

The non-prioritization of the **tourism industry** and its impacts on **tourism research**, development and management in the Central African sub-region

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Abstract | Tourism research is a relatively new, under-explored and under-researched discipline in sub-Saharan Africa in general but most especially in the Central African sub-region in particular in spite of its recognised potential for sustainable nature/eco tourism development. This is partly because the industry lacks the necessary patronage enjoyed by other economic sectors. As a result most governments of in the sub-region had until very recently paid very little attention to tourism research, development, and management in their countries. In spite of the fact that the travel and tourism industry has proven to be a very important corner stone in the economy of many developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa such as Senegal, Gambia, Kenya and Botswana which have already recognised its potential, it is only very recently that countries in the Central African sub-region, have realised the potentials of the tourism industry as a motor for socio-economic development and are taking some steps towards fostering some research and development in this domain. Presently, the travel and tourism industry in the countries of the sub-region contribute on average less than 3% of GDP and total employment respectively.

Using qualitative semi-structured interviews with key industry stakeholders in Cameroon as the case study; this paper examines the state of research and development in the tourism industry of the sub-region, the factors hampering the execution of some research projects that have been undertaken so far and with what degree of success, and proposes a way forward.

Keywords | Central African Sub-region, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Industry Prioritisation, Tourism Research, Cameroon.

Resumo | A investigação em Turismo é relativamente recente e sub-explorada na África Subsariana em geral, mas particularmente na sub-região da África Central, onde se reconhece um enorme potencial para o desenvolvimento do turismo de natureza ou ecoturismo. Isto ocorre, em parte, porque o sector não possui o apoio necessário e que é atribuído a outros sectores de actividade económica. Como resultado, a maioria dos governos da sub-região prestaram, até muito recentemente, reduzida atenção à investigação, desenvolvimento e gestão do turismo nos seus países.

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Não obstante o facto de a indústria das viagens e turismo ser um importante pilar para a economia de vários países em desenvolvimento da África Subsariana, tais como o Senegal, Gambia, Quênia e Botswana, que já reconheceram o seu potencial, apenas muito recentemente os países da África Central compreenderam que o turismo pode constituir um motor de desenvolvimento sócio-económico e iniciaram a promoção da investigação e desenvolvimento neste domínio. Actualmente, o sector do turismo contribui, em média, para menos de 3% do PIB e do emprego total nos países da sub-região.

Utilizando o método qualitativo, através de entrevistas semi-estruturadas realizadas a *stakeholders* do sector do turismo dos Camarões, este artigo analisa o estado da investigação e desenvolvimento do turismo na sub-região, os factores que dificultam a execução de alguns projectos de investigação desenvolvidos até à data, qual o seu grau de sucesso e propõe medidas para o futuro.

Palavras-chave | Sub-região da África Central, Turismo Sustentável, Prioridade do Sector do Turismo, Investigação em Turismo, Camarões.

1. Introduction

General tourism literature and research dealing with the Central African sub-region is rare. Sustainable tourism literature/research about this part of the African continent is even rarer. In fact it is almost non-existent, in spite of the fact that this region generally referred to as the Congo Basin, which runs through eight Central African countries including Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sao Tome and Principe, contains the second largest contiguous rainforest in the world after that of the Amazon. Cameroon's forests contain some of the Congo Basin's most biologically diverse and most threatened forests and are promising hot spots for the development of sustainable tourism (Shackley, 2006; WWF, 2001). During the last two decades there has been an increasingly growing number of scientific and academic publications within tourism and hospitality development and management studies and research dealing with (sustainable) tourism and its applications, management and development guidelines and codes of practice from authors like Beech and Chadwick (2006), Edgell (2006), Weaver (2005), Jafari (2003) and Sharpley *et al.* (2000), among many others. Very little attention

has, however, been focused on the tourism industry in countries within the Central African sub-region, in spite of its enormous sustainable tourism potential.

