

# **WILDLIFE CONSERVATION, VISITORS' PREFERENCES AND HABITAT CONDITIONS FOR WILDLIFE TOURISM AT OLJOGI CONSERVANCY IN LAIKIPIA COUNTY, KENYA**

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**International Academic Journal of Social Sciences and Education (IAJSSE) | ISSN 2518-2412**

**Received:** 12<sup>th</sup> June 2020

**Published:** 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020

Full Length Research

**Available Online at:** [http://www.iajournals.org/articles/iajsse\\_v2\\_i2\\_125\\_136.pdf](http://www.iajournals.org/articles/iajsse_v2_i2_125_136.pdf)

**Citation:** Nzomo, C. M., Maingi, S. W. & Kariuki, A. C. (2020). Wildlife conservation, visitors' preferences and habitat conditions for wildlife tourism at Oljogi Conservancy in Laikipia County, Kenya. *International Academic Journal of Social Sciences and Education*, 2(2), 125-136

## **ABSTRACT**

The enormous potentials of wildlife tourism in recreation, community and economic development can be maximized through focusing on visitors' preference in ensuring sustainability of this increasingly important sector. Wildlife tourism has an important economic value through revenue that can be used to support conservation. This study examined wildlife conservation, visitor preference and habitat conditions for wildlife tourism at Oljogi Conservancy in Laikipia County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. A structured questionnaire was used to elicit information from visitors touring the Wildlife rescue centre in Oljogi conservancy in addition to an interview guide which was used to collect data from the tour guides. Data were analyzed through content analysis. Results revealed that seeing wildlife in its natural environment, behaving naturally and viewing rare, unique or unusual wildlife were the three most important features sought in a wildlife tourism experience. For most of the visitors we recruited in this study, it was their first time to see the wild

animal. It also revealed that most of the tourists touched, handled or fed the wild animal which were friendly in nature, in addition to being rare and unique. The study also found out that the most preferred animal was the black rhino, followed by the leopard and the lion as the top three. It was also found that the conservation status at the Oljogi was good. This study concludes that visitor's profile for wildlife preference as well as habitat condition had significant influence on wildlife tourism at Oljogi conservancy. In addition, most of the visitors paying a stopover at Wildlife rescue centre in Oljogi conservancy were highly satisfied with the wildlife experience. The study recommends relevant programs that would ensure protection of the endangered species, increased number of preferred animals and high level of satisfaction among visitors. A similar study is recommended in national reserves and parks to compare and contrast the results.

**Key Words:** *habitat condition, satisfaction, visitor experience, wildlife conservation, wildlife preference, wildlife tourism*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of wildlife tourism is one that has attracted increasing academic and industry attention. This increased focus is set in the context of the growing environmental awareness of the general public (Green & Higginbottom, 2018). People are generally indicating a positive attitude toward the environment (Tarrant, Bright, & Cordell, 2015; Kellert & Berry, 2016) and environmental issues are receiving more attention in the media and educational curriculums in schools (Newby, 2014). While wildlife tourism provides an opportunity to fascinate tourists and increase their interest in wildlife which in turn can enhance the protection of certain habitats and communities (Kirkwood & Hindell, 2014), It can also cause negative effects such as behavioural or physiological changes of the affected animals (Green & Giese, 2017). Activities such as

hunting, trapping and use of animals in research have come under considerable public criticism from those concerned with animal welfare (Schmidt, 2018).

In Kenya, the government through Brand Kenya has marketed the country as a tourist destination especially due to the existence of the big five and rare wildlife species (Makawiti, 2015). Adverts are run showcasing Kenya in the international scene as a tourist destination which has attracted a wide range of tourists. Despite these, the numbers of tourists continued to fall between 2013 and 2017 (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2019) which resulted in job losses as the firms operating in the tourism industry cut on cost and laid off workers. The reduction in tourists also resulted to closure of businesses that relied on tourism to thrive. The economy of the country was hence affected as the level of foreign inflows from tourism was reduced (Getao, 2015). There is very little information that has been documented regarding wildlife conservation, habitat and visitors' preference for wild life viewing which influences their choice of wildlife tourism making this study very viable. This study sought to examine wildlife conservation, visitors' preferences and habit conditions for wildlife tourism at Oljogi conservancy in Laikipia county, Kenya.

