

# Prospects for Urban Eco-Tourism in Nairobi, Kenya: Experiences from the Karura Forest Reserve

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## Abstract

Despite the positive impact of urban tourism and eco-tourism on the city's economy, as well as the well-being of its citizenry, less attention has been given to it in developing countries. This paper argues that Nairobi city is well endowed with a wide range of natural ecological and bio-physical heritage and green spaces that can be tapped to develop and promote urban eco-tourism. Based on a case study of Karura Forest Reserve in Nairobi, Kenya, this paper examines the prospects of developing and promoting urban eco-tourism in Nairobi. In addition, the paper highlights the role of stakeholder participation and public-private partnerships in the promotion of urban eco-tourism, including revitalizing public urban spaces for leisure and recreation. However, despite improving the opportunities for eco-tourism in the forest, the urban-based elite community forest association and the responsible government department have socially produced the forest, each to suit their own interests. Thus, the seemingly successful partnership has created a semi-privatisation process, which has not encouraged the access and utilisation of the forest reserve for the majority of the low income and urban poor citizens.

**Keywords:** Urban Eco-Tourism, Karura Forest Reserve, Kenya

## **Introduction**

### **Urban Tourism**

Contemporary tourism is more fragmented and flexible, reflecting new forms of modernity, individualization and diversity, in contrast to traditional forms of tourism (Gospodini, 2001). Urban tourism is one of the re-emerging leisure activities that are increasingly consuming urban spaces, more than any other economic activity. Cities like Paris, London or Barcelona have always attracted visitors, but the concept of cities regarding tourism as an industry of economic potential is a rather recent phenomenon (Law, 1992), particularly in developing countries (Rogerson, 2013). The re-emergence of urban tourism exemplifies new forms of capital, brought about by tourism and recreation in present-day cities. However, urban tourism depends on many factors like the size of the town, history and heritage, morphology, environment, location and image, among others. Such factors may make it difficult to pin down and define what urban tourism is, and what it is not.

Even though the concept is not yet fully understood, urban tourism has been well received and is growing rapidly in developed countries (European Commission, 2000). Despite the lack of understanding of the concept of urban tourism, common themes exist among various scholars that help in our understanding (see Dodds and Joppe, 2001; Gibson et.al, 2003; Ashworth and Page, 2011). According to European Commission (2000), urban tourism is the set of tourist resources or activities located in towns and cities and offered to visitors from elsewhere. Azizi (2011) expands the definition by explaining that urban tourism takes place within the geographical limits of a city and that it constitutes spending leisure time out of home for both national and international visitors and can be realized at the area of citizen's residence. Paskaleva-Shapira (2001) notes that urban tourism raises many issues that are in the domain of city governments, including issues related to urban fabric and infrastructure, conservation of historic and cultural buildings and zones, and controlling pressures for development. Increasingly, urban tourism has become a cornerstone of a policy of urban planning and development (Dodds and Joppe, 2001; Gibson et.al, 2003; Ashworth and Page, 2011).

Despite the positive impacts of urban tourism to the city economy, as well as the well-being of its citizenry, less attention has been given to it in

developing countries (Rogerson, 2013). Ismail (2008) notes that most of the literature on the urban tourism phenomenon is based on the experience of cities in developed countries, while the study of urban tourism in developing countries has received little academic attention. Furthermore, urban planners and managers in developing countries have largely ignored the promotion and development of urban tourism (Rogerson, 2013). Albeit unnoticed, cities in developing countries have a growing urban tourism industry, which is slowly infiltrating into the urban economy. In fact, many cities in Africa have a great potential for urban tourism – but very little is being done to tap the same.

