

Ecotourism Development Plan: Omo National Park and surroundings, Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract

The ONP supports globally threatened and flagship species including African Elephant, Common Eland, African Buffalo, Lelwel Hartebeest, topi, African Wild dog, lion and other conservation importance species. The park is also more important area for the biome restricted and globally threatened bird species. It also contained unique natural heritages with outstanding beauty; diverse attractions and great tourism potentials in and environs including cultural and archeological assets. ONP locations in the Great Ethiopian Rift and cultural route, unique wildlife, and natural beauty underpin its ecotourism potentials. With strong conservation management efforts by EWCA, stakeholders and its partners, the Park's natural values can be preserved, and indeed enhanced, in the future.

Even though there are tremendous ecotourism products that can be applicable for tourists' satisfaction, there are several challenges and threats to realize ecotourism in ONP. Unless very significant efforts are made by EWCA and the Government to reduce human pressures in the park, the natural values of the ONP will become increasingly threatened and there is no realistic possibility for ONP ecotourism opportunities to be recognized. Therefore, Ecotourism development in ONP is depending on leveraging the conservation potential of the Park, boosting Park management capacity and increased community engagement.

Key words: Ecotourism development, Omo National Park

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1. Introduction

This Ecotourism development plan (TDP) is a strategic plan, proposed for a period of 5 years, which describes necessary measures and steps for development required ecotourism products and other facilities and services for Omo National park (ONP). Ecotourism can form a motor for local development and may provide urgently required income, for both the park and communities surrounding the park. Income from ecotourism can therefore improve the livelihood of people, provide the park with funds for maintenance of some of the facilities, and increase overall support for conservation of the area.

1.1 Aims for the ecotourism development plan

Aim of the ecotourism plan is to guide in the development of activities and attractions that will cater for the needs and interest of visitors, in cognizance of- and respecting the natural values of the area. More specific aim is to increase income generated by tourism, as a sustainable source of income for the National Park, the Gov. and communities, through

- ✓ increasing the visitor number
- ✓ increasing the length of stay of visitors
- ✓ increase and improve the facilities and opportunities for visitors
- ✓ increased community involvement in tourism
- ✓ increase the conservation value of the park through ecotourism

Increased income from ecotourism for communities around the park will result in more local support for conservation of ONP.

This ecotourism Development Plan is in fact a further elaboration of chapter 7 (7.5) in the Management Plan (GMP) for ONP. The Management Plan (2021-2030) has been adopted by the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority. However, the specific chapter in the Management Plan is brief, and lacks a detailed analysis of the resources and development opportunities for ecotourism in ONP and surroundings.

Since tourism development is one of the explicit outputs mentioned in the Omo NP Area, and little action had been undertaken at the time of the validation of ONP-GMP validation Workshop, specific recommendations were made: "*Ecotourism development and collaborative management are important opportunities for local and*

national economic development that potentially contribute to sustainability.”, followed by: “More technical assistance is required to develop the tourism potential of Omo NP. Most stakeholders encountered consider tourism as the number one asset of Omo NP. The current management plan contains an objective on tourism product development, infrastructure and marketing.”

This ecotourism development plan should therefore be seen as a more detailed plan, in line with recommendations from the long-term GMP of the national Park.

1.2 Methodology

The ecotourism development plan of ONP was prepared on the basis of the existing information in the management plan of the park, reports of additional inventories and field studies. Furthermore an assessment was done of the potential for cultural tourism in the fringe communities. The opinions and wishes of stakeholders, communities and visitors were collected through discussion and questionnaires.

An ecotourism resource audit was done, the analysis of ONP as ecotourism destination, this audit emphasizes on the existence of by Understanding how each of the ‘5As’ of a destination work together; Access, Accommodation, Amenities, Attractions and Activities; and opportunities for tourism, in particular for wildlife tourism in the national park.

1.3. Guiding principles

- ❖ The primary goal of ecotourism development plan is to minimize the negative environmental and cultural impacts of tourism. To do this, travelers must be educated on the importance of conservation and the need for responsible business practices. Additionally, the money generated from ecotourism should be directed toward the conservation and management of natural and protected areas.
- ❖ Zoning and visitor management plans should also be employed to ensure that ecotourism development does not exceed the social and environmental limits of acceptable change. Furthermore, it’s important to minimize the use of fossil fuels and to construct infrastructure that blends with the natural and cultural environment. within the park the developed facilities and infrastructure should be modest and not intrusive, larger structures can be developed outside the protected area, or on the boundary.
- ❖ Ecotourism is all about maximizing the economic benefits for the host country, local businesses, and communities while following sustainable business practices. Those should particularly benefit local people living near or around ONP. By adhering to these principles, ecotourism can be a great way to enjoy the beauty of nature while also making a positive impact on the environment.

This means that ecotourism is not just about visiting a place and taking pictures. It’s about learning the local culture and the natural environment and doing your part to protect both.

2.Legislation and policy

There are a number of policy documents and legal instruments that guide Ethiopia’s biodiversity conservation efforts, tourism development and sustainable utilizations in general and protected area management in particular. Key national policies relevant to implementation of this TDP include; the Wildlife Development, Conservation and Utilization Proc. No. 541/2007 accompanying regulation and guidelines (tourism service providers and wildlife filming in wildlife PAs) no. 28/2016 and 22/2015) are the principal legislation dealing with the conservation and management of wildlife resources in Ethiopia. The proclamation clarifies its objectives as to conserve, manage, develop and properly utilize the wildlife resources of Ethiopia. Under Article 3-2 declares to create conditions necessary for discharging government obligations assumed under treaties regarding the conservation, development, and utilization of wildlife. Art. 3-3 also promotes wildlife-based tourism and to encourage private investment.

The Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority establishment proc. No. 575/2008 explains about the objectives of the Authority shall be to ensure the development, conservation, and sustainable utilization of the country’s wildlife resource. The Wildlife Policy and Strategies of Ethiopia (2005) aim at preserving, developing and sustainable utilization of wildlife resources including ecotourism development in environmentally conscious way with the involvement of local people. To avoid adverse effects on the environment and to ensure that environmental quality is maintained, restored and enhanced, EIA will be required on all major actions, developments, activities within and adjacent to national park boundaries, including other types of protected areas. The Environmental policy is the Ethiopia’s umbrella policy on environment management with its overall objective to improve the health and quality of life and promote sustainable socio-economic development through sound management and use of resources and the environment.

The National Tourism Policy (2009) has the vision *to see Ethiopia's tourism development led responsibly and sustainably and contributing its share to the development of the country aligning itself with poverty elimination.* It articulates to increase the quality and quantity of, developing existing and new tourism attractions in variety, scale and quantity. Develop and expand tourism infrastructures and Facilities essential for tourism development and capacitate of human resource in the sector, strengthen collaboration relationships among tourism actors, improve and increase tourism promotional nationally and internationally, and embrace the participation the private sector and local communities and Diversifies tourism service.

This ecotourism development plan also aligns with the IUCN and CBD guidelines that provide tourism development plan in wildlife protected areas especially national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

3.Description of Omo National Park

3.1 Location

The ONP is found in the south-western end of Ethiopia wholly within the upper Turkana Rift Which forms the extreme upper fringes of the Albertine Rift, known as the Lower Omo Valley. The area is also known as Africa's Western Rift Valley is one of the most bio-diverse regions of the African continent. With more than half of Africa's birds, 40% of Africa's mammals and about 20% of its amphibians and plants, it contains more vertebrate species than anywhere else on the continent. It also conserves more threatened and endemic species than any other region of Africa, and as a result is a Biodiversity Hotspot, a Global 200 Eco region and an Endemic Bird Area but surrounded by impoverished communities on the continent. It has been a region of great conflict over the past 40 years with civil wars in Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo and part of South Sudan (Plumptre et. al, 2007)

Administratively it is situated in West Omo and Southern Omo Zones of south west and south Ethiopia regional states respectively. A total of 15 Kebeles and three Woreda are belonging to the two administrative Zones of the regions bordering the national park. It is located about 870km far from Addis Ababa by road. Initially it was established as proposed National Park having 4068km². The Park is entirely demarcated by natural marks, by the Omo River and Sugar Project five in the east, by Kibish River in the southwest, by Neruz River in the South, by Sugar Project three and Kuma River in the North and the international border by the west.

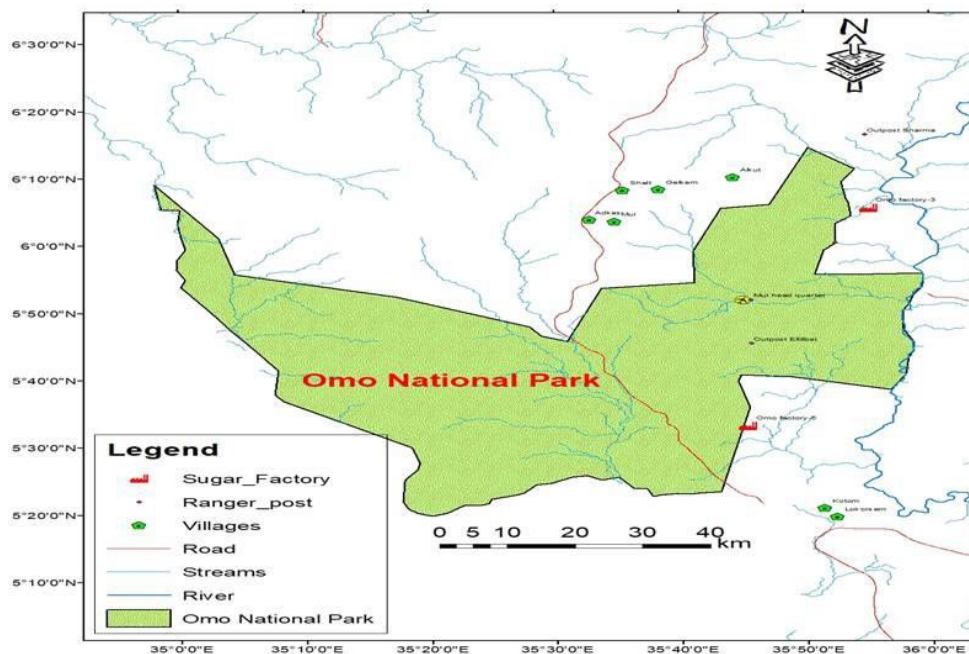


Figure 1: location map of Omo National Park

The lower Omo Valley has extraordinary ecological, social, economic, cultural and archaeological values; in particular it has been highly valued for possessing large ungulates. The values are an important pillar to alleviate poverty through the national development goals and rural development. Thus, the ONP could serve as important tourism and recreational, educational and research centers. In its current and relatively pristine condition, the Park produces and delivers a suite of important ecosystem goods and services that underpin the resilience of social and economic livelihoods of adjacent communities, as well as those further afield.

3.2 Climate

This area is a lowland area below the altitude of 1000 masl. The climate of the area is categorized by dry tropical climate with moderately high mean annual temperature and relatively low rainfall. Most of the climate data of the Park are collected at Mui headquarters and little variation occurs in the Park area. Other meteorological stations found in the region are Jinka, Maji and Omo Rate and these stations appear to be too far to bear relation to the Park environment.

3.3 Rainfall

The rainfall of the Omo National Park is characterized by three months (March, April and May) of rainfall and few showers of rainfall can be expected any time of the year. The rainfall in the Park is not well distributed and characterized by high torrential storms. Variation occurs in the Park due to the physiography of the locality. The western part of the Park which is more mountainous receives more rainfall than the lower lying plains. According to Stephenson and Mizuno (1978) the highlands which surround the Park on the north eastern and western sides receive three times greater rainfall than the precipitation over the lower ground. The significance of the highland rain as far as Omo National Park is concerned is the amount of water that is discharged to the Park by rivers and in the form of seasonal flood by perennial streams. Annual rainfall in the park ranges from 780 mm from old park record (Zealelem, 1994). The rainfall in the Jinka and Maji highlands is the highest which is 1,381mm in Jinka and 1,634mm in Maji, the lowest record is being at Omo-Rate which is 327mm (Daniel, 1977, Fetsum *et.al.*, 1986).

