

## Article

# Developing rural tourism as an alternative strategy for poverty alleviation in protected areas: Example of Oku, Cameroon

**Ndenecho Emmanuel Neba**

Department of Geography, University of Yaounde IE. N. S. Annex Bambili Bamenda, North West Region, Cameroon.  
E-mail: [ndenechon@yahoo.com](mailto:ndenechon@yahoo.com). Tel: (237) 77 38 66 20.

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In recent years the concept of rural or ecotourism has been gathering impetus in the countryside of developing countries. Areas which were previously based on agriculture are now urgently seeking new forms of income generation. This has resulted in the emergence of rural tourism which offers a solution to diverse needs. The paper uses a combination of primary and secondary data to appraise the rural tourism potential of Oku villages and identifies the various ecotourism types feasible for integration in the livelihood systems of the local people and in protected area management. It further identifies the scope and framework for the development of rural tourism as an economically non-consumptive form of “land use” management based on an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). Finally, the paper concludes that an application of the concept of rural tourism can enable rural people to sell local produce and souvenirs without having to change their lifestyles or move to town. The planning of protected areas for rural tourism must use participatory approaches by liaising with the existing forest management institutions, government agencies, municipal and local authorities and entrepreneurs. This should be complemented by the setting up of a legal and scientific framework necessary to balance the protection and use of the forest reserve by local people in order to achieve sustainable management and poverty alleviation. Such plans increase the potential use of protected areas and also contribute to the local economy.

**Key words:** Rural tourism, protected area, income generation, sustainable management, evaluation, alternative strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

Several researchers have considered nature tourism or ecotourism as a form of sustainable tourism and protected areas have been evaluated in terms of recreation and tourism by studying their natural and cultural properties and determining suggestions for protection and development (Poiani et al., 1998; Stem et al., 2003; Daniel et al., 2005; Trevor, 2005; Kruger, 2005). Additionally, some researchers have investigated the relationship between tourism and local people, with regard to both positive and negative effects (Gengiz, 2007). Researchers have considered ecotourism as a solution for decreasing environmental and socio-economic problems and as a sustainable development tool in ecologically sensitive areas. Research has focused on how protection of local ethnicity can be achieved without impacting on the life of local people by linking social life and environmental protection (Barkin, 1996; Gregory,

2005; Robert and Santos, 2005; Williams and Ferguson, 2005). Ecotourism has been suggested as a key to sustainable development of protected areas (Barkin, 1996). The priority of ecological tourism is to protect the ecosystem. It provides investment for tourism and enhances the living standards of local people by providing opportunities for employment. It enhances the environmental consciousness of visitors by increasing tourism quality and prevents areas from undergoing irreparable damage by protecting the natural and cultural environments (Barkin, 1996; Wight, 1993).

In 1985 the international council for bird preservation (ICBP) and the wildlife fund started conservation work in the Oku Montane forest. The project in order to reduce pressure on the forest promoted alternative income generation activities using community based organizations (CBOs) and local NGOs. The Kilum mountain forest