### **Urban Eco-Tourism**

The Green Tourism Association of Toronto, Canada, defines urban eco-tourism as travel and exploration within and around an urban area that offers visitors enjoyment and appreciation of the city's natural areas and cultural resources, while inspiring physically active, intellectually stimulating and socially interactive experiences; promotes the city's long-term health by promoting cycling as public transportation; promotes sustainable local economic and community development and vitality; celebrates local heritage and the arts; and is accessible and equitable to all (GTA, 1996 as cited in Gibson et al, 2003). According to Fennell (2010) the variables most frequently cited in eco-tourism definitions were in reference to: (1) where eco-tourism occurs; (2) conservation; (3) culture and heritage; (4) benefits to locals; and (5) education.

In Kenya, and more specifically Nairobi, urban eco-tourism is a rather new concept. According to Oketch (2009) many of the millions of tourists who visit Kenya use Nairobi as a gateway to other destinations. This suggests that no attempts have been made to promote parks and forests in the city as tourist destination sites. The benefits of urban eco-tourism for Nairobi would be: (1) preserving and conserving its natural spaces; (2) reducing the environmental impacts associated with tourism in remote areas; (3) enhancing education, learning and knowledge about conservation and protection of the environment; and (4) tapping into the financial viability of the large urban populations who also cushions against the effects of seasonal fluctuations of international tourists.

Nairobi city is well endowed with a variety of natural green spaces, the natural ecological attributes of which are well captured by the meaning

of its name, *'EnkareNyrobi'*, which is a derivative of the Maasai phrase 'the place of cold waters' - referring to the numerous rivulets that traverse the Embakasi plain and Kikuyu highlands where the city sits. The pristine wetlands and natural ecologies that once characterized this elevated watershed gave rise to the famous 'green city in the sun' image of Nairobi. Valuable green protected areas still exist today at the city's very core, including Nairobi National Park, Ololua Forest, Ngong Road Forest (in the South East and South West), Karura Forest (in the North-West), the Arboretum Woods and City Park Forest (near the city centre). These pristine areas in the city form a North-South green corridor, together with a series of other open spaces such as Uhuru Gardens, Railway Golf Club, Uhuru Park, Central Park, University of Nairobi Sports Ground and a couple of other golf and sports clubs. Apart from Nairobi National Park, the protected areas in the city have not featured in urban studies research, nor tourism planning, research and development.

### **Research Location and Research Methods**

Karura Forest Reserve is located in the North-western part of Nairobi city. It is one of the main 'green lungs' for the city. It is a gazetted forest and protected area under the management of the Kenya Forest Services and other stakeholders. The forest forms an important natural ecological and bio-physical asset in the city. It is the second largest green space in Nairobi after Nairobi National Park. It covers an area of 1041.3 hectares and it is believed that Karura Forest is one of the largest forests in the world within a city limits. The forest is sub-divided into three blocks: Mazingira, Karura and Sigiria. The forest borders the rich and upper middle class residential suburbs of Muthaiga, Runda, Ridgeways, Parklands, Highridge and Spring Valley. There is also a large informal settlement, the Huruma slums, located almost inside the forest. This settlement was a temporary relocation by the City Council of Nairobi of residents from another slum that was razed down by fire in 1975. The closest available local green space to Karura Forest is the Muthaiga Golf Club, which is privately owned, while the nearest local public space is Nairobi City Park, 4 kilometers away.



**Figure 1: Map of Karura Forest**  
 Source: <http://www.friendsofkarura.org>

The study of Karura Forest Reserve is a component of a larger research project on spatial analysis of urban green spaces in Nairobi. The Karura Forest Reserve study was carried out between June 2012 and April 2013 using a combination of methods. These ranged from rapid site assessment, interviews using semi-structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, interviews with key informants, and the use of historical and archival documentation. A check-list with five main items (general information, quantity, quality, use and planning, management and development of the forest) was developed for the rapid site assessment. Semi-structured questionnaires were randomly administered to recreational users of the forest to understand the personal and social influences that resulted in the use of the forest, as well as how the forest was being experienced and accessed by different groups of the urban population. The Kenya Forest Services and Friends of Karura Forest, the major stakeholders actively involved in the management of the forest, were selected as the key informants.

