Challenges and Prospects of Sustainable Tourism Industry in Eritrea: Retrospective Policy Assessment

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The tourism industry is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors in the global market. It contributes towards complete growth and development of a country by bringing numerous economic value and benefit and helping in building country's brand value, image and identity. Eritrea has huge tourism potential owing to its natural, historical and cultural endowments. However, the tourism industry in Eritrea is only in its nascent stage. This study, therefore, try to identify and examine the major challenges of sustainable tourism development and its prospects. Primary data were collected from interview with different Ministry of Tourism authorities, travel agencies and tour operators' managers and owners. Secondary data were retrieved from annual reports of international tourism organizations, Ministry of Tourism, the State of Eritrea and other documented sources including magazines and relevant research and papers. The research concludes that Eritrea has great potential for the development of tourism. However, the tourism growth is blocked by specific factors such as poor image, inadequate tourism infrastructural and technological facilities, absence of coordination among tourism stakeholders and lack of skilled man power. This study will assist policymakers to understand the present challenges of the tourism industry and provide necessary recommendations to adopt appropriate strategies and mechanisms.

Keywords: challenges, prospects, sustainable tourism development, Eritrea

Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest and rapidly growing industries throughout the world. According to recent United Nations World Tourism Organization world tourism barometer, there were an estimated 790 million tourists travelled internationally in the first seven months of 2024, about 11% more than in 2023, though 4% less than in 2019. Despite global economic challenges, political crisis and military conflicts in the previously tourists' destinations hubs of Eastern Europe and Middle East, international tourism results are well above expectations, with an additional 52 million international tourists travelling the world. Results were driven by strong demand across most regions, the ongoing recovery of Asia Pacific destinations, increased air connectivity and visa facilitation. The UN Panel of Tourism Experts pointed the inflation in travel and tourism, namely high transport and accommodation prices, as the main challenges the tourism sector is currently facing.

It is widely accepted that tourism is among the world's fastest growing and largest industries on the basis of its economic benefits. Asia leads the growth in tourism industry with +8%, Europe +4%, Americas +5% and

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Africa +7%. Undoubtedly, the growth in international tourist arrivals and receipts will continue in the future. Many developing countries have seen tourism as the major source of foreign exchange earnings. According to the World Tourism Organization (2024), tourism is considered as number one in the international services trade, that accounts for 40% of global trade in services and 6% of total world trade. The tourism industry directly provides approximately 3% of world employment, or provides at least 192 million jobs—the equivalent to one in every twelve jobs in the formal sector.

The tourism sector is recognized as a highly human capital intensive industry, in which tourist arrivals increase demand for accommodation, restaurants, recreation and transportation, which in turn generate direct employment opportunities in target destinations (UNWTO, 2015a; 2015b). Furthermore, the sector is acknowledged to increase the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and develop economic opportunities that are linked to the production and service delivery value chains within the tourism industry (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010).

Problem Statement

Despite the significant opportunities in the tourism sector, the use and prioritization of tourism as an asset towards economic development in LDCs is limited. Particularly for LDCs in the sub-Saharan Africa region, tourism development is underperforming, with 59% of the countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region where Eritrea is part of it demonstrating market failures in their tourism sectors (World Bank, 2011). As tourism is both dependent and impactful on an array of economic subsectors, due to backward linkages and multiplier effects in the production and service sectors of the tourism supply chain, a concerted investment (both regulatory and financial) is necessary to ensure the success of the industry in sub-Saharan Africa. However, Gisore and Ogutu (2015) noted that, the economic and social importance of the tourism industry is widely underappreciated. There is a limited understanding and/or prioritization amongst policymakers in the region of the potential for tourism development in their countries, and how to achieve 'destination readiness' for tourism. Given the multiple challenges and competing priorities in the areas of poverty, health, security and stability, tourism development is an industry that faces challenges in convincing policymakers of its value as a tool for broader economic development in the sub-Saharan Africa region (Haile, 2017).

Eritrea is amongst the list of countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have yet to fully develop and optimize their tourism industry. Despite impressive gains towards meeting the country's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and post-conflict rehabilitation efforts, Eritrea is categorized in the low human development category [United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2015]. Regional security, youth migration, climate change and economic development are identified obstacles that hinder an improved quality of life and standards of living in Eritrea.