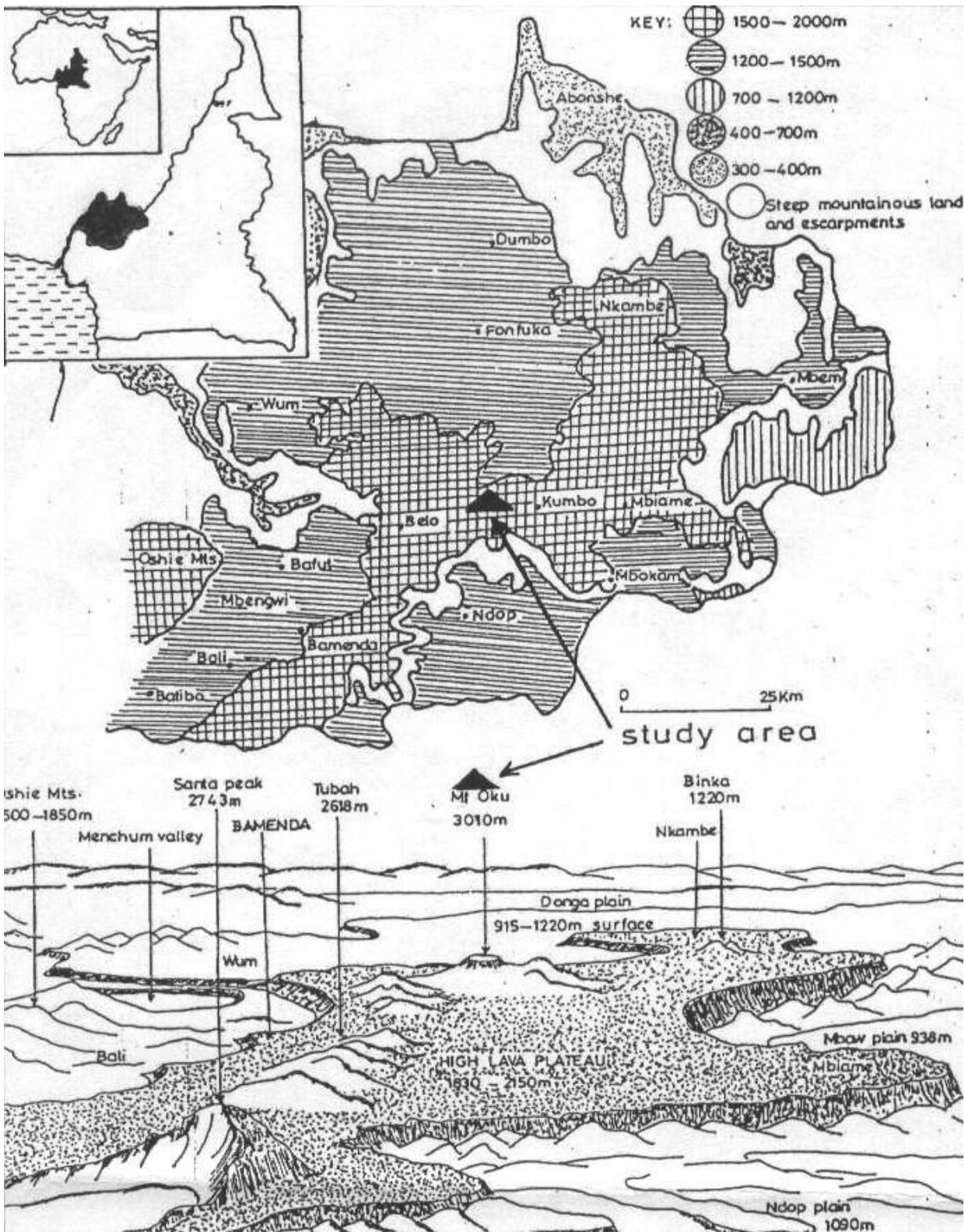


Figure 1. Location of Oku in the Bamenda highlands.

project (KMFP) assisted by local and international funding has rural tourism as a project component.

The paper appraises the rural tourism potential of Oku and identifies ecotourism types feasible for integration in