3.4 Hydrology

Numerous perennial rivers and streams exist in the Park among which Mui, Kuma, the Kibish and Sharom Rivers are the most important rivers as far as Omo National Park is concerned. These rivers rising from the Maji highlands drain to the Omo River. They provide water most of the year and dry up at the height of the dry season. Even if the rivers stop flowing the water accumulated in big ponds along the river courses provide water for the wildlife on year round basis. Few permanent springs exist in the Park (Ilillbay, Kuma, Tsalu). Some of these springs (Ilillbay and Kuma) are hot springs and have a medicinal value to people and cattle living adjacent to the Park. The Ilillbay Hot Spring and Gim Wuha being the only watering point in the southern part of the area up to Turkana, there is high concentration of wildlife and cattle at these points in the dry season. Other permanent water holes in rock cervices are found along the Dirga hill range (Gonibab, Dingai Wuha, Mukecha Wuha etc.). These holes are less important to wildlife because of the difficult nature of the hole.

3.5 Flora and fauna

The vegetation of the park consists of patches of dense scrub and thick riverine vegetation along the major water courses. Major vegetation types include open grasslands, wooded grasslands, forest and thicket. There are also scattered rocky outcrops and hills from where several streams drain into the Omo River. Elevation, on average is around 500 m asl but the Dirga hills can reach heights of 1100 m asl. The Maji escarpment on the western border of the park rises to more than 2500 m asl. Rainfall is close to 780 mm per annum and the main wet season is from March to November. Maximum temperature records can go as high as 40°C in December and minimum temperature from April to June are around 20°C.

The park conserves one of the largest diversities of mammalian and offers excellent opportunity to view wildlife. It supports large herds of Buffalo, Eland, Tiang, Lelwel Hartebeest, and Grant's gazelle. Other wildlife that is relatively easy to see includes Lion, Ostrich, Greater Kudu, Hyena and Warthog. Cheetah and Wild Dogs are also present but are rare nowadays. The riverine forests are home to primates including the Colobus Monkey and the rare de Brazza's Monkey. Elephants are seen irregularly and only in certain seasons.

3.6 Establishment of ONP

The earliest interest in the Omo valley as a protected wilderness area dates back to the brief Italian occupation. The interest was mainly related to hunting and mineral prospecting and these activities promoted the areas reputation as an outstanding wildlife locality. After the Italians evacuation, hunting was continued by the local people, for ivory, rhino horn and leopard skin. Due to the area's reputation as a land of big game, hunters

continued to come from different parts of the country. In addition, the Ethiopian Government used to take guest and Heads of States for sport hunting to the area (Stephenson and Mizuno, 1978 and Zelealem 1994).

Since the 1960s, the lower Omo Valley of south-western Ethiopia has been imagined as a “wilderness” land by conservationists, while state officials consider the area as an unproductive wasteland, inhabited by violence prone “nomads”, in need of the political control and civilizing influence of the state. However, the local people have perceived as a home, a place from which they derive not only their livelihoods but also their sense of individual and group identity. The formation of Omo and Mago National Parks in the 1960s and 1970s, linked conservation to state coercion (Turton, 2011).

4. Tourism in Omo NP

4.1 Tourism and protected areas

Travel to protected areas is increasing due to an overall expansion of tourism and development of transport networks, and because of the growing interest among tourists to learn more about the natural and cultural heritage of the destinations they visit. Visiting natural and cultural heritage sites is the fastest growing segment within the tourism sector overall. It is estimated that about 10% of international tourists choose to visit natural and cultural heritage sites. Domestic tourism is also considerable at many of these sites. Protected areas offer tourism companies important possibilities to add value to the excursions and packages they offer.

Protected areas can benefit from tourism in several ways;

- ✓ Additional funds for conservation can be generated from tourism, which is important as many protected areas face serious financial constraints.
- ✓ The profile of a protected area can be boosted when it attracts increasing numbers of visitors, which can help to solicit support for conservation of the site.
- ✓ Tourism may reduce unsustainable exploitation of natural resources in a protected area when it provides alternative income opportunities for people living in and around the protected area.
- ✓ Regular tourist presence can effectively discourage illegal activities such as poaching, due to permanent presence of staff in some areas. By linking conservation with the tourism sector, protected areas staff can learn about- and try to meet the requirements of tourists, while the tourism sector can increase its understanding of-, and contribute towards conservation (cross-fertilization).

It is vital to find ways for local people and communities to benefit from tourism linked with conservation, as this helps to demonstrate the economic value of the natural resources being conserved. Tourism can, however, also add to the costs of managing a protected area. Also, if not well planned, visitors can add more environmental pressure through e.g. increased disturbance, degradation of paths etc. Therefore, tourism has to be managed with care.

4.2 Vision for ecotourism development

Ecoourism is very important for Omo National Park for several reasons:

- ❖ People that enjoy the beauty of the park form the justification for the conservation of the area
- ❖ Omo National Park should generate income and employment opportunities to:
 - ✓ maintain the park
 - ✓ increase economical development
 - ✓ increase local support for conservation

The conservation aspect must be leading in all possible developments in and around the park, i.e. the activities should be in line with the existing conservation policies of Ethiopia and in line with the aim of conservation of Omo national park.

To develop a widely accepted vision on tourism development for the Park, it was participatory. The Vision for ecotourism development of ONP is:

Vision: Omo National Park will be the engine for ecotourism development in Southern Ethiopia. Ecotourism should bring improved infrastructure/basic services to southern Omo. Ecotourism should contribute to poverty reduction by creating opportunities for employment and income generation for communities around the park. Ecotourism should be sustainable, non-destructive to the environment and respectful of local values and customs.