### **Characteristics of Visitors to Karura Forest Reserve**

During the study period, a majority of the people visiting Karura Forest were from the surrounding high and middle-income residential neighbourhoods. For example, 41% of the visitors were from Muthaiga,

Runda, Rosslyn, Gigiri and Parklands, while 13% came from Langata – a middle-income neighbourhood. The visitors from the high-residential neighbourhoods were largely expatriate residents rather than Kenyan citizens. Other visitors were from outlying relatively low-income residential neighbourhoods of Kasarani, Embakasi and Makadara. Interestingly, there were no visitors from the nearby Huruma slums. Other visitors came from counties bordering Nairobi such as Thika and Kiambu. People visiting Karura Forest were generally in formal employment, business-people and had high level of education. The unemployed group consisted of students and youth looking for jobs. There were no major gender differences in those visiting the forest. However, due to fear, it was not easy to spot unaccompanied women in the forest.

More than three-quarters (80%) of the forest visitors were aged between 14 and 39 years old, majority of them being students. Children less than 14 years old were excluded from the interviews but were mainly accompanied by their parents, guardians or teachers. Many schools in Nairobi have environmental education classes that encourage teenagers to take a keen interest in travelling to natural pristine areas. As such, the forest hosts a number of organized study tours as part of environmental awareness classes hosted by the Karura Forest Environmental Education Training Centre. As would be expected, 70% of the forest visitors were unmarried. Generally, the young and unmarried have more free time than their married counterparts.

The major attraction of the forest was for recreation, more on active leisure and recreation such as walking, jogging and cycling in the expansive nature trails. Passive leisure and recreation included relaxing, get-togethers and picnics. The unemployed youth visited the park to pass time or for get-togethers and picnics with their friends. In addition, the forests hosts organized group events such as mini-marathons, weddings, corporate fun-days and dinners, camps, and tree planting. Research and educational tours are organized through the International Agro-forestry Research Institute and the Karura Forest Environmental Education Trust, respectively. The timing of visits to the forest varied according to the nature of the visit, time of the day and day of the week. Weekends and public holidays were the most popular days for visiting the forest. During weekdays the forest is used in the morning and evening for walking, jogging and cycling.

Consequently, 33% of the visitors used the forest for physical health reasons, 23% for social benefits, 13% for environmental benefits, 10% for psychological benefits, and 7% for enjoying nature. On the other hand, the community benefited from the forest socially (55%), economically (16%), environmentally (13%) and culturally (7%). Besides the activities, both first time and frequent visitors concurred that the forest is beautiful, clean and has relatively good facilities for their intended use – and that they would visit the forest again. Some people do not visit the forest frequently due to lack of time (31%), long distance (29%), and lack of bus fare and entrance fees (6%).

### **Potential for Urban Eco-Tourism in Karura Forest Reserve**

Despite the general under-development of eco-tourism programmes and activities in Kenya, Karura Forest has many advantages and potential for urban eco-tourism such as its strategic location; abundance of natural ecological and bio-physical heritage and environment; historic, cultural and political significance associated with the forest; supportive government policies; goodwill from stakeholders and public-private partnerships; existence of adequate facilities and infrastructure; and the increasing interest of the urban populace in leisure and recreation.

### **Strategic Location Nationally and Regionally**

Karura Forest Reserve is situated in a central and strategic location that gives it a competitive advantage nationally and regionally. The forest is largely accessible by all means of transport for the Nairobi residents, visitors from other counties, as well as international visitors on short stays in Nairobi. In fact, the forest can be easily included as one of the circuits for tourists during their City of Nairobi tours.

### **Natural Ecological and Bio-physical Heritage**

The natural ecological and bio-physical assets of the forest make it a high potential eco-tourism site. With the devolved governance structure, there is need for Nairobi City County to demonstrate the value of the services for which it is responsible for, and to generate benefits, in return for and in part to offset the public resources provided for its maintenance and development. The promotion and development of urban eco-tourism to

tap into the rich bio-physical and natural ecological heritage of the county is a step towards this direction.