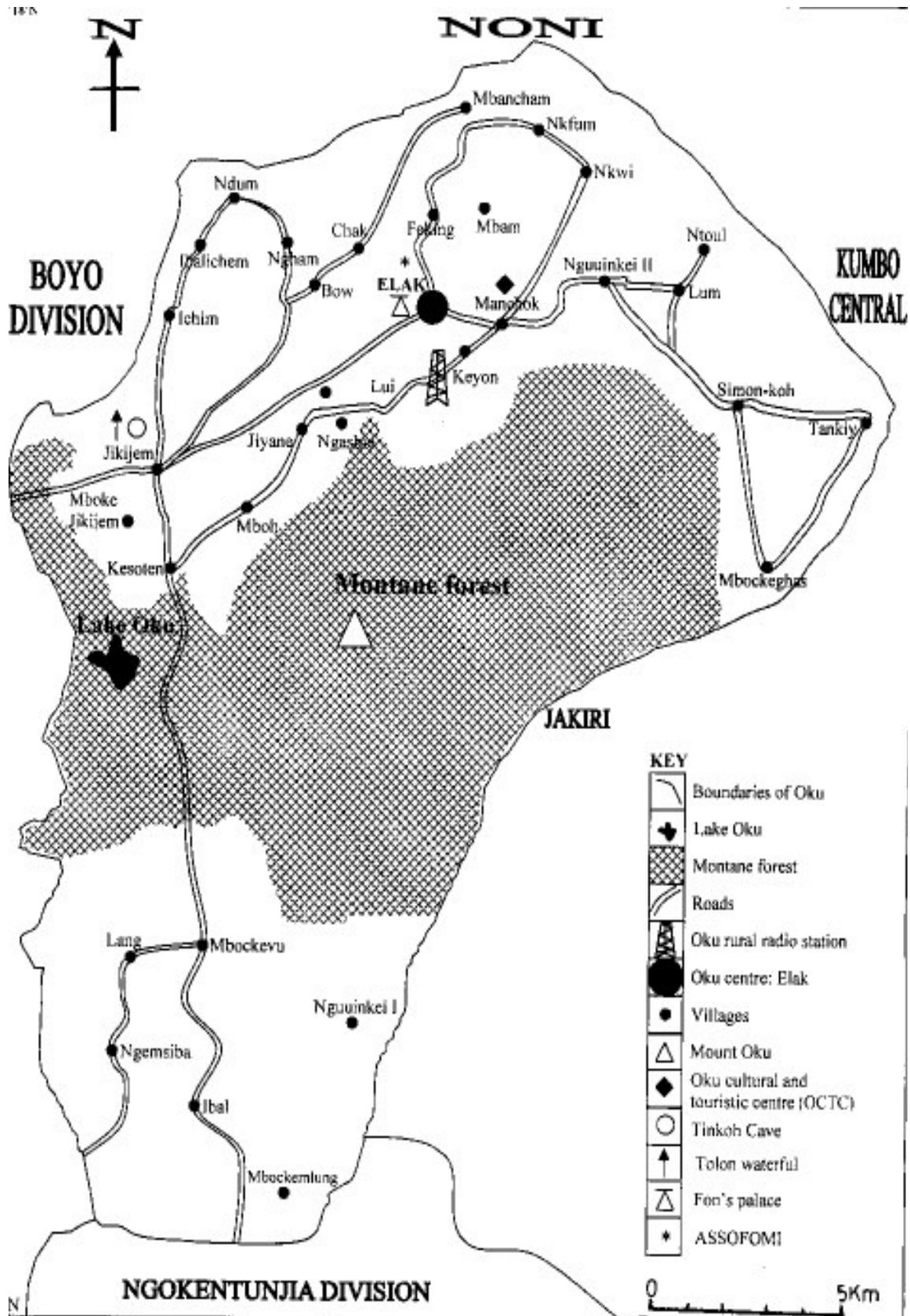


Figure 2. The eco-cultural tourism potential of Oku villages.

**Table 1.** Forest user groups and institutions in the Ejim-Kilum mountain forest reserve.

Forest User Groups (FUGs)	Length of Forest Boundary (m)	Forest Management Institution (FMI)
Ngashie	3.332	Emfveh mii
Keyon	1.505	
Manchok	3.296	
Ngvuinkei II	1.295	
Mbockevu	8.466	Upper Shinga
Lang	5.466	
Ngemsiba	1.486	
Ngvuinkei I	4.133	
Mbockenghas	3.860	Nchiiy
Simonkoh	3.139	Mbai
Ichim	3.139	Ijim
Jikijem	2.711	
Mbockejikijem	3.618	
Mboh	2.412	Kejem-mawes
Kesoten	2.982	
Jiyane	3.615	

Source: Ndenecho, 2006.

the livelihood systems of local people and the scope for the development of rural tourism as an economically non-consumptive form of "land use" management.