4.3 Time frame for development

In 2025 and 2026 the current basic ecotourism infrastructure in the park and at Wildlife Head Quarters in Mui will be developed (camp sites, picnic sites, trails, simple accommodation, and game viewing hides). Marketing and information materials are prepared and staff is trained. Selected pilot communities are supported to develop their own attractions or capacities. During 2025 and 2026 it will be actively pursued to find investors to build accommodation or to rent out material and equipment. Information will be distributed to potential visitors but also to travel companies, both in Ethiopia and abroad, to attract visitors and special interest groups to the park.

For the medium term (2024-2025) we foresee that the private sector will develop, based on the expected growth of tourism and the potentials of the park. Piloted community activities can expand to other villages.

Travel companies will include Omo NP as a destination in their program. Marketing will be ongoing, in particular through **the Rift Valley and the Cultural Mosaic of the South Route circuit**. Travel agencies that are willing to cooperate with communities in tourism are stimulated to set up small enterprises around the villages. Multi-day activities are developed, and required infrastructure is in place.

The life span of this ecotourism development plan is 5 years (from 2024-2028).

5. Ecotourism Resource Audit

5.1 Tourism assets in and around ONP

The Audit is an inventory and assessment of features that have the potential to attract tourists. Therefore, under EWCA-Wildlife Utilization Desk developed and adopted *destination audit tool* to evaluate wildlife conservation areas' ecotourism competitiveness and to identify courses of action that will improve the areas prospects.

5.1.1 Attractions

Wildlife and their habitat- based forms of tourism why tourists are travelling to ONP. The park and its environs boast of important ecotourism resources such as the attractive wildlife, beautiful plains, vegetations, mountain scenery, hot springs, rivers and streams. Besides its extraordinary biodiversity and rugged landscapes, the park is surrounded by fascinating Suri, Nygatom, Dizzi and other indigenous communities, few other places in Ethiopia hold such a variety of tourist attractions.

Wildlife and game drives – Home to more than 312 bird species, 73 mammal species and various reptile species, Omo NP contains an unrivalled variety of animal and plant species. A range of game drives through an array of habitats provides great opportunities to see such delights as grazing Eland, herds of Buffaloes, and lumbering Elephants. Also, the extensive open grasslands and woodland in the Park supports herds of large herbivore population including Waterbuck, Grant's gazelle, Lesser Kudu, and *Letwel hartebeest*. During the dry season they concentrate around Ilillbay hot spring and lower Dirga range (Gonibab) and to lesser extent at the upper course of the Mui River. In the rainy season the distribution of animals in the open plains decreases, sometimes no animal can be seen.



Figure 2: Eland at the Sai plain (© Solomon Worku, 2020)

Omo NP is considered as the most stronghold conservation place to preserve some critical endangered species like wild dog, lion and leopard.



Figure3: Packs of African wild dog on ONP (© Nakachew Birelew, 2021)

Water bodies and other scenery- The Omo River, which is 760 km long, originates in the central, south-western highlands of Ethiopia, where it is known as the Gibe. Its final destination is Lake Turkana, close to the Kenyan border. Since 1973, the river has proved a major attraction for white-water rafters. The season for rafting is between September and October, when the river is still high from the June to September rains from high land but the weather is drier around Omo.

The river passes varied scenery, including an open gallery forest of tamarinds and figs, alive with colobus monkeys. Under the canopy along the riverbanks may be seen many colorful birds. Goliath herons, blue-breasted kingfishers, white-cheeked Turaco, emerald-spotted wood doves and red-fronted bee-eaters are all rewarding sights, while monitor lizards may be glimpsed scuttling into the undergrowth. Beyond the forest, hippos graze on the savannah slopes against the mountain walls, and waterbuck, bushbuck and Abyssinian ground hornbills are sometimes to be seen.

The Park is fortunate in possessing a number of rivers and streams which ultimately drain to Omo River. The name of the park derived from the famous river that passes following the eastern boundary of the park called Omo River. This Park is abundant with plant species, riverbank forests, savannahs, grassy plains, mountains & valleys. The beautiful landscape and the three hot springs are feeding the Omo River. The important Mui River crosses the middle of the park. Much of the park is at c.800m but the southern part of the Neruze river drops to 450 m. The highest peak in the Maji Mountains is 1,541 m. The edges of the Omo River, which borders the park along its length to the east, are covered by close stands of tall trees including *Tamarindus indica*, *Ficus sycamorus* and *F. salicifolia*, *Kigelia aethiopicum*, *Phoenix reclinata*, *Terminalia brownii*, *Acacia polyacantha* and others. A well-developed shrub layer combined with woody and herbaceous climbers provides dense cover along the edge of the river which, however, is frequently broken by incoming streams and the activities of the local people and animals (particularly Hippo). Away from the river edge, dense stands of *Euphorbia tirucalli* abound, the canopies shading standing water long after the rains have abated. The park also embraces extensive open grasslands interspersed with stands of woodland species and bush vegetation.

Cultural diversity- The Omo NP is also exceptionally known for the diversity of ethnic groups. While the peoples who live adjacent to the park are the Mursi, Muguji, Suri, Bacha, Meinit, Nyangatom, Bodi and Dizi are also associated with the park. The Mursi Lip plate, the Suri donga stick fighting and the Nyangatom story telling and singing with their traditional herding sites are unique ecotourism attractions of Omo national park. There are several ethnic groups surrounding Omo NP known by their traditional life style mainly body decoration.

World heritage site- Home to some of Africa's most traditional tribes, the region was once inhabited by our earliest ancestors and is the place where the earliest known discovery of *Homo sapiens* fossil fragments was found. This exceptional archaeological and cultural wealth led the area to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980. The spectacularly beautiful Omo Valley also boasts a diverse ecosystem ranging from arid lowlands to lush high-mountain areas, volcanic outcrops, and one of the few remaining 'pristine' riverine forests in semi-arid Africa which supports a wide variety of wildlife.