A review of tourism literature thus revealed a lack of systematic and dedicated research and literature dealing with Cameroon's tourism industry in particular and the Central African sub-region in general. Also, an analysis of some tourism indicators indicates that there were very significant disparities in research, development and management of the tourism industries between the Central African sub-region and other regions of sub-Saharan Africa. This is in stark contrast to the fact that sub-Saharan Africa topped world tourism growth rates in 2006 with an average growth rate of +12% observed, as well as recorded average growth rates of +7% and +4% in 2007 and 2008 respectively in spite of the global recession (only being surpassed by the Middle East and North Africa). Leading destinations included South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, and Senegal (UNWTO, 2008; Mintel Report 2007; Mintel Report, 2007; UNWTO, 2006). However, not all countries in sub-Saharan Africa profited from this growth. Countries in the Central African sub-region blessed with numerous natural and cultural attractions even though experiencing increased visitor numbers are still lagging behind countries

located in West, Eastern and Southern Africa. It is only very recently that the governments of countries in the Central African sub-region began committing considerable financial resources to improving aspects of the service and non-service infrastructure. The gradual realization by some of the governments of these countries such as Cameroon, Gabon as well as Sao Tome and Principe that the tourism industry is a significant tool for poverty alleviation, attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and sustainable development has seen a gradual shift in efforts aimed at the development of tourism resources. However, even though some research has commenced on various aspects dealing with tourism development as a whole and ecologically sustainable natural and cultural tourism development (especially in Cameroon and Gabon) with some initial results being released, the application of the results of this research in the field has been fraught with problems (EMG, 2008; Expansion Strategies Inc., 2002). As such before the countries of the Central African sub-region could develop their industries and catapult themselves to the forefront as premiere sustainable eco/nature and cultural tourism destinations it will be imperative that research, development and management be synchronised to move hand in hand and this is not the case at the moment.

2. Objectives

This paper examines the state of research and development as well as its impacts on the management of Cameroon's tourism industry which is used as the case study. Cameroon's location, natural and cultural diversity as well as its linguistic and geopolitical situation in the Central African sub-region makes it an ideal case study for the sub-region. This paper thus examines and identifies some of the key obstacles hindering the execution of research as well as the implementation of research results in the development and management of tourism in the

Central African sub-region in general and Cameroon in particular with a view to proffering some concise measures aimed at addressing and redressing them.

3. Methodology

Primary data generated for this research came from in-depth semi-structured interviews/discussions lasting between 30-60 minutes that were conducted in Cameroon with 15 tourism industry stakeholders; 8 from the private sector and 7 from the public sector between the months of October 2008 to April 2009. Using a purposive snowball sampling technique public sector stakeholders from Cameroon's Ministry of Tourism and conservators of the national parks which are all state-owned on the one hand and private sector stakeholders made up of home-based tour/hotel operators and local community representatives on the other hand were co-opted to participate in the research. In-depth semi-structured interviews and discussions were used for this research because it allows "...the interviewer asks certain, major questions the same way each time but is free to alter the sequence and to probe for more information" (Fielding, 1993: 136). The researcher, working from a set of prepared guidelines, then asked the respondent probing but non directive questions requesting clarification, specification and examples wherever need arose. These questions were aimed at eliciting as much information as possible pertaining to the research in question and which could not be obtained in the existing literature. A content analysis of these interviews generated the following results

4. Cameroon: Location, geography and peoples

While travellers are drawn to West Africa because of its rich historical and cultural heritage

and to Eastern and Southern Africa because of its fascinating wildlife and incomparable topography, Central Africa is not only a combination of both but goes a step further in that it adds another dimension, i.e. the equatorial experience, to its portfolio. Not only is it the region with the highest number of spoken languages in relation to the population in the world, but the climate, culture, arts and music of northern Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic are reminiscent of the culture and topography of West Africa while the flora and fauna of these regions are reminiscent of those present in the wildlife parks and reserves of Eastern and Southern Africa. The southern parts of Cameroon and the Central African Republic as well as Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, and the Democratic Republic of Congo are all in the heart of the equatorial rain forest and do not only contain some of the highest concentrations of biological and endemic species found worldwide but are home to some of the first inhabitants of the Congo basin, the Pygmies whose unique culture, customs and tradition face the threat of extinction (Figure 1).