### The study area

The study area is located in the Bamenda highlands (Figure 1). The grid reference of the Summit of mount Oku is 6°12'N and 10°32'E. Southern slopes are known as the Ejim mountain while northern slopes the Kilum mountain. The Summit is 3011 m above sea level and is known as mount Oku. The reserve extends between 2022 m and 3011 m above sea level. Land under natural forest including degraded forest is 6900 ha, area under tree and scrub savanna is 2400 ha, grass savanna 1240 ha and area occupied by lake Oku 260 ha. This area became a reserve in 1931, but it was not until 1975 that demarcation of the forest boundary started. In the 1990s forest legislation evolved from state ownership and management to participatory management with local communities.

Montane forest covers a land area of 17,325 ha and about 300,000 people depend on it for livelihoods. It is managed by 6 forest management institutions (FMI). The forest provides local employment and livelihood. Honey, wood carving and the extraction of non-timber forest products are important local economies with the potential for improvement. The forest and lake Oku have strong cultural significance. The mountain is spectacularly beautiful. The magnificent views, unique wildlife and rich culture all have great touristic potential which could be realized with careful development. Efforts have been made since the 1930s to protect the forest but these have

so far been unsuccessful. Of the forest which covered the area before 1965, less than half remains and at least 33% of that is highly degraded. The Kilum mountain forest project (KMFP) assisted by international and Cameroon government funding started some conservation work in 1987. The KMFP initiated a social forestry programme managed by the forest management institutions (FMI). The project emphasizes reforestation, sustainable forest industries, education and improved farming practices on nearby lands. Ecotourism holds promise in the area and could be integrated as an alternative income generation activity in protected area management. Table 1 presents the various forest management institutions and villages with livelihoods dependent on the montane forest.

Participatory mapping and establishment of community forest management institutions started in 1994 after the failure of different approaches towards forest management employed by the government. The community has achieved relative success at protecting their forest. The achievements were facilitated because the Cameroon ministry of forests and environment bowed to pressures and allowed community forest management.

### Research methods

The study focused on the mount Oku, known as the Kilum forest. The study method included field observations, data collection and evaluation from primary and secondary sources in order to establish the natural resource potentials of the area. The soft systems methodology (SSM) which includes participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) philosophy was employed to evaluate the current situation using a SWOT analysis (S = strengths, W = weaknesses, opportunities and T = threats). In this way a sound understanding of the elements, process and practice

of the institutions was gained in order to determine appropriate interventions. An institution can simply be defined as an organization of people working together within a set of agreed rules, to achieve a common purpose. The institutions investigated are the forest management institutions and their various forest user groups (village communities). The strengths and weaknesses of the reserve were determined with regard to tourism. The SWOT analysis was done by determining opportunities and threats and strategic suggestions were then presented for ecological planning for tourism.

Field observations involved the mapping of cultural and ecotourism potentials and the consultation of secondary data sources at the tourism board at Elak rural council and the association of Oku forest management Institutions (ASSOFOMI). The data were complemented by informal interviews of villagers judged to be resourceful to the interest of the research in the Oku cultural and touristic centre (OCTC). Mapping of the cultural and ecotourism potentials was done using the global positioning system (GIS) and data on rural incomes obtained from Fonyuy (2008) and Kemei (2008).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Oku mountain is spectacularly beautiful with deep dissected valleys, grassy plateaux, montane forest and a crater lake. Its lofty heights give outstanding panoramas over the surrounding rugged grasslands. The magnificent views, unique wildlife and rich culture all have great touristic potential which could be realized with careful development. Several international tour companies have already expressed an interest in visiting the area (Macleod, 1986).

The climate is very suitable for tourism, with the following characteristics: maximum temperatures of 16.5 to 19°C and minimum temperatures of 9 to 10.5°C would be expected. There is a wet season from mid-March to mid-November. The rest of the months are dry. Rainfall is in excess of 3050 mm per year. Humidity from the prevalence of mist and cloud would be expected to be high and the incidence of sunshine low.