Other ecotourism activities- besides game viewing, bird watching and village tour, Omo national park has huge potential for ballooning, canopy walk, cycling, scenic drive, swimming, hot spring bathing, wildlife filming and photography, self-contained camping and special interest adventure activities.

5.2 Tourism facilities and services

5.2.1 Food and accommodation

Omo NP is among the few remote parks in Ethiopia. As a result, there are no tourist food and accommodation establishments inside the park. However, luxury lodges and related establishments are located on the en-route heading to the remote Omo valley.

This is a remote pocket of East Africa, the lodges are often built amongst beautiful landscapes and there is a certain thrill in being out in the sticks, exploring the farthest corners of Ethiopia. The lodges provide enough to get you through your time in the Omo: a bed, shower, and decent meals - but they don't do much more than that.

There are several satellite self-contained camping grounds in Omo National Park. The most recommended site is Mui which is located around park headquarter.

5.2.2 Transport and accessibility

Road- even though remote national park, **there** are several possible roads connecting Omo national park to visitors. The possible road includes via Jinka- Hana Mursi to Omo National Park. There is also a road from

Jinka to Key Afer to Turmi to Omarate to Kangatin to Omo national park. The other option is from Jimma to Mizan to Maji to Omo national Park.

Airplane- Omo national park is located in the major touristic spot in the Lower Omo Valley. So that, there are several alternative tour packages and itineraries can developed to the area. From Arba Minch, Jinka and Jimma air ports, Omo National can be the most remote and unique destination that absorb huge visitors. There is also an airstrip around Mui, park Headquarter.

There is no public transport connecting Omo National Park with the surrounding administrative woreda, kebeles and towns. The road that passes inside the park from Hana Mursi to Kangatin is asphalt road. However, four wheel drives are mandatory to visit Omo National Park.

5.3 Evaluation of Ecotourism assets

Omo National Park has outstanding resources, compared to other parks in Ethiopia. It has a unique flat terrain and well preserved vegetation, which is attractive for nature lovers and outdoor activities. Omo national park is among few wildlife tourism destinations in east Africa encompassing wildlife and cultural diversity as well as registered as UNESCO world heritage site.

The communities are potential interesting places. The close vicinity to the park boundary gives them a comparable advantage; the communities can easily be visited, and most are located along the main road. In addition, they can also be involved in tourism activities or provision of services.

5.4 Positioning of Omo National Park

Omo National Park is internationally recognized as the most wildlife diversified Rift valley national park in Ethiopia with stunning views, well preserved nature and wilderness. It is also among the 'Trans-frontier park' in Ethiopia, cooperating with Gambella-Boma National Parks in Ethiopia and South Sudan, unique for its lavish savannah grassland area and roughness, it's vast space and the excellent opportunities for adventure ecotourism and it's well preserved nature and wilderness; it offers the exciting combination of exploring nature and culture in and around the park. Remote Omo Valley is a unique destination of its own, well known as biodiversity and cultural diversity.

Omo is the main park for the 4 big large games, with possibilities for short hikes from a few hours up to several days, with overnight camping in the park.

Some 'catching' messages should increase the appeal, and seize people's interest in visiting the park:

- Omo NP forms the 'south western rift valley' of Ethiopia
- Omo NP is the game driving area of Ethiopia
- Omo NP is the area for adventure ecotourism, with opportunities for game viewing and camping, as well as village tours
- Omo NP is a beautiful, natural area with a beautiful adventure in the setting of a vast plain.
- Omo NP is a nice location for a rest for a few days, with pleasant NATURE overlooking NATURE.

5.5 SWOT analysis for ecotourism

A promising tourism development stems from the fact that the region is fast developing. With improvement of infrastructure, in particular roads and more on offer in regard of tourism facilities and attractions, tourism can grow very fast considering the potentials of Omo National Park. The potential for cross-border travel will add to the attraction of the park. A weakness on tourism development is that tourism has high quality standards and requires high investments. However tourism is one of the growth sectors, and in the currently rather unstable the Horn of Africa Ethiopia is one of the relative stable areas with a fast growing tourism market.

Below is a SWOT analysis for tourism development in ONP (Table 1).

Table 1: SWOT analysis for tourism in Omo National Park

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Beautiful natural savannah ranges and scenery unique in Ethiopia ❖ Various tourist opportunities ❖ Large vegetation diversity ❖ Relatively pristine forest ❖ Attractive surrounding communities ❖ Rivers and hot springs 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Low visibility of wildlife (low numbers) ❖ Limited access within the park ❖ Facilities for visitors in the park are too limited ❖ Poor Tourism promotion ❖ Poor quality of service at hotels and restaurants in the surroundings ❖ biting insects, Tsetse fly, mosquitoes ❖ Seasonality
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ There are still remnant wildlife populations: Eland, Lelwe hartebeest, buffalo, elephant, birds, primate species ❖ improvement of major access road to Kibish formation, by passing Omo National Park ❖ Opportunity for cross-border tourism cooperation ❖ Good opportunities for community based tourism ❖ Potential for adventure tourism ❖ Links with new tourism circuits the coffee route of South west Ethiopia ❖ Large cultural diversity 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Non-gazettement of the park ❖ Local encroachment ❖ A history of tension with some of the surrounding communities (inter-ethnic conflict) ❖ Inaccessibility due to heavy rainfall ❖ Political Instability, state or the national call of emergency, travel bans, outbreak of pandemic disease, natural disasters ❖ High inflation