Despite Eritrea's challenges, the tourism sector has been identified as one of the five strategic sectors of the country (Sati, 2006; Kaplan, 2016; Haile, 2017). Eritrea's historical heritage and geographic location along the Red Sea are identified as opportunities for tourism development (UNECA, 2011). Eritrea's Massawa city and the nearby Dahlak Archipelago are areas endowed with natural deep water ports, early-Islamic history, Ottoman and Egyptian architecture, a rich cultural heritage, and virgin marine resources spread across over 200 islands that position these two destinations as key tourism hubs. However, very little research has been conducted to identify the potential of sustainable tourism development in these destinations as a strategy to

contribute to local economic growth and poverty reduction efforts. As a developing country, it is critical that Eritrea ought to adopt sustainable use of its assets to broaden and diversify opportunities for economic growth and improve the quality of life for its citizens.

Research Objectives and Questions

Eritrea has vast tourism potential and is endowed with diversified tourism sites and attractions due to its unique land forms, socio-cultural history and strategic location along the Horn of Africa and Red Sea basin. Nevertheless, for several reasons the country is unable to tap the tourism potential into its own advantage. Eritrea had developed National Tourism Development Plan (NTDP) in 1999 that extended for twenty years. The study is carried out to: retrospectively analyze Eritrea's tourism policy, assess the challenges that constrained tourism sector for the last two decades, and to chart out the prospects of the tourism sector in the future.

Hence, the research is aimed to answer the following questions through the study:

- What is the current state of Eritrea's tourism industry?
- What are the constraining challenges of Eritrea's tourism sector?
- What are the future prospects of tourism industry in Eritrea?
- What are the outcomes of Eritrea tourism policy in the last two decades?

Significance of the Research

Upon its completion, the study is expected to fill the obstinate research gaps that embedded in tourism industry of Eritrea. The research is conducted for the first time in Eritrea, thus, it will be a source of reference for further research in tourism sector. The paper also tries to assess Eritrea's tourism policy, so it will help Eritrean policymakers critically examine the policy outcomes and make policy adjustment in their future proceedings. It will enable the Ministry of Tourism to understand the pressing challenges of the tourism sector and future prospects. Besides, the study will help travel agencies on how to deal with tourism challenges through recommending them coping strategies and mechanisms to deploy.

Literature Review

The impact of tourism as a tool for economic development and poverty alleviation is currently a growing area of research as part of the overarching discourse on sustainable development programs (Telfer, 2014). The natural, cultural and historical resources in many developing countries are considered to be underutilized tourism assets that can contribute to economic development and social change (Telfer, 2014). An increasing number of academic research has been conducted to analyze the challenges of the tourism sector, and assess the value of integrating the industry as a development asset for economic growth and social progress.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have been conducted about tourism sector across all countries. The study conducted by Odudoh (2013) posited that safety and security, lack of adequate resources and infrastructure, poor image and perception of Africa—political instability, limited connectivity, high operating costs—fuel prices and limited and expensive air access are the most challenges of Kenyan tourism industry. Another study undertaken by Andargie (2014) shows that: lack of infrastructure, lack of museums, lack of service facilities, absence of protection and preservations of cultural heritage, financial limitations as key constraints hinder

tourism development in Ethiopia. Biazen (2010) pointed out political uncertainty and infrastructural disruption as major influencer of tourism industry.

Dabour (2003) on his study found out that: lack of tourism knowledge and awareness, lack of technical knowhow and weak promotion activity, lack of tourism related infrastructure, lack of consistent tourism strategy and policy, lack of tourism safety and lack of tourism diversification are the main problems of OIC countries. World Bank (2011) cited that: ups and downs in licensing of tourism service operators, inconsistent and weak supervision of such organizations by the government, little awareness as to the benefits of tourism services by the local communities, shortages of reservation software indicating tourism sites to visitors and number of registered local and foreign visitors who got the services and image of the nation by itself are among some of the key factors that determine the growth and trends of the tourism sector in sub-Saharan Africa.

Cernat and Gourdon (2007) carried out a study aimed at understanding the cross-sectoral nature of tourism. They posited that: it can only grow sustainably when it is integrated into a country's overall economic, social and physical planning policies. Where national attractions are shared with neighboring countries, joint or regional promotion and marketing can be effective. The tourism industry, therefore, needs to be developed further to be attractive and competitive in the international market.