Cameroon, one of Africa’s most peaceful countries has always been described as “all of Africa in one country” (Government of Cameroon, 2004) because of its geographical, topographical and multicultural diversity. Located at the crossroads between West and Central Africa with English and French as the official languages, Cameroon has a total surface area of 475 442 km² and had a population of about 18.5 million inhabitants in 2007 (NIS, 2007).

Just 6 hours away from continental Europe, its location enables it to have four distinct topographical zones ranging from a low coastal plain in the south opening into the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea to the West which has equatorial rain forests and swamp lands as its main characteristics; a savannah covered plateau near its centre known as the Adamaoua Plateau that stretches into south eastern Nigeria; a mountainous western region which is covered in forests and has an active volcano, the Mount Cameroon (the highest mountain in West

and Central Africa at 4,095 m) in the south western part; and a rolling sub-arid savannah or sahelian vegetation in the north; drained by the Benoué and Kébi Rivers which flow through into the Niger River basin in Nigeria and the Logone and Chari Rivers which flow into the Lake Chad Basin (Neba, 1999).

Cameroon is home to 300 mammalian species, 849 bird species, 143 reptilian species, close to 200 amphibian species, 542 fish species, and an estimated 9000 plant species (MINEF *et al.*, 1999; Vivien, 1991; Stuart *et al.*, 1990). It is in this regard that in 1997, the World Bank and the WWF classified Cameroon as one of the 13 countries worldwide with the highest amount of biological diversity, while the 2008 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) ranked Cameroon 15th out of 130 countries in terms of the concentration and number of total known floral and faunal species but only 38th in terms of the current level of ecologically sustainable tourism development and opportunities (Blanke and Chiesa, 2008).

As of 2005, only 14% of Cameroonian territory was actually under some form of protection on paper. At present Cameroon has 11 national parks, 3 of which are UNESCO-MAB biosphere reserves and one a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site; 18 wildlife reserves, 3 wildlife sanctuaries, 16 forest reserves and protected areas, 9 cloud (mountain) forest sites as well as 402 km of coastline with pristine beaches near the foot of Mount Cameroon in Limbe (South West Region) and at the entrance of the equatorial forest around Kribi and Campo in the South Region (Table 1) (MINTOUR, 2007).

Table 1 | National parks, reserves and protected areas in Cameroon

Protected Areas	Number	Surface area (ha)
National Parks	11	2 577 930
Faunal Reserves	6	702 995
Synergetic Zones (Wildlife/Forest Reserves)	35	3 083 750
Faunal/Floral Sanctuaries	2	132 000
Zoological Gardens	2	4,07
Total	56	6 496 499,07

Source: Ministry of Tourism (MINTOUR), 2007.