The study was based on mindfulness, animal encounter and involvement theories. Mindfulness theory of tourism was postulated by Moscardo (2009). He developed a model to illustrate mindfulness and mindlessness in built heritage sites. According to this model whether visitors are mindful or mindless is influenced by a combination of setting and visitor factors. Animal encounter theory, postulated by Moscardo, Woods, and Saltz (2004) set the theoretical framework for animal encounters as a strength level of wildlife experiences. The theory postulated that the encounters at a destination may offer sustainable and conservation considerations for participating visitors, the stakeholders, the animals, and the whole tourism industry. Ratchford and Vaughn developed the involvement theory and related it to tourism in 1989 (Ratchford & Vaughn, 1989). Involvement Theory captures the attitudinal motives of time, cost, and energy required by the tourist in choosing their wildlife destination and activities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Wildlife has been considered as any living non-human, undomesticated organism in the kingdom Animalia (Moulton & Sanderson, 2014). In tourism literature, wildlife tourism, as a sub-set of nature-based tourism can then be defined as 'tourism based on interactions with wildlife, whether in its natural environment or in captivity' (Burns & Sofield, 2011). It also contains all the traditional elements of tourism (such as tourists, hosts and resources) with its distinguishing feature being focused on wildlife as tourist attracting resource (Shackley, 2017). In Kenya, for example, wildlife tourism is mainly faunal, as defined by Reynolds and Braithwaite (2011) as a form of nature-based tourism that is centred on the interaction of visitors with wild animals. A study carried out in Ilorin Zoo in Nigeria showed that only the lion and the hyena had more than 50% of the respondents indicating them as one of their most preferred wild animals.

### **Wildlife Visitors' Demographic Profile**

According to Odunga and Maingi (2011) tourists were profiled in regard to the demographic features. It showed that men and women tend to be viewed differently in terms of being travelers; for instance, men who travel alone will generally seek adventurous activities, expedition, or sex tourism. In the study carried out at Ilorin Zoo in Nigeria, the dominance of Zoo visits by the youth was confirmed. More males (64.2%) visited the zoo and majority (84.2%) possessed tertiary education. The fact that 65% of the respondents were single was explained by the age distribution of the respondents. The average household size was six. While 34.2 % were civil servants, 30.8% of the respondents were students while the remaining 35 % were self-employed (Adefalu et al., 2015). A study carried out at Ol Pejeta Conservancy which neighbours Oljogi, indicated that females were more satisfied with wildlife tourism than males (Njeri, 2013). Kaltenborn, Bjerke, Nyahongo and Williams (2016) reported that age and level of education significantly influenced wildlife tourism preference among tourists. Gender has also been confirmed to significantly influence wildlife tourism preference among visitors; the study also determined these relationships. Gender has also been confirmed to significantly influence wildlife tourism preference among visitors; the study also determined these relationships (Kaltenborn et al, 2016).

### **Wild Animals' Habitat**

Wildlife tourism involves visits undertaken to view and/or encounter wildlife (CRC, 2009). It can take place in a range of settings, from captive, semi-captive to the wild, and it encompasses a variety of interactions from passive observation to feeding and/or touching the species viewed. Seeing wildlife in its natural environment, behaving naturally and viewing rare, unique or unusual wildlife were the three most important features sought in a wildlife tourism experience. Being able to touch/handle wildlife was least important (Moscardo & Saltzer, 2017). Satisfaction scores were also higher for visitors who place greater importance on seeing wildlife on holidays, are tour participants, are female, desire wildlife encounters in natural environments, desire wildlife encounters with knowledgeable guides or staff present, touched wildlife or saw an animal for the first time in real life. The encounter between the visitor and the wildlife comprises the core of a wildlife tourism experience (Chen & Chen, 2010).