The concept of sustainable tourism is stemmed in the following guidelines according to Muzapu and Sibanda (2016):

• Minimizing the impact of tourism activity on the environment by contributing to maintaining and enhancement of conservation through the return of a part of the revenues towards the protected area;

• Minimizing the negative impact of tourism activity on the local community and its members;

• Minimizing the negative impact of tourism activity on the culture of the local communities;

• Maximizing the economic benefits of the local population.

The objectives of sustainable tourism development are focused on factors that stabilize and promote tourism. In a nutshell, it includes establishing protected areas; management of tourist techniques; management of resort center carrying capacity; environmental impact assessment; establishing codes of ethics for tourists and operators and establishing laws, regulations as well as right policies (UN, 2010).

The development of tourism sector requires the roles of many actors inter alia: the government, the market and local media. According to Muzembi (2014), to achieve the desired growth from the tourism industry, policies that refurbish and support economic growth are indispensable. Muzembi's (2014) argument also concurs with assumptions of Ritchie and Crouch (2000), who firmly believe that effective tourism policy would seek to provide high-quality visitors experience to the destination, while ensuring that the destination is not compromised in terms of its social, environmental and cultural integrity. The roles of government are aptly explained by Muzapu and Sibanda (2016) as providing duty relief to tour guides, importation of necessary vehicles by hotels. At inter-government levels with other countries, government may enter into joint tourism programs with neighboring countries, country-to-country tourism agreements and country-to-country cultural exchanges.

The role of local private businesses and market development should not be undermined and ought to be encouraged to participate in investing in the tourism activities[1]. The introduction of direct flight, 72 or 100 hours visa free entry period for foreign tourists, promoting international, regional and internal airline connectivity, resuscitation of the national airline, interconnectedness of cities by rail, road and air networks,

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[1] China Tourism article. (2015). Retrieved from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn.

relaxation of visa application and requirements system are pivotal to tourism development (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2016).

Theoretical Review

Many scholars define tourism in many ways and provide different definitions. The Tourism Society defines it as deemed to embrace any activity concerned with the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their usual place where they simply live, work and their activity during their stay at the destinations. Dumbrăveanu (2006) defined tourism as a service-based industry comprising tangible and non-tangible components. The tangible elements of tourism include: transport, tours, beverages and foods, souvenirs and different types of accommodations. Whereas the intangible components embrace: education, adventure, escape, relaxation and culture (Mclntosh & Goeldner, 1995).

Kitjanantawiwat (2004) stated that, the primary tourism stakeholders are people, tourists, private businesses, local communities, local government, regional and national governments. UNWTO (2005) had defined sustainable tourism as sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices that are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations to the various niche if tourism segments. The concept of sustainability in tourism refers to the environmental, socio-economic and cultural aspects of tourism development (UNWTO, 2015a; 2015b).

Tourism System Theory (TST)

This theory was developed by Beech and Chadwick in 2000. The theory considers tourism as being made up of a number of components that include the tourist, tourist generating region, transit route region, tourist host region and tourism industry. The tourism system composes supply and demand factors. Chaisawat (2006) stated the supply factors of TST inter alia: tourism facilities and services, tourist attractions and activities as well as infrastructures. Whereas the demand factors embrace: local administration, transportation, institutional elements, educational establishments and accommodations.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a recent concept that aims at protecting and enhancing the environment, meeting basic human needs, promoting current and intergenerational equity and improving the quality of life of all members' society.

The United Nation (2010) stated that the common elements of sustainable goals are inter alia: managing the utilization, development and protection of resource in a way that the cultural, social, economic and physical environment welfare of communities is sustained.

World Tourism Organization (2005) defined sustainable tourism as tourism that directs to management of all resources in a way that aesthetic economic and social needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.

Research Methodology

The research used qualitative approach to reach the objectives of the study and answer the research questions. The data collection instruments were both primary and secondary sources. Primary data collection was obtained from interview with Ministry of Tourism senior officials and managers of travel agencies and tour services in Eritrea. Moreover, personal knowledge and self-observation were used as part of primary data collection instruments. The secondary sources of information were gathered from articles, books, policy

documents, journals, proclamations, legal notices and website searches. Besides, the study took into account ethical consideration of key informants such as keeping their identity anonymous and confidential; the study won't do any harm to them and considers their consent as well.

Analysis, Discussion & Findings

General Overview of Eritrea

Eritrea is a small and young country in the Horn of Africa, bordering the Sudan to north and west, Ethiopia to south, Djibouti to south east and the Red Sea elongates along its eastern part. The country had been colonized by five countries for the last five hundred years and got its independence from Ethiopia de facto in 1991 and de jure in 1993. Since then, the country had gone through unprecedented socio-economic and political transformations. Eritrea's economic growth showed massive improvement in post-independence period until the outbreak of war with Ethiopia for two years (1998-2000) followed by two decades of "no war no peace" situation.