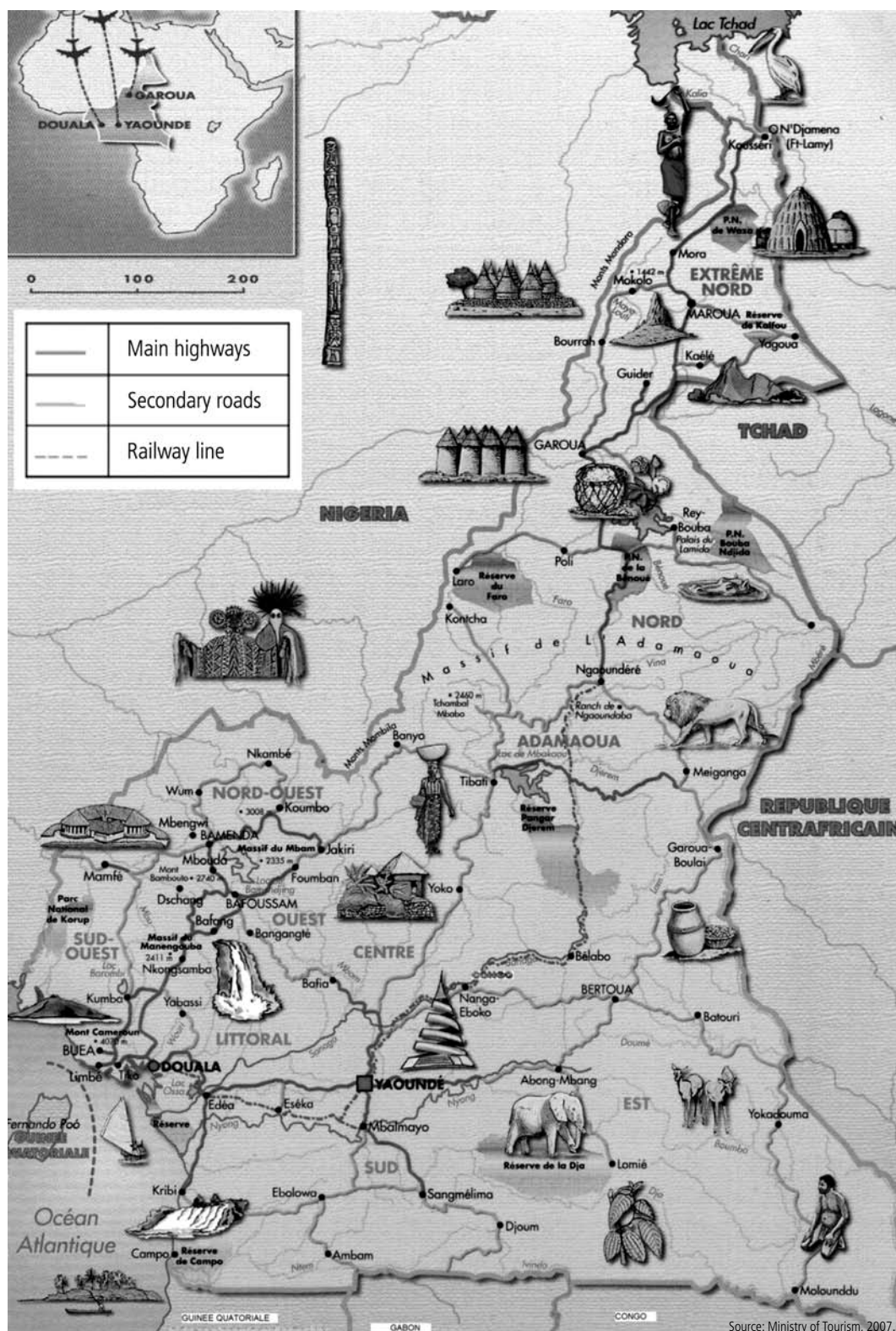


Figura 1 | Touristic and transport map of Cameroon.

The rich biodiversity coupled with its relative peace and political stability, relatively unknown but rich and diverse ancient cultural heritage manifested in the traditional and colonial architecture, colourful clothing, masks and statues, cuisine, music, song and dance during cultural festivals of the various ethnic groups found in the country as well as the colourful varied and landscapes makes it a potential hotspot for ecologically sustainable nature and cultural tourism development. This potential is further enhanced by the use of French and English as the official languages (in addition to 270 local languages) and openness of the people. Unfortunately, very limited research has been done and is presently being done on the means and ways of developing this potential for socio-economic development and results of past research that have been concluded are hardly ever applied for various reasons. This has led to the fact that Cameroon’s natural and cultural tourism potential is under exploited and in some cases mismanaged and poorly developed due to the absence of effective working documents for tourism development. Thus apart

from 2006 when visitor numbers into the country significantly increased with 451,000 visitor arrivals recorded, general tourists’ arrivals into Cameroon and the other countries of the Central African sub-region had been stagnating or even declining. Thus Cameroon and none of the countries in the sub-region can be considered as tourist destinations by the World Tourism Organisation because none of them receives up to 500,000 visitors or more per annum (Figure 2 and 3).

The positions occupied by Cameroon and other neighbouring countries in the 2008 TTCR clearly indicated that Cameroon and the sub-regions’ full potentials as a nature and cultural tourism haven still has to be tapped, harnessed and developed in conjunction with other accompanying service infrastructure like transport, human resources and accommodation where Cameroon in particular and the other countries lagged very far behind in the same report. It also elucidated the fact that there were many obstacles hindering tourism development in Cameroon and thus the successful marketing of the country internationally as a tourist destination.