### **Satisfaction Level and Visitor' Preference to Wildlife Tourism**

Measuring and managing customer satisfaction is important for the survival, development and success of the tourism business. When measuring customer satisfaction, the basic premise is that consumers reflect on their experiences and express these honestly and free of bias (Njeri, 2013). Customer satisfaction is one of the most frequently examined topics in the hospitality and tourism industry because it plays an important role in the continued and sustained operation of any tourism business. To ensure continuity and growth, a destination attraction is dependent on

the visitors and the satisfaction of their needs. Although total satisfactions of visitors' needs are not the goal in themselves, striving to achieve this enables the attraction to attain its own goals (Lindsey, Alexander, Frank, Mathieson, & Romanach, 2017).

## **Wildlife Conservation**

Wildlife conservation is the practice of protecting wild species and their habitats in order to prevent species from going extinct (Giles, 2018). Spenceley and Snyman (2017) did a study on whether a wildlife tourism company influenced conservation and the development of tourism in a specified destination. Through a series of stakeholder interviews and literature review, the research found that Mombo had influenced the destination's quality standards, how it was marketed and promoted, and also in the conservation of endangered species. Rastogi, Hickey, Anand, Badola, and Badola (2015) did a village-level study wildlife tourism, local communities and tiger conservation in Corbett Tiger Reserve, India. The results suggested that future forest and conservation policy and management strategies should de-emphasize the monetary function of wildlife-tourism, and instead focus on building social capital and strengthening local institutions. Despite the much comments that have been made by the authors regarding visitors' demographics, wildlife habitat, and satisfaction levels, there is no concern that has been raised in relation to the interrelations between wildlife conservation, visitors' preference and habitat for wildlife tourism in conservancies in Kenya. The studies were done in various countries other than Kenya hence creating a research gap that justifies the recent one and making it feasible.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Survey Design and Data Collection**

The study was carried out in Laikipia county. This study adopted a descriptive research design in form of a case study. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to ensure the study was able to define and quantify the problem, collect data and explain phenomenon more comprehensively (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2012). The study used a questionnaire to collect data from visitors. Interview guide was used to collect data from the tour guides.

### **Population**

The study targeted all types of visitors touring the Wildlife rescue centre in Oljogi conservancy. On average, 13728 tourists visit Oljogi conservancy annually (Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association, 2018). The study used simple random sampling to select 384 visitors for the study. Visitors were intercepted at the gate of the wildlife rescue centre at Oljogi conservancy and issued with questionnaires which were later returned to the researchers.

## **Sample Size**

The study targeted a sample size of 384 respondents in collecting data out of which 339 filled in and returned the questionnaires making a response rate of 88.3%. Mugenda & Mugenda (2012) asserted that response rate of 50% was adequate for analysis and reporting; a rate of 60% was good while that of 70% and over was excellent.

## **Pretesting**

The questionnaires were pretested on 12 visitors randomly selected and who were not included in the final study. This was 3% of the 384 visitors sampled. Out of the 12 visitors who took part in the pretest, 5 of them (41.6%) took too long filling in questionnaires and hence were assisted during the main study to ensure time was not lost. So as to ascertain validity, the instruments were reviewed by the supervisors and changes were recommended. The necessary adjustment and revision were done to ensure validity of the research instruments. The reliability of the research instrument was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. The high value of Alpha coefficient (0.791) indicates that the research instruments that were used were highly reliable and therefore was helpful in deriving reliable outcomes in this study. Prior to the start of fieldwork, an authorization letter was obtained from the graduate school. The researcher waited for the questionnaires to be filled and collected them on the same day. This was important to minimize cases of misplaced questionnaires or visitors carrying them home.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative techniques. In this case data analysis was done using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) computer software. The collected data were screened for accuracy and coded based on profiles of the respondents so as to eliminate any outliers that were deemed influential on the outcome. In addition, descriptive analysis was carried out to generate frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations for the various variables on the closed ended questions. For qualitative data, thematic data analysis was used in making general statements on how categories or themes of data were related.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. This is based on the 339 visitors who filled and returned their questionnaires. This related to age, category, marital status, occupation, and education.

