Pains of tourism

Tourism, especially nature-based tourism, which is closely linked to natural resources, biodiversity and attractions created by the rich and varied environment of an area can easily lead to biodiversity extermination when the resources (water, energy and land) are strained by excessive use, and when the impacts on wildlife, vegetation, rangelands, mountain, marine, and coastal environments exceed their carrying capacity.

Some of the threats that tourism (especially over-tourism) poses to the ecosystems, nature, and community resources are;

a) Depletion of available local resources

Tourism can exert pressure on naturally available resources like water, energy, vegetation, and other raw materials that may already be in a crisis, significantly when the demand to consume these resources increases in areas with already scarce resources.

Facilities in the tourism industry majorly rely on water. The reliance on water cuts across operations and personal use. Accommodation facilities, gardens, swimming pools, golf courses, and other tourism and hospitality entities are major consumers of this resource. According to the Global Development Research Centre (GDRC), it was estimated that while on vacation, most tourists tend to use much more water (up to 440 litres a day) for personal use than when at their homes. During the tourism high seasons in Kenya, there is a need for larger volumes of water due to the population of visitors visiting/check-in into facilities. The Traceability and Verification System (TRVST) states that this overconsumption of water can result in water shortages of which the local area community gets affected the most, as well as generating a greater volume of wastewater.

In a research study done by The Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) in 2002 titled “Impact of Tourism on Environment in Kenya: Status and Policy”, it was discovered that tourism has led to land degradation and deforestation due to construction activities. Of its vital role in the global GDP, tourism is considered an engine of economic growth. It has led to infrastructural development (airports, roads, etc.) and the construction of tourism facilities (hotels and resorts, restaurants, schools, markets and shops, etc.). These construction activities have contributed to the destruction of vegetation in Kenya’s most popular tourist attractions, resulting in soil degradation and deforestation. Putting too much stress on land use has led to natural habitat loss, soil erosion, pollution, and exerting more pressure on endangered species. Unplanned tourism development can seriously affect the land.
b) Biodiversity loss

Tourism leads to the extinction of biodiversity. Research studies show that tourism plays a role in altering the behaviour of wildlife during the breeding and nesting seasons. When a tourist is present during this season, this wildlife may change their behaviours which may lead to the fear of mating due to the presence of humans or even fleeing away from their native breeding habitats. When animals/wildlife stop breeding, it can lead to a sharp decline in wildlife biodiversity. Some of the animals (such as elephants, and gorillas), and bird species never return to their native habitats because of tourist infiltration.

c) Invasive species and diseases

Tourism has led to the introduction of exotic species (insects, animals, plants, and diseases). These species have caused the disruption and destruction of ecosystems. For example, the introduction of Eichhornia crassipes commonly known as water hyacinth (a native plant in South America) in Lake Victoria due to human activities has led to the loss of fish and other biodiversity due to the deterioration of the water quality.

In the picture: A photo taken by The Star shows the extreme spread of water hyacinths in Lake Victoria that pose a threat to the existing aquatic life.

Tourism has also boosted the spread of communicable diseases such as ebolavirus and coronavirus (COVID-19) disease. In a case, on March 2020, cabinet secretary for health, Mutahi Kagwe announced that a woman who had travelled to Kenya from the United States via London was found to be infected by the COVID-19 virus. This virus later spread rapidly in the nation leading to many deaths (From the ministerial records, more than 5680 COVID-19 deaths have been reported).

The Convention on Biological Diversity also pinpoints that pollution, overexploitation, habitat change, climate change and the introduction of invasive species that are all closely linked to the tourism sector are some of the major reasons for biodiversity decline. The loss of biodiversity; boosts climate change; affects ecological functions; reduces the productivity of ecosystem services; makes ecosystems weak and affects their ability to deal with natural disasters; and causes loss of tourism potential.

Tourism, however, has contributed to environmental conservation, protection, and restoration of biological diversity and the sustainable use of resources (locally available). With the growing need and interest in ecotourism, local communities have quickly realized the need for them to protect what they have to attract more tourists. This growth of tourism has led to the establishment of new conservancies and protection sites that connect sustainable tourism with biodiversity protection. For example, the establishment of the Ol Pejeta Conservancy has been at the forefront of protecting endangered species I.e., the protection of the Northern White Rhino species.