The most important water resource in the reserve is lake Oku. It has a surface area of 260 ha. The lake is found at an elevation of 2219 m above sea level to the west of the Kilum Massif. This area is spectacularly beautiful though visitors are advised by the local guides that the lake is sacred. The people believe that it is the abode of their ancestors. Around this mountain block at elevations between 1000 and 1500 m above sea level are thermo-mineral springs in Bambui, mineral springs in Sabga-Ndop foot slopes and a fumerole in Kedjom-Keku. These have neither been studied nor have commercial facilities for using their water.

Additionally, the reserve has important potential in terms of flora and fauna. As a result of a study by the international council for bird preservation (ICBP), the area was identified as the only extensive area of tropical montane forest in the Bamenda highlands of Cameroon and in critical need of conservation (Stuart, 1986). The forest is of great ecological importance because it contains

a disjunct vegetation association found nowhere else in west Africa (Macleod, 1986) and is the home of several endangered species of plants and animals, (Figure 3). These are of great scientific interest. Scientific tourism is a major attraction.

The avifauna has been studied by Stuart (1986). Altogether 53 species of montane forest birds are found in the area. 36 of these birds are restricted to the montane forest with three endemic sub species. Collar and Stuart (1985) identify four montane forest birds threatened by habitat loss. These are Bannerman's Turaco (one of the most threatened birds in Africa), banded Wattle-eye, green-breasted bush-shrike and Bannerman's weaver (*Ploceus bannermani*).

The mammal fauna is less well known than the avifauna. Incidental recordings of large and small mammals were made by the ICBP Cameroon mountain forest survey (Stuart, 1986). A detailed survey is necessary. 3 species of primates are known to occur (*Cercopithecus preussi*, *ercopithecus aethiops* and *Cercopithecus nictitans*). Large mammals are not abundant, due to indiscriminate hunting and forest clearance which continue to threaten many species and have reduced their populations. The rare Preuss's monkey is one of the most important mammals to occur. It is classified as endangered by the IUCN (1987). The open *Schefflera* spp, *Pygeum africanus*, *Rapanea neurophylla* and *Syzygium standtii* forest found around the lakeshore and high altitude *Podocarpus* forest are likely to be the prime habitat for this monkey. Several small mammals have sub-species endemic to the mountain (Stuart, 1986). A few species of frogs are endemic to this mountain and the nearby mountains. The *xenopus* sp. is probably endemic to the lake (Stuart, 1986). Proposals to develop tourism (found in the development plan of Cameroon) should respect its conservation value and be undertaken with great care. Figure 3 presents the ecotourism potential.

The valleys possess fast running streams and cascades. These are formed by streams and mountains and enhance the visual value of the area. Valleys with steep slopes and gullies and the escarpments in the southern slopes are suitable for mountaineering and climbing. The mountain pastures and the Fulani (pastoral tribe) culture characterized by grazing animals, building traditional houses, local food, lifestyle, horse riding and festivals are also important attractions. In general, festivals providing recreation are important in maintaining social cohesion in the village communities. All these should encourage the development and protection of cultural values in the settlements. Traditional lifestyles need to be preserved and ruined buildings and structures in the chiefdoms around the mountain restored. The Fulani are traditionally becoming more and more sedentary. Cattle, goats and sheep are grazed on the mountain during the rainy season and are brought down to lowland pastures during the dry season (November to April). Runoff erosion on