**Table 1: Respondents’ demographics**

		Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-25 years	78	23.0
	26-34 years	50	14.7
	35-44 years	121	35.7
	45-54 years	66	19.5
	55 years and above	24	7.1
Gender	Male	197	58.1
	Female	142	41.9
Category	1-2 Members	102	30.1
	3-5 Members	104	30.7
	6-10 Members	82	24.2
	More than 10 Members	51	15.0
Marital Status	Single	156	46.0
	Married	183	54.0
Occupation	Other white-collar	88	26.0
	Skilled manual	78	23.0
	State pensioner	62	18.3
	Self-employed	111	32.7
Education	Secondary	82	24.2
	Graduate	112	33.0
	Masters	106	31.3
	Post-Graduate	39	11.5
Total		339	100.0

Table 2 shows the agreement on statements relating to profiling and wildlife tourism. The findings are based on the scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree.

**Table 2: Visitor profiling and wildlife tourism**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Characteristics of the visitors influence their viewing of wildlife	339	2.00	5.00	4.03	0.83
Education increases one’s interest in wildlife tourism	339	3.00	5.00	4.32	0.58
Men who travel seek adventurous activities like game drives	339	2.00	5.00	4.16	0.78
Single people prefer wildlife tourism to other fun activities	339	2.00	5.00	4.23	0.83
Youth are more likely to go for a wildlife tourism expedition compared to the aged	339	3.00	5.00	4.09	0.88

Table 3 shows the habitat in which animals in Oljogi exist in. Majority existed in natural environment where wildlife was free ranging. Table 4 shows agreement on statements relating to habitat conditions and wildlife tourism.

**Table 3: Habitat**

	Frequency	Percentage
Natural environment	212	62.5
In a cage or enclosure	127	37.5
Total	339	100.0

**Table 4: Statements Relating to the Animal Habitats**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
wildlife animals exist in natural environment	339	3.00	5.00	4.26	0.67
I like viewing wildlife in a cage	339	2.00	5.00	4.01	0.93
I like viewing free ranging wildlife	339	2.00	5.00	4.13	0.84
Wildlife in captive habitats are more friendly compared to the free ranging wildlife	339	2.00	5.00	4.27	0.76
Endangered species are caged in the conservancy	339	3.00	5.00	4.38	0.58
Wildlife habitat determines the number of visitors in wildlife tourism	339	2.00	5.00	4.08	0.81

Table 5 shows the level of satisfaction at Oljogi conservancy. Majority of the respondents were satisfied. From the interviews, the tour guides indicated that the most visitors were very happy and satisfied with the experience in the conservancy promising to return in a near future.

**Table 5: Satisfaction level of Visitors on preferred wildlife**

	Frequency	Percentage
Dissatisfied	62	18.3
Moderate	35	10.3
Satisfied	113	33.3
Completely satisfied	129	38.1
Total	339	100.0

Table 6 indicates the reasons for guest satisfaction in wildlife tourism in the conservancy. Uniqueness and variety of wildlife were the key factors of satisfaction. The tour guides and visitors indicated that wildlife conservation status in the Oljogi was very good. Table 7 shows the results on level of agreement on statements relating to wildlife conservation.

**Table 6: Reasons for guest satisfaction in wildlife tourism in the conservancy**

Cause of satisfaction	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
It was the first time to see the wild animal	339	3.00	5.00	4.35	0.69
Wild animal was rare and unique	339	3.00	5.00	4.12	0.75
Wild animal was of friendly nature	339	3.00	5.00	4.23	0.77
To experience native animals'	339	3.00	5.00	4.34	0.62
You touched, handled or fed the wild animal	339	3.00	5.00	4.25	0.73
The wild animal was aggressive	339	3.00	5.00	2.21	0.73

**Table 7: Statements on wildlife conservation and wildlife tourism**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Poaching is a major challenge wildlife conservation	339	1	4	3.74	0.85
Habitat destruction hinders wildlife conservation efforts	339	3	5	4.04	0.32
Wildlife conservation status defines wildlife tourism in protected areas	339	2	4	4.23	0.77
I have seen unique wildlife conserved in Oljogi	339	1	5	4.34	0.79
I have seen big five in Oljogi	339	3	5	4.11	0.43
Poor conservation of wildlife reduces visitors for wildlife tourism	339	2	5	4.31	0.58
Many people visit Oljogi for wildlife adventures	339	1	4	3.55	0.70
Oljogi has a variety of wildlife conserved within its borders	339	1	5	3.72	0.75

The study sought to test the hypothesis “H0: Wildlife conservation is the only factor influencing wildlife tourism at Oljogi conservancy.”