Karura Forest is a remnant of the *montanesclerophyllous* (small leaves) forest that covered all of the Kenya highlands from Nairobi to the Aberdare moorlands in the pre-colonial times. The main assets and natural attractions include the indigenous tree vegetation and endemic and rare tree species. According to Njoroge et al. (2013), Karura has 87% forest cover. The indigenous trees such as African Olive, Pencil Cedar and Croton still exist covering approximately 260 hectares of the forest. Native Kenyan bamboo groves found along the riparian belts of the rivers in the forest and wildlife, consisting mainly of bird life and monkeys are the other main attractions. Other common species of wildlife include Bush Babies, Duikers and Genets.

The forest has over 200 species of birds, including the African Crowned Eagle, Crested Crane, Narina Trogon, doves, weavers and vultures. Throughout the forest, small water habitats can be found consisting of birds and butterflies species, such as the Lily Butterfly Lake (Njoroge et al, 2013; Kigomo, 1999). In addition, the forest has caves and waterfalls. The caves, known as the Mau Mau caves, are believed to have been a hideout place for the Mau Mau freedom fighters during the colonial era. Other recreational opportunities in the forest include nature walks, camping, picnics, jogging, cycling, weddings and other corporate or social events. According to the Friends of Karura Forest about 5,000-7,000 visitors use the forest on a monthly basis.

### **Historic, Cultural and Political Significance**

There is no doubt that Karura Forest forms an important historic, cultural and political space not only in Kenya but also internationally. The historical and cultural importance of the forest is very important in conservation efforts and eco-tourism activities. Furthermore, Karura Forest has been in the regional and international limelight as a success story for protests leading to the conservation and restoration of an important urban ecosystem. During the pre-colonial era, Karura Forest belonged to a Kikuyu clan, *mbariyakihara*. The traditional Kikuyu people, who were the original inhabitants of the area, used the forest for collecting food, wood fuel, fibre, herbal medicine and spiritual ceremonies. Many of the indigenous trees were for medicinal purposes. Livestock grazing, felling of trees and

cultivation were not permitted, as the Kikuyu people considered the forest sacred (Njeru, 2013, 2012 & 2010; Klopp, 2012).

During the colonial period, the local native Chief “donated” the forest to the colonial government on condition that it was used as a public space. However, the European settlers started to extract timber and wood fuel from the forest. As a result of this, there was an urgent need by the colonial government to protect the forest and other natural areas in the city. In 1932, Karura Forest was gazetted as a protected area (Njeru, 2013). The forest was managed by the central government and public use of the forest for any purpose was prohibited. With time, controlled access and use of the forest was allowed, but to a very limited extent by the post-colonial government policy through the forest department. However, recreational use of the forest was not allowed (Njeru, 2013, 2012 & 2010; Arden and Mbaya, 2001; Matiru, 2000).

Over the years, Karura Forest has lost about 20 hectares of its land to private developers through corrupt allocations and/or selling. For example, a land title deed of 564.1 hectares was issued in 1996 to the private developers, formalising the illegal excision (Njeru, 2013, 2012 & 2010; Klopp, 2012 & 2000; Arden and Mbaya, 2001). The grabbing of large sections of the forest became apparent to the public through the media in 1998. What followed was a series of (sometimes violent) protests led by the late Prof. Wangari Maathai and her Green Belt Movement. The protests took all forms and shapes: replanting trees in the forest, destroying the private developers’ construction materials, demonstrations, legal appeals and continuous demand to revoke the allocations. This demonstrated Nairobi residents’ awareness of the importance of Karura Forest and the need for its conservation.