Eritrea's population consists of nine ethno-linguistic groups, each with its own language and cultural traditions. In addition to the native languages spoken by various ethnic groups, English, Arabic and Italian are widely understood. The religious composition of Eritrea is estimated as 50% Christians and 50% Moslem.

Eritrea's economy is predominantly agrarian, with a large amount of farming being carried out on a subsistence basis. It is also dependent on mining and remittances from the diaspora, leading to accompanying volatility. The main headwinds for the economy include climate change, the effects of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on supply chains and the lack of political and economic reforms (World Factbook, 2024). In 2024, real GDP growth is projected to increase to 3.1%, from 2.6% in 2023 and 2.3% in 2022, due to higher international prices for metals, which account for 50% of exports.

Despite continuing security risks, including the ongoing civil conflicts in neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan, the year 2023 realized positive progress in the regional integration of Eritrea in the Horn of Africa. In June 2023, after two decades of absence, Eritrea rejoined the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa, which is expected to boost its regional integration, trade and investment in manufacturing and service industries such as tourism. As a result of Eritrean improvement in diplomatic engagement, the president of the Africa Development Bank and the vice president of the World Bank visited Eritrea in September 2023. Moreover, Eritrea's foreign minister held talks with the United Nations Secretary-General to advance collaboration between Eritrea and the UN, as well as to improve peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

The new Government of the State of Eritrea and UN Joint Work Plans for the period 2024/26 are predicted to be signed soon. These will align with the government's ten priority sector plans, announced in early 2022. The proposed Joint Work Plans contain a remarkable shift in policy, towards requesting UN support for the tangible delivery of social services, rather than for policy or strategy development, which is now outlined as the government's responsibility.

Historical Development of Tourism Industry in Eritrea

The first tourism office was opened in Eritrea in 1966 during the Emperor Haile Selassie colonial era. During that period, arrivals of international visitors were 16,898 in 1966 and 21,459, a peak in 1972. However, arrivals during the Dergue regime from 1974 to 1990 decreased. In 1974 there were 7,108 arrivals and this figure hit the ground almost to null in 1976, as hotels were nationalized, travel agencies were closed and most

tourist attractions were under the control of the liberation movement. In general, the movement was impossible as the whole country was under the shadow of war. Eritrea starts its journey in 1991 after earning costly independence from Ethiopia. Eritrean government has realized that tourism has the potential to contribute towards efforts in reduction of poverty since independence. Therefore, the government of Eritrea established tourism department in 1992 which is responsible for the tourism activities. But in 1994, the government elevated former tourism department to ministry which is responsible for policy formulation and co-ordination of activities to develop and promote the tourism sector in Eritrea.

Since independence in 1991, due to emergence of peaceful environment and conducive atmosphere to travel, visitor arrivals started to revive and reached to 12,756 in 1991. In 1996 it shot skyward and reached 416,596. However, in 1998 visitor arrival was dropped due to the war of border conflict with Ethiopia. Again when peace agreements were signed and war conditions calmed down, arrivals in 2001, boomed and reached to 113,000. From 2002-2009 for almost ten years, tourist arrivals remained constant around 80,000. But from 2010-2014 tourist arrival had been improved and almost reached 141,210 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Tourist Arrival to Eritrea

Years	Number of tourists arrived to Eritrea (in thousands)
2010	83,947
2011	107,090
2012	128,924
2013	141,210
2014	118,618
2015	121,689
2016	126,697
2017	133,276
2018	80,962
2019	79,426
2020	23,030
2021	20,884
2022	65,496
2023	92,352

Note. Source: Ministry of Tourism, 2024.

National Tourism Policy and Strategies: Situational Analysis

Eritrea has an emerging tourism sector but still at its embryonic stage. In 1999, the government formulated National Tourism Development Plan to make every effort to develop tourism in a sustainable manner. This means conserving the natural, archaeological/historical and cultural resources of tourism, avoiding socio-cultural problems, maintaining and improving the environmental quality of tourism areas.