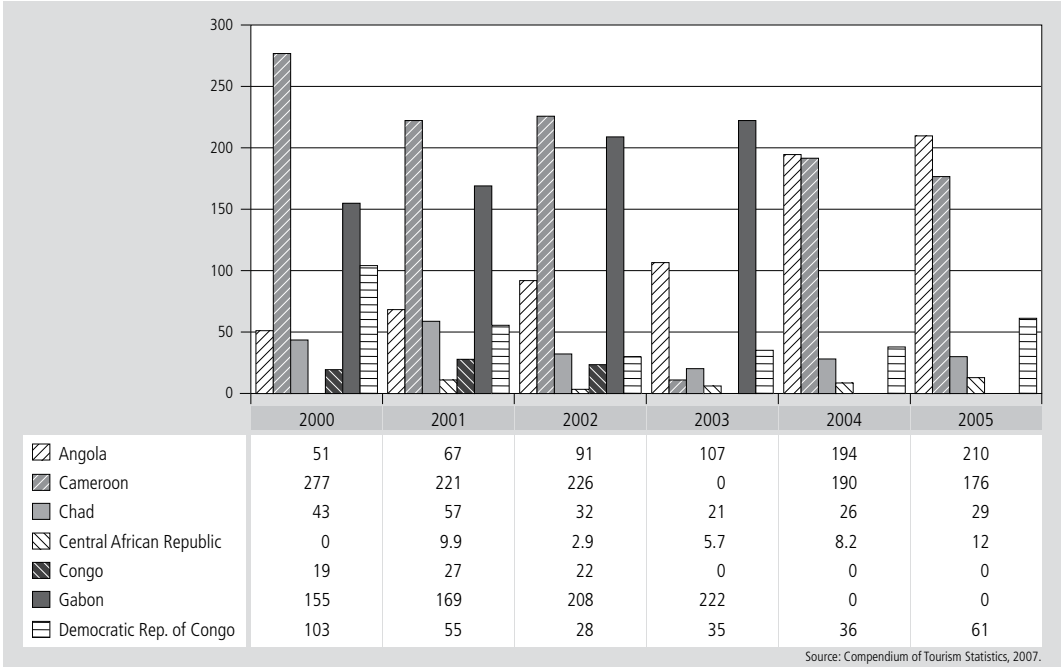


Figura 2 | Overnight visitors (in 000) to Central Africa by country from 2000-2005.

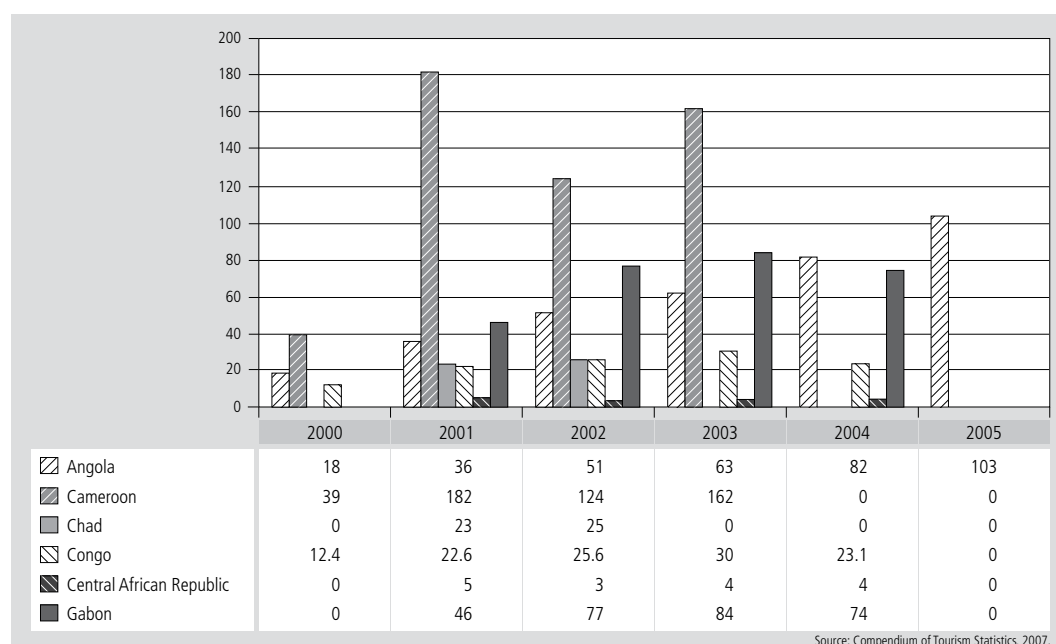


Figura 3 | Inbound tourism expenditure (in US\$ Mn) in Central Africa by country from 2000-2005.