Table 8 illustrates that the asymptotic significance values for the variables was less than 0.05, hence all the factors have a significant effect on wildlife tourism. This meant that we reject the null hypothesis that wildlife conservation is the only factor influencing wildlife tourism at Oljogi conservancy.

**Table 8: Hypothesis Testing**

		Visitor profile for preference	Habitat Conditions	Visitor satisfaction	Wildlife conservation
Chi-Square	41.289 <sup>a</sup>	126.819 <sup>b</sup>	74.289 <sup>b</sup>	65.771 <sup>a</sup>	118.108 <sup>a</sup>
Df	3	4	4	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

## **DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

All the factors were found to have a significant effect on wildlife tourism from the hypothesis testing. This meant that we reject the null hypothesis that wildlife conservation was the only factor influencing wildlife tourism at Oljogi conservancy and concluded that wildlife conservation was not the only factor that influence wildlife tourism.

The study revealed that visitor's profile had a significant influence on preference of wildlife tourism. Education was found to increase one's interest in wildlife tourism with single people preferring wildlife tourism to other fun activities. Men and youth preferred adventurous activities like game drives and wildlife tourism expedition. These findings concur with the study findings by Higginbottom and Bjerke et al., (2012) who reported that individual characteristics such career, age, level of education significantly influenced wildlife tourism preference among visitors. This lead to the conclusion that visitor's profile had a significant influence on preference of wildlife tourism at Oljogi conservancy.

Findings revealed that most visitors preferred rare and unique wildlife in its natural environment. It was also found that habitat conditions had a significant influence on visitors' preferences to wildlife tourism. These findings are in support of the study findings by Higginbottom and Buckley (2014) who indicated that visitors preferred to view wildlife in untouched natural environment where the wildlife was mainly found. This study hence concluded that habitat conditions influence wildlife tourism at Oljogi Conservancy.

The study concluded that most of the visitors paying a stopover at Oljogi conservancy were highly satisfied with experience. The findings concur with those of Odunga and Maingi (2011) found that visitors' preferences and choices of wildlife-based experiences play a critical role on attracting overseas visitors. The study found that there was unique wildlife conserved with all the big fives available within its borders. The findings support those of Van Wijk, Lamers and Van der Duim (2015) who reported that conservation of unique wildlife enhanced wildlife tourism within protected areas.

The wildlife conservation status was found to be good. Poor conservation of wildlife was also found to influence wildlife tourism by reducing the number of visitors to destinations. This was supported by the hypothesis testing where wildlife conservation status was found to influence wildlife tourism. The findings supported those of Shutt (2014) who determined that wildlife tourism is on the decline with wildlife conservation being the main challenge facing the industry. The study hence concluded that wildlife conservation status in Oljogi conservancy influence wildlife tourism.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given that individual or group profile were found to influence visitor's preference of wildlife tourism, the management of Oljogi Conservancy should therefore tailor its tourism packages to match the dynamics of overseas visitors. Such should include measures as costs as this directly related with individual income. Give that animal habitats were found to play a significant role in influencing visitor's preference of wildlife tourism the management of Oljogi Conservancy should again strive to offer different extensive view points for the wildlife in the conservancy. As majority loved learning natural behaviours of the animals on their natural habitats, it is therefore important to give information in advance, explaining reasons as to why some of the animals were caged. To ensure competitiveness and client satisfaction, the management of Oljogi Conservancy must continually embrace distinctive strategies that keep the Conservancy top on the tourism grid. This may involve strategies that improve process efficiencies at the conservancy, cost effectiveness, adoption of measures that improve on awareness globally, periodic assessment on client wish in future and factoring the same in future (R&D) among others. A study on the factors influencing wildlife tourism in national reserves and parks to compare and contrast the results was recommended.

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