**Table 2.** The origin of tourists and tour fee generated in Oku.

Origin	Number of tourists and fee paid (francs CFA)					
	2005		2006		2007	
	No.	Fee	No.	Fee	No.	Fee
Holland	1	2,500	2	5,000	1	2,500
United Kingdom	2	5,000				
France	7	17,500	2	5,000	1	2,500
Cameroon	4	10,000	3	7,500	3	7,500
Italy	1	2,500	-	-	-	-
America	2	5,000	-	-	1	2,500
Germany	3	7,500	3	7,500	3	7,500
Canada	1	2,500	-	-	1	7,500
Zech Republic	1	2,500	-	-	-	-
Switzerland	-	-	1	2,500	-	-
Belgium	-	-	1	2,500	-	-
Japan	-	-	1	2,500	-	-
Russia	-	-	1	2,500	-	-
Lebanon	-	-	1	2,500	-	-
New Zealand	-	-	-	-	1	2,500
Ethiopia	-	-	-	-	2	5,000
South Africa	-	-	-	-	1	2,500
Total	22	55,000	15	37,500	14	40,000

Source: Elak rural council tourist book.

**Table 3.** Comparison of alternative income generating activities in Oku based on a sample of 10 respondents each per activity.

Coffee farming			Apiculture			Handicraft/tourist craft item sales		
Respondent code No.	No. of Bags	Revenue (FCFA)	Respondent code No.	No. of Bags	Revenue (FCFA)	Respondent code No.	No. of Bags	Revenue (FCFA)
1	15	315,000	1	15	315,000	1	15	315,000
2	10	210,000	2	10	210,000	2	10	210,000
3	6	126,000	3	6	126,000	3	6	126,000
4	6	126,000	4	6	126,000	4	6	126,000
5	8	168,000	5	8	168,000	5	8	168,000
6	5	105,000	6	5	105,000	6	5	105,000
7	9	189,000	7	9	189,000	7	9	189,000
8	8	168,000	8	8	168,000	8	8	168,000
9	5	105,000	9	5	105,000	9	5	105,000
10	9	189,000	10	9	189,000	10	9	189,000
Average	9	170,100	Average	9	170,100	Average	9	170,100

Source: 2007 fieldwork.

pastures has often increased because of intense and uncontrolled grazing and protective measures are needed to restrict the use of these areas.

Table 2 presents the origin of tourists and the fees paid to the Oku tourism centre. ASSOFOMI in Elak guides the tourists to the main destinations. These include the

chief's palace, Lumetu shrine, Tolon waterfall, Wood carving centres, the mountain and the honey cooperative. Tourists are charged a visiting fee of 2,500 francs CFA. The forest management institutions and municipal authorities are charged with the organization of reception, security and lodging of tourists. Tourists and researchers

pass through ASSOFOMI ecotourism information centre for guidance. Guidance fees are charged as follows: foreign nationals (non-African) pay 10,000 francs, foreign nationals (Africans) 5,000 francs, Cameroonians 500 francs, foreign researchers 5,000 francs and Cameroonian researchers free access. In 2005 the tourists received involved 4 Cameroonians, and 18 foreigners (non-Africans). In 2006 a total of 15 tourists were received involving 3 Cameroonians and 12 foreigners (non-Africans). The number dropped to 14 tourists in 2007. These included 3 Cameroonians, 3 foreigners (Africans) and 8 foreigners (non-africans). The fee paid to the tourism board was 55,000, 37,500 and 40,000 francs for 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively. Tourist visits show a declining tendency. ASSOFOMI has recently stepped up efforts to promote Oku as a tourist destination.

Table 3 presents a comparison of the alternative income generating activities in Oku based on a sample of 10 coffee farmers, 10 bee farmers and 10 wood carvers (Figure 4). Annual income for each activity was established per respondent. The average income for coffee farmers was 170,000 francs. Bee farming and handicraft generated 126,000 and 508,500 francs respectively. The greatest income was earned by wood carvers whose activities target tourists. The Oku handicraft cooperative markets local tourist craft items. Rural tourism can therefore act as an important alternative income generation activity in developing countries, especially where rural people cannot longer make a living as farmers due to a fall in the prices of agricultural produce (Table 3).