According to the Ministry of Tourism (1999), Eritrea's national tourism policy is grounded on the following guidelines as major driver of socio-economic transformation:

• Develop tourism on a sustainable basis;

• Develop international tourism also to introduce Eritrea's historical and cultural heritage and diverse environments to the international community;

- Develop domestic tourism so Eritrean people have the opportunity to engage in recreation activities and to learn about their environmental, historical and cultural heritage, leading to a greater sense of national unity;
- Develop and maintain a good quality level of tourism;
- Develop tourism in a manner that encourages conservation and enhancement of the natural environment and biodiversity, and conservation of archaeological and historical sites, architecturally important buildings and the cultural traditions and identities of the country's several ethnic groups;
- Create opportunities for spreading the benefits of tourism widely throughout society and the country and specially to local communities. Integrate tourism into the overall national, regional and local development programs and achieve balanced development;
- Ensure the effective management tourism based on cooperation between the public and private sectors and coordination among the various levels of government.

The national strategy identified tourism development corridors which are the immediate visual and physical environment of major tour routes. The four principal tourism corridors are:

- Asmara to Massawa;
- Asmara to Keren;
- Asmara to Zalambesa;
- Asmara to Tera-Emni.

The National Tourism Development Plan adopted regional tourism development strategies for each of the six regions of the country and identified fourteen high priority and five low priority areas.

The Government of the State of Eritrea formulated the National Tourism Development Plan to develop tourism in a sustainable manner to meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the future generation. However, most of the objectives of the national plan are not met yet. The Plan was an ambitious scheme to create healthy tourism industry focused on natural and cultural resources of the country. The reasons that hinder the tourism industry development plans and fail to achieve the objectives are the main focus of this study and are discussed below.

Findings of the Study

Tourism Resources of Eritrea

Our study tried to consider the most important tourism resources Eritrea is having up to today. We found that, the country is a land of undiscovered treasures, endowed with a stock of diverse nature based, historical and cultural wonders that make it a fascinating tourist destination.

Natural Resources

Eritrea encompasses a variety of natural resources like pleasant climate, attractive topography and beautiful coastal beaches. The country occupies an important place in the north-west of the Horn of Africa and is located at the crossroads connecting Africa, Europe and Asia. The topography of the country is diverse and forms much scenic beauty. One of the outstanding features of the country is the escarpment between the capital city Asmara and the main seaport Massawa, which goes from more than 2,000 meters to sea level in less than 100 kilometers. The road and railway between these two cities offers dramatic scenic views and is known as the journey of "Three Seasons in Two Hours" i.e. hot sea level, moderate escarpment and cold highland climate. A great attraction of the country for tourist destination is the pristine Red Sea. The beaches are clean and not so crowded that they can make up the tourists' minds to visit them many times.

Historical Resources

Eritrea's historical tourism resources comprise: ancient rock paintings, monuments steles, ruined building, ancient pottery that shows when trade started in Eritrea, spreading of Christianity and Islamic religion in Eritrea, introduction of writing scripture. The country is endowed with prehistoric sites such as: Adulis, Qohaito, Metera, Shrine-Sahaba, rock arts and engravings in different places of the country. The historical attraction also includes Eritrea's long struggle for independence and guarding sovereignty sites. It includes armed struggle remnants like: tanks, military planes, military sites and fronts.

Socio-Cultural Resources

Eritrea, the world's newest adventure, is ready with its traditional warm welcome. The harmony and mutual respect for one another exhibited by all members of the nationalities is exemplary. It is this shared experience of harmonious co-existence that constantly enriches and strengthens the Eritrean people's common values and unity. The unity in diversity is, therefore, the basic social fiber of the Eritrean people's culture. Each of the country's nine nationalities has its own oral and literary tradition, its music and dance, its architectures, its arts and crafts, and much more. Eritrea celebrates this rich heritage at all major celebrations and festivals, with performances and exhibitions that show the unique contribution of each group.

Different cities of Eritrea are characterized by modern architecture, collection of buildings that show the variety of styles of Ottoman Turkey and Italy. As a result, on July 8, 2017, Asmara was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list. Some of the main architectural attractions of the city are: built cottage house of Asmara or the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Asmara President's Office, Fiat Tagliero Building, Cinema Impero, Asmara Saint Mary Church (Enda-Mariam). Amazing monument of Ottoman, Egyptian and Italian architecture, mainly built in the 18th-19th century on two islands (Massawa old town). Especially impressive feature is waterfront of city. It includes the fifteenth-century Sheikh Hanafi Mosque, Imperial Palace and other historical buildings. Besides, the modern city of Keren possesses historic buildings and infrastructure that include religious buildings, administrative offices, restaurants, cafes, and residential houses.

