destination are the 'cultural offerings at the destination' (44%), 'the price of the overall trip' and the 'natural environment in the destination' (both 43%) (Flash Eurobarometer 499). In addition to Western European countries (Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium), 'nature' is also the most important motivating factor in some Eastern European countries (Poland, Czech Republic). In these countries, the older age group, between 50 and 70 years, is the main group interested in ecotourism. They have money to spend and time to travel, and they are experienced travellers, well-educated and prepared to spend more for an authentic, immersive experience. This group could be the most important target group for CBET in Ethiopia in the future. To sum up, we can conclude that the issue of CBET in national parks fits well with European trends.

### *Supply side*

Indigenous-led experiences are a growing CBT trend. More and more indigenous communities around the world are entering the CBT market. They are introducing experiences that allow visitors to learn about the origins, history, culture and future of a destination. This is a very positive development for indigenous communities that have been negatively exploited for generations. Today, tourism is an effective tool for preserving their unique culture and educating travellers, and directly benefits different groups. There are many and diverse indigenous communities around the world that can benefit from the demand for authentic, immersive experiences. Indigenous peoples make up about 5% of the world's population, but manage up to 25% of the land. These lands are often located in areas of high biodiversity, protected areas and ecological importance. These communities are therefore well placed to provide the most immersive experiences in remote, less visited places (cbi.hu 2024b).

CBT and CBET activities, which are also environmentally friendly, include a range of opportunities, some of which could be used in Ethiopia: learning about local flora and/or fauna, guided bird watching trips, trips to local wildlife parks or nature reserves, trips to local communities, villages, festivals and events, and food experiences - eating with local families, learning how to prepare a traditional dish, meeting local artisan producers. Taking into account international trends and bookings, Kenya and Uganda are the biggest CBT competitors for Ethiopia.

Communities, companies and SMEs in developing countries that want to sell their products on the European market will have to meet higher sustainability standards to comply with

European criteria (see for example the EU Green Deal, the European Package Travel Directive, the General Data Protection Regulation or the requirements for Liability Insurance and Insolvency Protection). More and more European tour operators will only work with suppliers that are certified or can show a sustainability certificate (cbi.eu 2024c).

### ***Adaptable findings on community-based activities in conservation areas***

Basically, there are two types of operation in Europe, one is the top-down managed national park, which can often operate with significant investments, and the other are protected areas where bottom-up operation (individuals and civil society organisations) is more prevalent (Dukic et al 2014). The latter are capable of achieving a certain level of visibility, which is still not sufficient to promote the destination with a greater impact. On the other hand, the existence of such initiatives is important because they represent a real force and capacity that can be important in tourism development, especially in its development based on consultation and cooperation with the community. For a destination to develop in line with this concept, it is necessary to involve (in addition to the relevant documents) all the efforts of individuals and organisations on the ground to complement the stated plan with the grassroots activities without which a successful community-based ecotourism destination cannot be developed. In particular, it is important that revenues stay in the community and that the environment and local traditional values are not damaged (cbi.eu 2024c). These results can be adapted to national parks located in less developed areas (especially in East Central Europe) and where there is significant economic activity in the buffer zone of national parks.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

According to Kiss (2004) development organisations see CBET as a potential opportunity for economic development and poverty reduction. From a conservation perspective, CBET support can contribute to the long-term conservation of protected areas, as the preservation of the natural environment, especially in economically disadvantaged areas, is essential to sustain the income generated from it. Our results support the findings of Salafsky et al (2001) that CBET or tourism alone is insufficient for entry-level business to generate significant income. It can take years to build and manage a similar business. CBET can be successful mainly in the area of land use, but is not efficient enough in terms of pure conservation. It can successfully contribute to local community income generation and community building. In the long term it can reduce the need for an external financing.

The Bale Mountains National Park provides an excellent opportunity for developing community-based ecotourism in Ethiopia. Through conversation and observation, it was found that the local community possesses a variety of ecotourism assets that might be transformed into profitable community-based tourist goods. These would comprise leisure activities, scenic attractions, and other types of entertainment. From a product standpoint, the local cultures are vibrant and highly intriguing, as are the endangered animals and plants, Fincanbera tourism attraction, Bodity Mountain, rivers, and waterfall watching chances.

Despite having great opportunities and a favorable climate for CBET growth, the Park must overcome a number of challenging obstacles. The resource base needed for the construction of an ecotourism park is impacted by low levels of local participation and benefit sharing, poor park-community ties, settlement unsustainable livelihood, and exploitative resource use patterns.

Other significant barriers to the growth of CBET identified in the report include a lack of stakeholder initiatives, commitment, and engagement, particularly on the side of Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organization, local government, and other important stakeholders.

Problems with policy, law, and regulation have also been noted as significant obstacles. Ethiopian environmental, animal, and tourism policies, as well as numerous laws, provide the main obstacles to constructing CBET in the Bale Mountains National Park region. Collaboration was also found to be a barrier to the development of community-based ecotourism in the Bale Mountains National Park region, in addition to issues with infrastructure, labor, and awareness. The study's conclusions show that unless local residents are involved in all park activities and are guaranteed long-term benefits through CBET, it will be impossible to preserve the park's few surviving indigenous resources. Because it enables locals to priorities their development goals while also strengthening conservation partnership, ensuring CBET through genuine involvement and participation is a crucial tool for conservation.

In order to successfully develop a responsible community-based ecotourism destination, the characteristics of the destination must be in line with international strategy documents, national development strategies and, of course, local development and planning documents. Furthermore, a coherent action by state and local governments, as well as individuals and groups at the local level, must be brought together at all stages of destination and product development, from resource mapping through to product creation, promotion, marketing and revenue use (cbi.eu 2024c).

The European relevance of our research is demonstrated by the growing trend of community-based tourism and ecotourism from Europe to developing countries in international tourism.

Especially the older age group in Western European countries could play a greater role in the future in the exploitation of community-based ecotourism in Bale Mountains National Park. Our study also presented some adaptable results for the further development of national parks located in disadvantaged European areas.

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