The montane forest is surrounded by village communities. The main income of local people is first farming and second, forest-dependent livelihoods. As the tourist numbers increase, the local people are positive about tourism, although they have not specifically been made conscious of it. The area is largely deficient in tourist infrastructure and facilities. It is, however, in a natural and cultural treasure. It has the added attraction of traditional village life, in terms of settlements and variations in land use. Traditional live-style and culture are important and attractive elements for tourists. This is immediately evident by the drumming and xylophone music which can usually be heard echoing around the hills. There are many traditional events with music and dancing. The annual festival in Oku Chieftdom is perhaps the most spectacular event. The palace museum displays many traditional artifacts of interest.

Traditional architecture is an important element in the cultural landscape, with buildings of wood, bamboo, mud and grass-thatched roofs. The grassland house with its high pyramidal roof structure fits very well into the surrounding grasslands and the mountainous landscape. The smoke from the hearth rises in the one room house and finds its way out through the grass-thatched roof. One of the most beautiful sites is to watch the smoke rising from roofs of a village at day break. However, the

indigenous house constructions as well as the traditional value of art and crafts are fast disappearing. The traditional wall and roof construction, all made of either raphia poles or Indian bamboo, is giving way to the use of sun-dried blocks or cement blocks. The grass thatching on the pyramidal raphia framework is replaced by corrugated aluminium sheets on a gable roof constructed of timber.

Wood carving and weaving provide a valuable second income to many households. For some, handicraft production represents the only cash income. In the past, the area produced some of the most remarkable pieces of art in the Bamenda highlands, including carved stools, drums, masks, pedestal wine bowls, palm oil containers, door surrounds and wooden pillars (Knopfli, 1998; Madeod, 1986). Characteristic of the area are masks made of wood, feather and fibre, which are still widely used in traditional ceremonies and celebrations. The handicraft cooperative at Elak (Oku) serves as an outlet for some of these carvings. The absence of noise pollution in the village communities presents a traditional and tranquil environment.

There are no modern hotels or guest houses. Elak has recently acquired electricity to which a few houses are connected. Only the health centre and the palace have pipe-borne water, though there are standpipes and springs which provide healthy water from the forest. There is some accommodation judged to be clean and adequate. The cost of lodging per night is about 2000 francs CFA. All lodgings provide sheets and blankets. Most restaurants provide adequate meals of staple foods and fruits. There are also several stores selling basic items. In recent years rural tourism has provoked these developments. More and more country folk convert part of their property into "guest rooms". The originality and imagination demonstrated in these different types of accommodation is simply amazing - old houses restored with some modern facilities available for tourists. Elak is being metamorphosed into guest rooms and economic activities orienting their plans for development around tourism. The local council is investing funds and time to encourage tourism, but there is no master plan that reflects its policy of creating a supportive environment for encouraging the industry. There is the lack of capacity to develop "land use" for tourism and to give clear indications of the process required for approval of establishing tourist units with the entire necessary infrastructure. There are also natural country pastimes which lend themselves to the development of tourism. These are yet to be developed.

Oku has a potential for the development of rural tourism. The SWOT analysis yielded the following results:

\* S = Strengths

i) Rich and varied biodiversity and spectacular physical landscapes and a conducive mountain climate.

- ii) Rich traditional values, culture, art and crafts.
- iii) Positive attitudes of local people to visitors and tourists.
- iv) Annual festivals, traditional ceremonies and celebrations organised each year.
- v) Available ecological potential to increase the demand for tourism.
- vi) Opportunities for recreation (swimming, mountaineering, horse riding, participation in dances and rituals).

\* W = Weaknesses

- i) The area is far from the main regional town (Bamenda city).
- ii) It suffers from very poor infrastructure and the lack of tourist support services.
- iii) The development of ecotourism will require high investment costs.
- iv) There is the lack of educated staff for tourism.
- v) The lack of facilities for advertising and marketing.
- vi) Both tourist and local people are insensitive to environmental issues.

\* O = Opportunities

- i) The provision of employment for all age groups and alternative income generation.
- ii) The protection and sustainability of natural and cultural values.
- iii) The participation of local people in the protection process in view of the benefits.
- iv) The development of traditional cottage industries based on local livelihoods and culture.