Tourism Industry Challenges in Eritrea

In our interview with Ministry of Tourism and travel agencies and tour operators' key informants, the research found out that: Eritrea tourism industry faces numerous challenges that inhibit its growth and reap the relatively virgin industry of the country. From the interview we conducted with Ministry of Tourism and travel agencies and tour operators, we found out the following four main challenges of developing sustainable tourism in Eritrea.

Poor Image of Eritrea

According to an interview with the Ministry of Tourism officials, even though there is "no war no peace" situation in Eritrea since 2000, there is no security problem in the country except the places bordering Ethiopia. However, the key informants underlined that, the international media on conflicts and disasters play an important role in creating negative image about Eritrea. They further added that, Eritrea's image in the international arena has been one of the worst due to the war conflict with Ethiopia (1998-2000) and media's allegation as destabilizer in the Horn of Africa. Therefore, Eritrea as a tourism destination seems to be contested because of the poor image causing an obstacle for a growing number of international tourist arrivals. The Head of Promotion Department said that, the Ministry of Tourism initiated programs aimed to enhance

Eritrea's image such as: promoting the country's main attractions in social media (Tourism Eritrea/Meta account), in collaboration with Ministry of Information they prepare short programs promotion in Eri-TV about tourist attraction sites, and publish articles in the Eritrean newspaper (*Eritrean Profile* and *Hadas Eritrea*), prepare and disseminate brochures and pamphlets. The travel agencies and tour services key informants stated that they undertake measures to enhance Eritrea's image through promotion in social media, participating rarely in international trade shows, symposiums and conferences.

Inadequate Tourism Infrastructure

In our interview with key informants, the tourism sector in Eritrea lacks sufficient transportation facilities and lack of standardized accommodations. The existing roads are inadequate for the tourism industry as it is operating now, because many of the attractions are away from road and inaccessible. Lack of access to some areas where there may be more opportunities for tourism remains one of the main problems in the development of tourism as in the case of Nakfa. Nakfa was home to a revolutionary movement against Ethiopia colonization. It is a city surrounded by trenches and remnants of war, an amazing frontline and military settlement during the struggle for freedom. In addition to this, the travel agencies and tour operators' managers agreed that, there is shortage of mini buses and buses for medium or large group of tourist so that they are unable to host such groups.

International flights to Eritrea are not too frequent and involve at least one and often two transit from most of the tourist source countries, a deterrent to attracting more tourists engaged in discretionary travel. Currently, Eritrea is served by international flights operated by Egypt Air (three times a week) from Cairo, Turkish airway (twice a week) from Istanbul, Dubai Fly (daily) from Dubai, Flynas (three times a week) from Jeddah and Tarco (twice a week) from Port Sudan. Likewise, Eritrea has only one international airport that serves international tourists; Assab and Massawa airports are not functional to tourists.

An interview with the travel agencies and tour operators' managers confirms that, only less than ten hotels in Asmara have better facilities like bathrooms with hot water, clean toilet, sufficient water supply and internet access. This implies that tourists are unsatisfied with the quality of accommodation services at the destination. This occurs due to several factors such as financial constraint, ineffective monitoring by government agencies, lack of resources; weak coordination of institutions and failure of various stakeholders in playing their role are among the major causes for poor accommodations facilities.

Lack of Skilled Manpower

In our interview with travel agencies, their current man power lacks proper tourism knowhow and their employees' main weaknesses are: lack of business skills, understanding visitors' needs and expectations, customer service, online communications, low educational levels, lack of leadership skills to implement effective training plans and lack of prior experience.

Inadequate ICT Infrastructure

ICT infrastructure refers to a wide array of both existing and emerging technologies that range from simple to complex such as: fixed and mobile telephone including Short Messaging Service (SMS), digital cameras, Computer Reservation Systems (CRS), internet which is accessed through channels such as broadband channels, fibre-optic, wireless (WiFi), Geographic Positioning Systems (GPS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). In our interview with the Ministry of Tourism officials and travel agencies, the ICT infrastructure is a main challenge for developing tourism sector in Eritrea. Accordingly, all informants

anonymously stated that, there is limited internet access with limited and siphoned usage like using VPN for different social media in Eritrea. The banking sector is key to tourism development and in Eritrea the banking related technologies are poor in cities and towns. Banking technology like use of credit cards, cellphone banking, Automated Teller Machines are not available except for larger hotels and airlines. This presents inconvenience for many tourists and may reduce the money spending and duration of their stay. The reasons for inadequate ICT infrastructure are decades long of occupation and wars and budget constraints according to key informants.