6. Market analyses

6.1 Tourism development in Ethiopia

Tourism is one of the most important industries and the second fastest growing sector in the world. According to (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019) Travel & Tourism grew by 3.9% in 2018, only next to Manufacturing, which grew by 4.0%. The sector contributed \$8.8 trillion to the global economy (10.4% of global GDP) and also across the world, more than 319 million jobs were supported by the sector in 2018. This represents 10.0% of all employment, or one in every ten jobs worldwide. According to (Africa Travel & Tourism Association, 2020) and (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019), Africa was the second fastest growing tourism region (next to Asia-Pacific) with 5.6% growth and contributed 8.5% (or \$194.2 billion) of the continent's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018. According to (Jumia, 2019) and (World Tourism Organization, 2019), tourism supported 24.3 million jobs in Africa and the continent received around 5% of the estimated 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals in 2018. (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019) reported that, Ethiopia was the fastest growing country (growing by 48.6%) in the world in terms of Travel & Tourism GDP and the sector contributed \$7.4 billion to the Ethiopian economy in 2018, an increase of \$2.2 billion compared to that of 2017. The sector represents 9.4% of Ethiopia's total economy and supported 2.2 million jobs, or 8.3% of total employment. This shows direct contribution of travel and tourism to employment growth for Ethiopia was 41.6 %. As indicated in the World Travel and Tourism council's latest report, Ethiopian growth in terms of Travel & Tourism was driven

mainly by international visitor spending as 77% of the Travel & Tourism spending came from international travelers and 23% from domestic travel. In 2018, total number of international tourist arrivals for Ethiopia was 849,000 and the sector was primarily driven by leisure travelers, i.e., 79% of the Travel & Tourism spending was generated by leisure visitors and 21% from business travelers.

Ethiopia is known by interesting natural, cultural, Historical and Archaeological attractions. Ethiopia's tangible world heritages such as The Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, The Castle of Gondar, The Stelae of Axum, The Walled City of Harrar, Tiya Stones, Lower Awash, Konso Cultural Landscape, Gedeo cultural landscape, Lower Omo Valley and The Semien Mountains and the Bale Mountains National Parks are among known attractions. Intangible world heritages like, Ethiopian epiphany, Gada system (an indigenous democratic socio-political system of the Oromo), Fichee-Chambalaalla (New Year festival of the Sidama people) and Commemoration feast of the finding of the True Holy Cross of Christ; and Ashenda (Ethiopian girls festival) which is under ongoing nomination list are also world intangible cultural heritages of the country according to (UNESCO, 2020). According to (Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020), World Heritage Books such as the Four Gospels /Bible, New Testament/ (14th Century), St. Paul's Epistles (15th Century), Homily of the Passion of Our Lord and Services for Passion Week (15th century), Book of Enoch (15th century), Psalterium Davids (16th Century), Letter of King Sahle Selassie of Shoa to the Queen of Britain and Letter of King Theodros to Queen Victoria of Britain (19th Century) are among Ethiopian heritages. In addition to its natural and cultural resources, Ethiopia has also many tourist attraction opportunities. For instance, Africa Union is located in Addis Ababa, Capital city of Ethiopia, Researches revealed that Ethiopia as origin of human being, home of Lucy, Man-made huge Renaissance DAM, and Ethiopia is among the oldest countries to accept two known religions Christianity and Islam in the world as a result; Ethiopia is also known by its religion heritages. Regardless of being home of all these tourist attractions and resources, Ethiopia is not benefited from its tourism sectors as expected relative to Sub-Saharan African countries like Kenya, Tanzania & South Africa (Mekonen, 2016).

6.2 Current Tourism in South Omo & Omo National Park

Ethiopia offers great opportunity for tourism to be a key driver of the economy, but much work needs to be done to. When most tourists think of Ethiopia, the envisage visits to Aksum and Lalibela but in truth there are many other places of great interest in Ethiopia. The Omo National Park hosts various traditional tribes as well as spectacular wildlife. In this region one witnesses astonishing traditions which have been unchanged for centuries. Karo, Hamar and other tribal groups live in tented villages with their cattle and goats. Visiting such areas is interesting and special. In fact most tribes, including for example, the Mursi, Hamar, Dassanech, have all managed to maintain their culture and still live, for most part as, they have done for many centuries. Local infrastructure at other destinations such as those at Omo, need to be upgraded in especially minor towns and road-side villages and it is also critical to develop a professional body of tour guides to show tourists the beauty of the country and encourage tour operators to be sensitive to all areas in their marketing initiatives. For example, a tribal tour could start from Arba Minch and go straight to Mago National Park Mursi Village where tourists can spend an unforgettable night. The program can followed by Ari, Hamar, Dasanch, Kara, bull jumping, open market visits and a Dorze tribe encounter.

South and West Omo zones are rich in cultural tourism resources with its great diversity of natural attractions. Mago Omo National Parks, Tama community conservation area, Murule controlled hunting area and river Omo as well as the deserts of the Omo valley are valuable natural tourism resources. The zones are more suitable and preferred for cultural tourism activities more specifically ethnic tourism rather than nature based tourism alone. The diverse cultural practices of the sixteen ethnic communities and their lifestyle as well as their philosophy of life are unique and mysterious to the outsiders including the majority of Ethiopians. As a result, it appeals to both domestic and international tourists and thus needs to be fittingly commercialized and changed into a special tourism product. Out of the sixteen ethnic communities of the zone eleven were investigated from their tourism potential and development levels. The researchers found that all ethnic communities have their own tourism resources that can attract tourists. However, when it comes to tourist observations and their experiences, only four ethnic communities were being visited by more than fifty percent of tourists. These include the Hamar, Mursi, Karo, Dassanech and Ari communities.

According to tourist preferences and tour packages selected of more than 80% of Tour Companies based in Addis Ababa, Hamar and Mursi were the most visited and preferred ethnic communities among the tribes of South Omo this was primarily due to their unique and exotic cultural practices.