Eventually, after almost two years, the private developers gave up the construction. The illegal allocations were however not immediately revoked by the then President Daniel Arap Moi. In 2002, when President Mwai Kibaki came to power that ecological restoration in the forest was initiated and illegal allocations revoked (Njeru, 2013; 2011 & 2010; Klopp 2012 & 2000, Nixon, 2006/2007; Rocheleau, 1999). Apart from the political intrigues associated with privatising the forest in the 1990's, Karura Forest has had its share of other evils. For a long time, the forest was associated with rampant crime. Criminals were known to dump their victims in the forest. These bad memories have been difficult to erase from people’s

minds. Many people still associate Karura Forest with these evils, despite the major security changes.

### **Supportive Government Policies**

The Government of Kenya has, in the recent past, put in place policies that can be used to support urban eco-tourism in Karura Forest. The main statutes that guide the management of Karura Forest, as well as other forests in Kenya are the Forest Act No. 7 of 2005, the draft Forest Policy (Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2007), the Kenya Forests Master Plan and the Environmental and Coordination Act of 1999. Other laws include those related to natural resource management in Kenya and international conventions. The autonomous government authority responsible for the management of forests and implementation of the decrees is the Kenya Forest Services.

The draft Forest Policy supports forestry and wealth creation and vouches for the development of recreation and eco-tourism facilities. The Forest Act mandates Kenya Forest Services to develop programmes and facilities in collaboration with other interested parties for tourism, and for the recreational and ceremonial use of forests. In its 2009-2014 Strategic Plan, Kenya Forest Services has outlined the need to enhance revenue generation through sustainable forest based industries, eco-tourism and payment for environmental services. In line with this, the Kenya Forest Services has put in place guidelines on how to work with other stakeholders in developing urban eco-tourism, including creating a department dealing with eco-tourism issues.

Furthermore, the Forest Act allows for citizen participation in forest protection and management through the creation of Community Forest Associations. As such, civil society and citizens have been involved in the management of Karura Forest since 2009 through the Friends of Karura Forest, a registered Community Forest Association formed in 2009 under the Forest Act. The Act allows Friends of Karura Forest, through Karura Community Forest Association, to protect the forest; provide access to people living around the forest and to the public at large; to restore the forest to its natural state; and to provide employment to people from less privileged communities neighbouring the forest. Through this process, organized youth, women and self-help groups have been given the opportunity to engage in income-generating activities in the forest such as

bee-keeping ('New Dawn' group), planting and selling of tree seedlings ('Mushrooms' group) and fish farming ('Karumba' group). Furthermore, organic wastes are collected for humus, while a private company collects and disposes inorganic wastes at no charge.

### **Goodwill from Stakeholders and Public-Private Partnerships**

The collaboration between various stakeholders, especially Friends of Karura Forest, the Kenya Forest Service and the private sector, is encouraging towards improving the forest for urban eco-tourism. In addition, the management of the forest has greatly improved over the years and therefore attracting more visitors and confidence on their safety and comfort. Friends of Karura Forest have successfully mobilised funding from the private sector and other donors to support rehabilitation and development of the forest for eco-tourism and recreational programmes and activities. In 2013, the Friends of Karura Forest and the Kenya Forest Services signed a 5-year Forest Management Agreement. The Agreement is a major milestone for public participation in the forest management, eco-tourism development, conservation and educational activities.

Since its formation in 2009, Friends of Karura Forest have fund-raised and spearheaded various activities and developments that enhance conservation and urban eco-tourism in the forest. For example, erecting an electric perimeter fence around the forest to deter logging and improve safety and security; employing Karura Forest scouts; renovating and refurbishing a building for an auditorium for environmental education; improving the nature trails and footpaths with signs and markings; installation of water taps; and rehabilitating the destroyed forest patches. All these have been possible with generous funding and partnership through corporate social responsibility initiatives of companies like East African Breweries, Barclays Bank of Kenya, Kenya Commercial Bank, Safaricom and G4S Group, among others. To broaden the forest products, the Kenya Forest Services is seeking the private sector to invest in the development of eco-tourism facilities such as restaurants, zip lines, boardwalks, canopy walks, bird hides, cable cars and tree houses. Targeted market segments include the Kenyan citizens, repeat international visitors, local residents, business travellers and specialist individual groups like the bird watchers.