Lack of Coordination among Tourism Stakeholders

The sustainable development of tourism requires the participation of the different actors that is, governmental and private sectors in planning and management stages (Tosun, 2006). Particularly local communities are stakeholders who can build a stronger destination image (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2009).

The majority of the study interviewees agreed that, the main stakeholders of tourism development in the country at the current time are Ministry of Tourism, public and private enterprises who are involved in the tourism sector. Most key informants of Ministry of Tourism noted that, there is no coordination among key stakeholders; inter alia: Commission of Sport and Culture, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Communications and Transportation, Department of Immigration and Nationality, Regional Administrations and Local Communities. According to their response, the big challenge to develop sustainable tourism in Eritrea is that, there is no coordinating body to mobilize and initiate stakeholders for tourism development in the country. According to the interview with the head of Statistics Division of Ministry of Tourism, there is limited cooperation with Department of Immigration and Nationality, Civil Aviation Authority and Authority of Land Transport only in providing statistical report of tourists' arrival.

Other Challenges

In reviewing our secondary sources, our study found out that: shortage of funds, lack of equipment such as modern computers, modern cameras and drones, tight visa policy, lack of tourism awareness of local communities, lack of tourist sites preservation and protections, myopic private sector businesses and lack of internationally oriented promotional strategies remain as constraints for sustainable tourism development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the assessment of tourism resources in Eritrea, our study firmly revealed that Eritrea has great potential for the development of tourism. The historical, cultural and natural potential of the state are powerful assets for future developmental progress of tourism. The Government of the State of Eritrea issued National Tourism Development Plan with an aim to develop sustainable tourism. Despite the government effort, our study found that, poor image of Eritrea disseminated by international media, "no war no peace" status quo with Ethiopia, poor tourism infrastructure in transportation and accommodations, lack of skilled man power and weak coordination among tourism stakeholders, poor ICT infrastructure, lack of promotional activities, tight visa policy and so forth are currently hampering to reach its full potential.

Our study firmly concluded that, the future prospects of the tourism industry is bright and sanguine. This is due to: Eritrea current good diplomatic engagements with different country such as Russia, People's

Republic of China, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries. The country is heading to relatively peaceful stage unlike the previous decades; Eritrea's culture of unity and mutual respect will contribute greatly to the future development of tourism. Since safety is among the top concern of tourist, especially if it is burdened with war and political instability, Eritrea as tourism destination possesses these social and political capital. This will further encourage international tourists' arrival to the country and will inspire domestic tourism in the upcoming years.

Recommendations

The study provides the following recommendations for tourism stakeholders to play their role in the development process of sustainable tourism industry in Eritrea.

• An accurate and reliable statistical system is needed in order to systematically monitor tourism development in destinations. Data such as the number of foreign tourists, hotel occupancy rates, site visited by different tourists, tourist segmentation, tourist expenditure rates and tourism contribution to employment and GDP are mostly limited.

• There is a lack of coordination between the Ministry of Tourism and other stakeholders regarding the distribution and assignment of tourism-related roles and responsibilities. So, it is recommended for the Eritrean Government to establish a "Coordinating Body" that represents all stakeholders of the industry.

• The Government has to exert effort to encourage and attract all domestic and foreign investments in the tourism sector to overcome the infrastructural challenges and technological gaps.

• All tourism stakeholders ought to play their respective roles in heritage restoration and protection to avoid further damage of historical and archeological sites.

• Realistic and sophisticated marketing strategy approaches should be implemented abroad specially in Western countries so as to change the negative image of Eritrea.

• Eritrean diaspora should play their role in changing Eritrea's image by taking part in the ongoing promotion and economic development endeavors.

• Training and development programs should be provided by Ministry of Tourism to enhance the knowledge and skills of employees who work in the tourism firms.

• Regional tourism integration approach should be adopted for realizing and responding to opportunities offered by spatial and comparative advantages in the East African region.

• Financial assistance should be provided by Government to travel agencies and tour operators to participate in international conferences, tradeshows, exhibitions and symposiums.

• The Government should permit travel agencies and tour operators to import buses and other modes of transportation vehicles to facilitate tourists' movements.

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