7. Strategic objectives for ecotourism development plan

Ecotourism development shall primarily encourage conservation, entrepreneurs, private sectors, and local businesses, as they will best react to the market opportunities and enhancing business sustainability. However, regulations of the sector by EWCA and other relevant authorities will play a vital role and regulation should be developed with the principal goal of establishing an enabling environment for tourism businesses to thrive. EWCA has a clear regulatory and management mandate for the ONP. The key priorities for product development and regulation system include:

7.1 Ecotourism zones

Based on the GMP of ONP mapping on eco-tourism zones. The recommended tourism zones, together with all proposed ecotourism facilities, walking/trekking routes and tourism areas. These zones should be further refined by EWCA with the use of a detailed topography map, giving consideration to practical and specific issues such as water supply, road access, noise and visual impacts of any future ecotourism facilities and tourism activities. These ecotourism zones should be **competitive and branded**.

7.2 Ecotourism infrastructures

Ecotourism infrastructures of ONP will be developed and improved based on the principle of sustainability. However, there is no eco-lodge existence and the campsites need improvements and additional facilities. Additional campsites can be developed near the vicinity of the national park than can be bring benefits for local community. A small museum around Park head quarter needs improvement. Information, orientation and interpretive facilities can be used to influence visitor behavior and thus assist protected area management, for example by safeguarding fragile environment.

7.3 Engagement with and private sector

It is essential for constructive engagement with selected national and regional private sector tourism industry. The consultation process for the development plan has resulted in stronger response from local and regional tourism sector representatives than national associations.

7.4 Tourism data collection and monitoring

Tourism data collection is an essential component of developing ecotourism in the ANP indeed the wider wildlife protected areas in Ethiopia. The tourism data collection and analysis system of other African countries' protected area management authorities (particularly east African countries) relatively poor and there are therefore not any particular examples EWCA to learn from. The tourism data will measure

- ✓ Overall visitor numbers
- ✓ Nationality
- ✓ Length of stay
- ✓ Reason for visit and activities under taken
- ✓ Sources of information
- ✓ Agent/private
- ✓ Mode of transportation
- ✓ Accommodation

7.5 Capacity Development

Omo national park has moderate natural tourism assets, however the human skills and capacity required to unlock these assets are not wholly present. So, capacity building should be prioritized and facilitated by EWCA, working very closely with the private sector to ensure the training is relevant.

7.6 Omo National Park Ecotourism Marketing

Omo national park is located within the en route of major international destinations of southern Ethiopia. However, significant eco-tourism marketing and promotional activities required to grow ecotourism further and in particular to channel visitors to those tourism experiences which are consistence with conservation and with priorities of the General Management Plan. Improved the existing ecotourism products and ecotourism infrastructures are paramount significance to promote and marketing of the national park for all visitors.

The private sector will further develop their own businesses specific marketing and promotional strategies, and these will be of primary relevance in driving visitors to the ONP, however it is very important to also have an

over-arching EWCA led initiative in order to consistently promote ONP's tourism asset. Therefore, a simple ecotourism marketing strategies are relevant to ONP, which includes:-

7.6.1 New ecotourism products: - besides the existing tourism products of ONP, it is essential to improve the existing eco-tourism products and develop new ecotourism products in and around the vicinity of ONP.

Village tour: - In the current situation, the locations selected for eco-Village Tours are two in number. These are around Kibish River at Nygantom village and at western part of the park at Suri people village. The main purpose of Village Tour is to help visitors get to know the general life style of the community living near the national park. Village Tour is a potential tourist attraction near Omo national Park. Among the vintage tours are the traditional amenities, home décor, traditional costumes, body decoration, local shopping areas, stories telling, traditional herding sites, general cultural connections with wildlife and nature, not only to benefit the community, but also to protect the park's attractions. It will play a major role.

Souvinor selling centers (women association) :- the ONP surrounding is source of huge souvinor products supplying centers; the souvinors are those representing the traditional life style of the sites like the Mursi and Suri lip plates, those of local jewellery, home used materials and body decoration.

Opportunities:-

The villages are located near the south and west of the park, and access to the hot springs is particularly close to the prominent tourist arrival in the national park. In addition, it is easy to access visitors because they are located in the nearby major roads.

Future scenario:-

The areas selected above are designed to make Visible Tour accessible to visitors, their proficiency, affordable and at low cost. Thus, the new tourism product that has to be worked out to develop and access this destination is:

- Conducting a discussion on the office of the park, wildlife utilization Desk, Woreda Culture and Tourism Offices, Community Representative and lodges, tour operators and local guides
- Identify tour activities in the villages and set up a viewing area
- Providing trainings
- promoting the Village tour on the entrance to the park office, in the park brochure, and at the Lodges' Web sites.
- Setting up community camping areas

Eco-trekking:-

This area has been a favorite spot for researchers and visitors for centuries. It is the highest plain in the Rift Valley, with active caldera, and rock fines. .

Future scenario:-

- In view of the natural beauty and importance of the place, there are no tourism infrastructures (e.g. lodging) on the plain and the escarpments, except satellite camping.
- The Park Office, EWCA, and Woreda Culture and Tourism Offices are required to work together to promote the area's tourism potential.

Eco-ballooning:-

This type of ecotourism product is done individually and in groups, and in Ethiopia, especially in the last 35 years, its demand has increased. It can be done by selecting places that does not disturb the wildlife and environment. Especially since the park is home to take-off ballooning, it may be landing to be near the local kebeles, so it is important to work with the kebeles before the show takes place. Therefore, since balloon pricing is not included

in the visitor program, it is best to keep interested visitors at the park entrance rate until the entrance rates are approved and diversified.

Special interest groups: -.

It is worth noting that there are many ecotourism resources that can be cultivated and marketed in ONP. But considering the existing park development and conservation potential, studying the pros and cons of ecotourism products, considering the low impact they can bring to the ecotourism market, considering the low impact they can have on the environment and society. Ecotourism is a product will be developed very carefully.

Thus, the Wildlife Utilization Desk, Omo National Park Office, South and West Omo Zones Culture and Tourism Office, Suri, Nygantom and Maji Woreda Culture and Tourism Bureaus work together on processes to make these new ecotourism products accessible to visitors.

Based on the Park GMP, Omo national Park should be prepared in a manner that recognizes other tourism product potentials, ecotourism investment potentials, community interest, and visitor demand and ecotourism infrastructures.