However, despite improving the opportunities for eco-tourism in the forest, the urban-based Friends of Karura Forest and Kenya Forest Services have socially produced the forest, each to suit their own interests. Thus, the seemingly successful partnership has created a semi-privatisation process, which has not encouraged the access and utilisation of the forest reserve for the majority of the low income and urban poor citizens. There is an urgent need to bring on board the wider Nairobi citizenship and potential forest users to determine the types of products they want. Currently, the forest is being used by residents of the neighbouring high and middle-income residential neighbourhoods – rather than a gateway or an attraction for tourists and the general Nairobi residents.

Other stakeholders such as the Nairobi City County government, Ministry of Tourism, Kenya Tourism Board, Kenya Wildlife Services, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, the National Museums of Kenya, among others should also be actively involved in the management of Karura Forest. It is a pity that the former Nairobi City Council took less interest to develop and market Karura Forest as a destination for urban eco-tourism. Furthermore, conflicts of interest and fights for supremacy between the different government departments need to be addressed. According to one of the key informants, these conflicts of interest, fights for supremacy and lack of resources are a major set-back for harmonious working relationships between the concerned government departments.

### **Adequate Facilities and Infrastructure**

The existing recreational facilities and infrastructure in the forest are adequate in promoting urban eco-tourism. The forest reserve boasts of a bar and restaurant; the Karura Forest Environmental Education Trust Centre auditorium for workshops and training on environmental education; sports fields for football and tennis; play grounds and associated facilities for children; a relatively secure car park; relaxing points with benches; toilet facilities; and well developed and marked nature trails. However, some of these facilities need to be improved and expanded to cater for the large numbers of users.

### **Increasing Numbers of visitors and enthusiasts**

The increasing number of visitors to Karura Forest over the years is an opportunity to encourage urban eco-tourism. The number of monthly

visitors to the forest has increased from less than 500 people in December 2010 to about 7,000 people in June 2012. It is worth noting however, that many of these visitors were those that came in groups, for private and semi-public events and functions organised and hosted in the forest – another great potential for urban eco-tourism. These group events and functions have been a major source of revenue to Karura Forest management.

### **Conclusion**

Despite being a relatively new concept, eco-tourism in Karura Forest Reserve is now evolving, and can be developed to not only balance the physical and cultural aspects of the environment but also to improve the quality of life of people living in the city. A synthesis of the values of eco-tourism – natural/pristine space, conservation, culture and heritage, benefits to locals, and education – are indications that Karura Forest Reserve is a potential destination for urban eco-tourism. Furthermore, the participatory management of the forest, including public-private partnerships, has greatly improved its eco-tourism products, infrastructure and services over time whilst also attracting more visitors and confidence on their safety and comfort. With the increasing urban population of Nairobi and its region, the demand for urban eco-tourism will definitely increase. As such, urban planners and managers need to identify, secure and preserve areas that are more natural – and integrate them and eco-tourism in city planning and development. This will ensure the demand for and supply of urban eco-tourism products (spaces) for the growing city and regions are met comfortably. This is indeed one way of diversifying tourism products, cushioning the tourism industry from fluctuations of the international tourism segment and encouraging domestic tourism. However, development of urban eco-tourism in Nairobi and its region will require embracing a culture of shared habitats with evolving human practices that show sensitivity and seek to strike a balance between human activities and Nairobi's unique landforms and biodiversity. In addition, there is need for: aggressive marketing and sensitization of eco-tourism products available in Nairobi; products and packages that will attract a large majority of the low-income city residents; and providing a platform for a wider Nairobi citizenship participation in decision-making.

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