One of these factors is the near complete absence of research and development in Cameroon's tourism sector and the non-implementation of available research results.

5. Results and contribution

5.1. Lack of concern and interest in tourism research and development

One of the main results after a content analysis of the interview data was the lack of systematic and dedicated research and interest in tourism and tourism-related topics and in Cameroon in spite of the fact that tourism development had been earmarked by the Cameroon's head of State as one of the priority areas to assist in the socio-economic development of the country since 2004 (Government of Cameroon, 2004). In practice however, significant developments still had to be observed. This, according to the respondents, was due to a number of reasons which included the low interest placed

on the government in tourism and development on one hand and the lukewarm attitude of the local communities towards tourism related issues on the other. This lukewarm attitude towards research and development in the tourism sector sprang from the fact that tourism had relatively few supporters and little influence at the higher echelons of government. As a result, the tourism industry since its creation has always had one of the smallest annual budgets (ca. 3 billion CFA francs), 60% of which is used to cover administrative and running costs alone.

In addition, Cameroon is blessed with an abundance of natural resources (petroleum, iron ore, bauxite, gold, diamonds and other mineral resources as well as an abundance of agro industries) on which earnings from its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are heavily dependent. As a result, Cameroon does not have the problems of countries such as Senegal, the Gambia, whose territories are not resource rich meaning that they have to depend almost entirely on the export of cashews, peanut (butter) and fish products, and therefore have to look for

other sources of revenue generation by investing in tourism research and development. The presence of other alternative sources of revenue generation has meant that Cameroon's rich potential thus remained untapped (which in another perspective has contributed in protection and conservation of its natural biodiversity) and very limited research was being done towards seeking for ways and means of developing the industry.

5.2. Ignorance and the absence of role models

Another important result which emerged from the data analysis was the realisation of the fact that there existed a high degree of ignorance and the lack of basic knowledge about tourism in many local communities with potential for tourism development. Even though the recognition of tourism as an income generating sector capable of bringing about socio-economic development to the local communities (where operations were being undertaken), had been recognised by some communities; acceptance by a vast majority of the population of its existence and most important the benefits of tourism still had to be achieved through practical manifestations on the field.

Apart from the north of the country where photographic nature and hunting safaris had been practised as far back as the 1960s, tourism and sustainable tourism in particular was a notion which did not exist in many communities.

Cameroonians by culture like to copy role models and so far there is no major 'successful' operator in the tourism sector on whom the population could look up to and emulate. Ignorance and the absence of successful role models in Cameroon's tourism sector has also contributed to less research being carried and many potential investors not actually considering it as a serious business enterprise in which they could invest on research whose results could lead to the implementation of better development and management strategies.

5.3. Finance

In spite of the lack of practical commitment by the public and private sector in general in committing resources for research aimed at the sustainable development and management of tourism in the country, its rich and diverse ecological biodiversity is internationally renowned. This regularly attracts the interest of international organisations such as the Commonwealth which in 2002 sponsored a research project that developed a Marketing Plan for Cameroon's tourism industry and another research project in 2008 which developed a Cameroon Tourism Destination Branding Report aimed at creating a brand image for the country (EMG, 2008; Expansion Strategies, 2002). Unfortunately, none of the recommendations of the 2002 marketing plan has been practically implemented up to now. It also remains to be seen if the recommendations of the 2008 Cameroon branding report will be implemented. The main reason for the non implementation of these research results has been attributed mainly to the lack of finance as well as the absence of qualified professionals in Cameroon's tourism sector. In effect the Ministry of Tourism has a very small budget when compared to all other ministries, close to 60% of which is dedicated to servicing administrative and running costs while the rest is for investments (Table 2).