High End tented-camping at hot spring area: - due to conservation and community concern, only high end tented camping is recommended around the Hot spring, Sharma and other Rivers side, Dirga mountain and selected places.

Associated Needs for Quality Products

- Walk creation, signage
- Community based village and trekking guide
- Information materials on tourism products
- Interpretation centre

7.6.2 Other ecotourism marketing strategies include:-

Maps: - **maps** of major touristic spots, GPS coordinates of park entrance gates, critical road junctions, viewpoints and other attractions will be provided.

Geo-tourism map guide- this is illustrated and annotated map incorporating a description of the major geological features of the national park and the vicinity with its cultural and historical attractions.

Complete field guide: - a complete handbook of park's tourism product that provides detailed descriptions about mammals, birds, surrounding community, geology and other wildlife present, local uses of plants and tips for visitors

Brochures and other publications: - Information products can be published locally in Ethiopia to a high standard. Copies of all materials should be distributed to major bookshops, hotels, tourist operators, tourist lodges, park offices and information centres. The cost of publication and distribution should be reflected in the sale price.

A mechanism needs to be developed so that the money received for the sale of these products – field guides and maps – can be used to finance the cost of re-printing and re-distribution of the products once they have sold out. In most cases, information materials distributed by government and donors in Ethiopia soon become unavailable, once the initial production run is exhausted

Website and social Medias: - Official websites are crucial tools for image dissemination, brand promotion and marketing of destinations. EWCA and partners are aware of the need to create, maintain and update an Official Destination Website in order to engage with current and potential visitors.

Logo and tourism Branding: - Although the concept of branding has been applied extensively to products and services, tourism destination branding is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the ever more competitive tourism marketplace, destinations are increasingly adopting branding techniques in an effort to craft and differentiate an identity which emphasizes the uniqueness of their product. Tourism destinations are difficult to manage because of the complex relationships of their diverse public and private stakeholders. It focuses particularly on the political processes involved in successful brand management and on the vital role of public and private sector stakeholders. Tourism branding of ONP shall consider key wildlife species, diversity of geological formations, landscape, and climate align with park establishment objectives.

Local Medias: The roles of local Medias are very significant to promote domestic tourism and educational tourism.

Public-private partnership: - A cooperative alliance between the public and private sectors, in different areas of intervention which are traditionally inherent to the public sector, but without embracing a complete privatization process. The underlying premise of Public Private Partnerships is to benefit all parties involved, through alignment of their resources and goals. Public Private Partners are becoming more common, because governments realize these agreements may have many tangible and immediate benefits, and the private sector is granted access to new markets and opportunities.

The major private partners in ONP for tourism development are the lodges which are established in the national park, hotels and resorts in its route and tour operators. Identification of critical factors that may influence the success of partnerships is essential for their success. To do so, it is important to approach issues such as partnership formation and organization, the goals at the very base of that formation and its organizational structure. These partnerships are promoting the national park through their websites, and itineraries.

7.7 Community-Based Ecotourism

There are thousands of local communities living within the Woreda adjacent to ONP. Occasionally, Park-boundary communities are benefitting as employee of infrastructure developments. Community-based ecotourism (CBE) is seen as a viable model for achieving conservation and improved livelihoods for park-fringe communities. One of ecotourism's greatest contributions to conservation is the degree to which it can shift community activities from the "threats" category to that of "opportunities," i.e., those activities which contribute to sustainable development and the achievement of an area's conservation goals.

Not all communities or community members will wish to be involved in tourism activities, and EWCA, ONP and other developers should respect this. For those that do seek involvement, they may choose from a range of degrees of participation, including:

- Renting land to an operator to develop while simply monitoring impacts;
- Working as occasional, part-time or full-time staff for private ecotourism business operators;
- Providing services to private operators such as food preparation, guiding, transport or accommodation or a combination of the above;
- Forming joint ventures with private tour operators where the community provides most services while the private sector partner manages marketing, logistics and possibly bilingual guides; and
- Operating as independent community-based programs.

The role chosen by a community should be based, among other things, on its interest, organizational capacity, experience, cultural sensitivity, presence of strong leadership, quality of natural and cultural resources, tourism demand, training opportunities, availability of partners and private sector interest.

Ecotourism benefits are not explored and well addressed for local community around ONP with reasonable situations and less attention on ecotourism planning. However, ONP has great potential to develop community ecotourism. Among the principals are:

- **Organize eco-village tours** (encompasses various cultural activities in the local village like in the villages of Nygnagatom, Maji and Suri...)
- **Guide associations**- guiding associations can be established to promote ecotourism activities.
- **Community campsite:** - These campsites can be either permanent or temporary around the local villages or the major scenic gates. This development promotes showing traditional cultures, handicraft, and storey telling in the village, traditional herding sites and others.
- **Handicraft association:** - various handicrafts presenting the local culture shall be display for sale at the main entrance gate of the national park for park visitors.

8. Recommendations

EWCA is governmental institution under Ministry of Tourism and has the authority to undertake conservation and sustainable utilization of wildlife in Ethiopia. It is responsible for managing the national Park in terms of its conservation, biodiversity and wildlife protection. In addition, it manages the visitor services of the Park Office, Park gates, conservation and tourism activities in ONP. Therefore, to implement this plan EWCA shall:-

- o Works in partnership with regional and zonal authorities and lodge owners, tour operators – and with other stakeholders.

- Conservation and environmental management and development – providing guidelines for new developments – and restrictions – and advice on areas of particular sensitivity in terms of wildlife and biodiversity and community.
- Employment – of scouts, rangers, wardens, gate security and park office staff – all of whom have some interaction with visitors – be that maintaining a safe environment in the park or providing actual services to visitors.
- Tourism impacts may be evaluated through the capture of data at the main gate, from traffic both entering and leaving the Park. As visitors to the adjacent lodge are not required to pass through an entrance gate and the Lodges are directly associated with the Park, the same data may be captured at this facility

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