\* T = Threats

- i) Increased pressure on the environmental resources of the protected area due to intense tourism activity.
- ii) Degradation of attractive landscapes used as centres of intensive recreational usage (walking areas, picnic areas, camp sites, festival sites and Lake Oku and its shore).
- iii) Undeveloped environmental consciousness among indigenous people.
- iv) Erosion of indigenous cultures through their commercialization and exposure to tourists. Cultures will be commercialized and perverted to please the tourist.
- v) Risk of the loss of a cultural heritage. The coveted and irreplaceable historic treasures of indigenous people may be secured by tourists for display in museums and private collections in developed countries.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Management plans must be prepared for protected

biodiversity and socio-economic structures. This type of planning is important because Cameroon is rich in protected areas. These require the evaluation of social and environmental influences and further research. Jongman (1995), Leitao and Ahern (2002) and Kelkit et al. (2005) have proposed the following protection zones.

\* Zone 1: A natural zone where nature has priority for protection.

\* Zone 2: A cultural zone: Sustaining local people's livelihoods.

\* Zone 3: An intense usage zone: in areas with most visitors.

\* Zone 4: A rehabilitation zone: with emphasis on restoration of biodiversity and natural landscapes.

The development of ecotourism in partnership with local communities and conservation projects can restore local livelihoods. In this way villagers can learn how to manage the wildlife and landscapes in a sustainable manner making sound livelihood decisions without sacrificing their cultural values. It therefore seems logical to integrate consumptive and non-consumptive forms of wildlife management into projects because conservation through sustainable management can only be successful if it is economically worthwhile for inhabitants of rural Africa in the long-term. This requires determining which uses of wildlife resources are economically appropriate to a given situation and will be acceptable to the community.

Tourism is one of these feasible uses. Economic analysis could reduce the risk of planning and investment error. Because good planning of the intense usage zone will decrease the use of other zones, this zone should have a high priority for protection. The annual calendar of recreation activities should be planned while protecting biodiversity. Such a plan will gain by reviving the important traditional crafts common in the past. Local festivals, ceremonies and celebrations are important for recreation. These can be developed by bringing people together and advertising local culture. Local people could then benefit much more by selling local food and handicraft. Most attention must focus on the needs of local people and the creation of an awareness of the environment. Planning of protected areas for ecotourism should use participatory approaches by liaising with the existing forest management institutions and by setting up a legal and scientific framework necessary to balance protection and use of reserves by local people in order to achieve sustainable management. Such a plan increases the potential of use of the protected area and contributes to the local economy. This requires the joint efforts of the government, local authorities and entrepreneurs to work as partners to build and make a "garden of their country". An application of the concept of ecological or rural tourism can enable rural people to sell local produce and souvenirs without having to change their lifestyles or move to town and without destroying the ecological base

of their livelihoods and the environment.

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Rural Tourism has emerged as a new mantra for alternative tourism development. This concept has been already tested in the developed country & proved the best results. Rural tourism has been seen as tool through which many problems in rural areas can be addressed in the countries like Sub Sahara, afflicted by debilitating rural poverty, tourism is perceived to be one of the few feasible options for development. For example, a site like Darjeeling or Kolkata has reached a maturity level. Rural tourism will emerge as an important instrument for sustainable human development including poverty alleviation, employment generation, environmental regeneration and development of remote areas and advancement of women and other weaker section of the society. Developing a rural tourism enterprise can bring many benefits, but as with any enterprise, there are challenges. The checklists in this publication are designed to ask probing questions relating to those challenges, ranging from the initial idea development, to the business set up and operation. Who is coming to your area? Essential information for a Marketing Strategy. Create an experience that will make them want to return. Knowing the tourism system and how it works. Many farmers and rural dwellers have embraced rural tourism as an opportunity to bring in "new money"™ to rural areas, stimulating growth, providing employment opportunities and attempting to halt rural decline.