It is thus practically impossible for them to undertake any serious research exercises or implement any research results without external technical and financial assistance from international donor organisations. This is presently the case with the development of the ongoing World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) sponsored (Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty) ST-EP pilot programme aimed at developing sustainable tourism for community development at Ebogo (ca 60km from the national capital Yaoundé). It is the same scenario in the Campo-Ma'an National park in the Southern Region of Cameroon where thanks to the support of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) through

Table 2 | Evolution of the investment and functional budget of the Ministry of Tourism from 1995-2005 in CFA Francs¹

Year	Budget			
	MINTOUR		STATE	
	Functional	Investment	Functional	Investment
1995/1996	T = 846 200 000		T = 682 000 000 000	
1996/1997	889 000 000	300 000 000	147 262 000 000	74 262 000 000
1997/1998	T = 1 037 000 000		449 750 000 000	166 000 000 000
1998/1999	1 324 000 000	600 000 000	534 880 000 000	229 000 000 000
1999/2000	1 550 000 000	825 000 000	565 213 000 000	295 000 000 000
2000/2001	T = 1 625 000 000		664 000 000 000	339 000 000 000
2001/2002	1 679 039 000	1 119 000 000	768 154 000 000	273 246 000 000
2003	1 606 000 000	1 500 000 000	823 000 000 000	224 000 000 000
2004	1 723 000 000	1 300 000 000	879 000 000 000	201 000 000 000
2005	1 546 600 000	1 300 000 000	867 100 000 000	288 500 000 000

Source: Ministry of Tourism (MINTOUR), 2007.

NB: T = Functional + Investment; 1 Euro = 655.566 CFA francs.

the Kudo-Zumbo Project aimed at conservation and community development, research funded by the WWF is presently engaged in finding ways and means of actively engaging the local communities in park conservation as well as guaranteeing that their socio-economic livelihoods are also improved though participation in conservation and eco tourism development. Without funding from the UNWTO, WWF, German Technical Cooperation Mission (GTZ), Dutch Development Organisation (SNV) and other organisations, it would have been practically impossible for these programmes to have taken off the ground. However since research and development is an ongoing process, experience has proven that at the end of most foreign sponsored projects in Cameroon, research is discontinued and many projects come to a standstill. This was the scenario with the Korup Project in the Korup National Park (South West Region) from 1997 to 2002. The WWF, while sponsoring conservation work in the park, employed experts to carry out research on means of relieving pressure on the park by surrounding local communities. Sustainable eco tourism development was deemed to be one of the alternatives and as a result, all the necessary service and marketing infrastructure were put in place thanks to assistance of the WWF and GTZ. Visitor

numbers to the park began increasing until the project came to an end in 2002 with the departure of these international organisations after the end of the project. Since then tourism activities have virtually come to a standstill and some of the infrastructures have fallen into disrepair. As such left on its own, the Cameroon tourism sector will see very limited research being carried mapping means and ways of developing and managing the sector.

5.4. Education

The low importance given to the sector by public and civil society means that until 2005, no university in Cameroon offered degree courses for persons wishing to specialise in the tourism and hospitality industry. The only institutions which up till then offered higher diplomas in tourism and hotel management were the Regional School of Tourism and Hoteliers in Ngaoundéré created in 1987 and transformed into a regional institution to serve students from the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) countries in 2002 and the Garoua Wildlife School (in the north of Cameroon) which was actually specialised in training guards and technicians of the wildlife sector. At the moment however, three universities (Yaoundé I, Buea and Douala) do offer undergraduate degree

¹ 1 Euro = 655.566 CFA francs.

courses in geography with a possibility of majoring in tourism. Senior professionals presently working in the sector both at the Ministry of Tourism and in the private sector capable of carrying out research in the sector acquired their training abroad and these are not many. Other professional training institutions (ca 40) do exist but the trainings offered here are for low and mid level staff of the hotel and tourism industry. There is thus a problem of the availability of qualified staff in the ministry. It is for this reason that some of the foreign sponsored research projects like the Cameroon tourism marketing plan and the destination branding reports were carried out by foreign companies.

Evidence of the lack of research and subsequent development in Cameroon's tourism industry due to its non recognition as an important socio-economic sector as well as its position in the national economy is seen in the positioning of Cameroon when some statistics published by the WTTC are examined. Cameroon occupied the 123rd position in the 2008 Travel and Tourism Competitive Index (TTCI) in terms of prioritization of the travel and tourism industry, 111th in terms of travel and tourism trade fair attendance, 119th in terms of the effectiveness of marketing and branding and 102nd with regards to government expenditure in the travel and tourism industry (Blanke and Chiesa, 2008). In 2007, travel and tourism industry contributed only 1.6% to Cameroon's GDP and 1.3% of the total employment (Blanke and Chiesa, 2008; WTTC, 2008). It is thus evident that just like with all the other countries in the sub-region, the travel and tourism industry in Cameroon is not considered to be of serious importance and lacks a clearly defined leadership.

6. Research Limitations

The low administrative and civil society coverage and importance given to the tourism sector in Cameroon and many other countries in the sub-

region therefore means that potential researchers and this research are often faced with a plethora of problems when conducting research in the sub-region and Cameroon in particular. Due to weaknesses in the institutional and organisational set-up, lack of resources and infrastructure, poor performance, inability of administration, businesses and enterprises and the general population to part with timely and reliable information by countries in the Central African sub-region, leading to low standards of book keeping, low administrative coverage, deficiencies in law and order and issues of access; the research had to narrow its scope and interviews were conducted with tourism industry stake holders located mainly in the towns and cities of Cameroon. In addition the latest data on tourism indicators for the Central African sub-region were impossible to come by. The researcher therefore had to rely on figures dating back to 2007.

7. Conclusions

Though the research co-opted the views of representatives from the public and private sectors based in Cameroon, the time frame within which the research was conducted meant that the number of interviews was limited. It is however worth noting that most of the results obtained in this research and conclusions drawn could be related to the tourism industries of the other countries of the sub-region which are in the same situation or even worse than that of Cameroon. This is in view of the fact that the tour operations of all operators interviewed expanded beyond the borders of Cameroon. They also organised tours and excursions to the other countries of the sub-region and where thus familiar with the state of the tourism industries in these countries.

The focus on Cameroon's government policy on tourism research as well as other countries in the sub-region should first of all be geared towards

encouraging citizens in Cameroon and the other respective countries to take up studies in leisure and tourism at graduate and post graduate level. This should be done through sensitisation campaigns in general but more specifically in schools and other educational institutions, by awarding full and part-time bursaries to qualified students interested in the domain. However for this to be realised, the government through the ministries of tourism, higher education and scientific research have to put in place the necessary mechanisms and infrastructure which will guarantee the effective training and specialisation in this domain. Partnerships should be created between institutions of higher education abroad with established tourism faculties and educational institutions in the sub-region which will favour the exchange of staff and students in the tourism department.

In addition, the budgets of the Ministry of Tourism in Cameroon and the tourism ministries in the other countries of the sub-region would have to be looked into and adjusted in such a way that the tourism ministries in these countries would have the financial latitude to sponsor research projects and not always depend on external support. An increased budget will also make it possible for the results from research projects to be implemented rather than having to consign them to drawers.

Emphasis should be placed on organised and consistent data collection, collation and storage. For this to be successful all stakeholders involved in tourism have to be sensitised on the need, necessity and importance of data collection. In addition workers have to be trained to manage the archival systems and new storage capabilities have to be put in place. It is only by changing public/private sector attitudes, synchronising research, results and development as well as adopting some of these measures and many others not mentioned that it will be possible to successfully undertake or carry out full scale active and participatory research projects aimed at the sustainable development and management of

Cameroon's tourism sector in particular and those of other countries in the sub-region such as Chad, Central African Republic, Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo for example which are in a similar situation. However future research would be able to determine how the tourism industry in Cameroon in particular and the sub-region in general could be repositioned so that it can be treated on the same par as other industrial sectors by both private and public sector stakeholders as well as ways and means of developing and positioning tourism studies in higher institutions of learning while strengthening public/private sector partnerships at the national and international level.

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