Unexplored Natural Tourism Potentials: Gambella People’s National Regional State, South West Ethiopia

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Abstract - Tourism is travel for recreation, leisure, education and training, visiting friends and relatives, shopping, transit, pilgrimages or business purposes and staying in places outside their usual environment for not less than 24 hours and not more than one consecutive year. The tourism industry is made up attraction sector, accommodation sector and transport sector. Ethiopia embraces enormous natural tourism potentials with its unique biodiversity, spectacular landscapes, lakes, waterfalls, rivers, mountains, cliffs, natural bridges, valleys, protected areas and biosphere reserves. Gambella Region is located at south west of Ethiopia and endowed with remarkable natural tourism destinations. Nonetheless, limited study has conducted in exploring natural tourism potentials. Henceforth, the current study addresses the stated issue. To do so, key informants from three zones (n=15), five regional offices (n=23) and 13 woredas (n=65) has purposively selected based on the set criteria. Altogether, 103 key informants were interviewed besides to field observation. Collected raw data were chosen, refined, categorized, edited, evaluated, coded and entered to SPSS software version 20. Descriptive statistics were computed for relevant variables and information obtained from the key informants and field observation was described in meaningful content. Findings of this study revealed that Gambella Region has endowed with marvelous natural tourism potentials like waterfalls, lakes, rivers, mountains, bridges, wetlands, national park and biosphere reserve. Key informants underlined that the region has delightful natural potential to attract tourists, ecologists, environmentalists, explorers, drifters, naturalist and other segment of tourists towards its unique biodiversity from the different corner of the world.

Index terms: Tourism, Natural Tourism Potentials, Gambella, Ethiopia

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is travel for recreational, leisure, education and training, visiting friends and relatives, shopping, transit, pilgrimages or business purposes (UNWTO, 2010; Kumar and Audit, 2016). It is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal, business or professional purposes (UNWTO, 2012). It comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not less
than 24 hours and not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes (UNWTO, 2013). Now days, it is one of the largest and increasingly recognized growing industries globally, generating 9.8% of global GDP; is the best ways to earn foreign currency (WTTC, 2015). The tourism industry is made up of three major components: namely, transport sector, accommodation sector and attraction sector (Knezevic, 2008). Since the mid-1980s nature based tourism has become a major economic force for both developed and developing nations around the world (TIES, 2006; UNWTO, 2010). Nature based tourism is newly emerging industry and increasingly important source of income, employment and wealth in many countries (WTTC, 2015).

Ethiopia embraces enormous natural tourism potentials. The country has endowed with a wealth of tremendous biodiversity, less disturbed natural resources, mountains, lakes, special events, colorful ethnic groups, manmade sites, unusual geological features, local arts, and artifacts (Binayew and Yiheyis, 2016). The country has endowed with various fauna and flora composition. There are about 320 mammal species, 39 endemic; 862 bird species: 19 endemic; 240 reptile species: 16 endemic; 71 amphibian species: 30 endemic; 172 fish species: 38 endemic and 6500-7000 flora species: 625 endemic to the country (Vreugdenhil, D., 2012; Young, J., 2012; MoCT, 2012; Amare, 2015). Likewise, the country has enormous protected areas like 21 national parks; 3 wildlife sanctuaries; 3 wildlife reserves; 3 community conservation areas; 7 open hunting areas and 18 controlled hunting areas (SDPASE, 2008; Vreugdenhil, D., 2012; Young, J., 2012; Amare, 2015). Moreover, nowadays Ethiopia has 5 biosphere reserves; namely Majang Forest biosphere reserve, Lake Tana biosphere reserve, Sheka Forest biosphere reserve, Kaffa Coffee Forest biosphere reserve and Yayu Coffee Forest biosphere reserve (Selemon, Chiranjib and Alemken, 2019). Gambella People’s National Regional State is one of the mosaics beautiful tourism destinations of the country which is located at Southwest tip of Ethiopia where five indigenous nationalities and other nation and nationalities of the country live in greater harmony. The region has various natural tourism potentials to attract eco-tourists, ecologists, environmentalists, naturalist, explorers and other segment of tourists towards its unique biodiversity (Selemon, Chiranjib and Alemken, 2019). However, limited studies were conducted to explore natural tourism potentials of the region. Even though the region has endowed with tremendous natural tourism potentials, it seems that the region receives fewer visitors relatively compared to other regions (MoCT, 2012). Hence, the current study explores the major natural tourism potentials of the region in order to attract different visitors from the various corners of the World.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted from June, 2018- March 2019 in Gambella People’s National Regional State. Gambella People’s National Regional State is located in the South-western part of Ethiopia about 777 km away from Addis Ababa, capital city of Ethiopia. It is situated in the lowlands of Baro-Akobo River Basin between latitudes 6°22’ to 8°37’ North and longitudes 33°10’ to 35° 50’ East. It has a total area of approximately 34,063 km² of land. The region borders with Benishangul Gumuz and Oromiya regions to the North; Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Regional State (SNNPRS) and the Sudan Republic to the South; Oromiya and SNNPRS to the East and the Sudan Republic to the West. The region encompasses three administrative zones; namely Anywaa, Nuer and Majang zone; and comprises 12 woredas, Itang special woreda and Gambella town administration (Lema, et al., 2017; Mathewos, M., 2017).
The average temperature is 27°C – 33°C and the annual rainfall amount ranges from 900mm-2200mm (Wondachew, M. and Muchie, N., 2017). The region experiences unimodal rainfall characterized by heavy rainfall from May to October and very low precipitation from November to April (Lema, et al., 2017). The Region has a total population of 495,625, 51% (252,769) males and 49% (242,856) female (CSA, 2007). It is inhabited by the five indigenous ethnic groups and others nationalities. The five indigenous ethnic groups are: Anywaa, Nuer, Majang, Komo and Opo; besides, the other Nationalities of Ethiopia who have been living in the region for such a long time live in harmonization.

Sampling Techniques

In this particular study, most of non-probability sampling technique is employed in order to get relevant data from the respondents. Accordingly, key informants from 3 zones (n= 15), 13 districts (n= 65), Gambella National Park office (n=5), Gambella Culture and Tourism Bureau (n=5), Gambella Tourism Organization Office (n=5), Gambella Culture, History and Heritage Research Directorate (n=4) and Gambella Government Communication Office (n=4), altogether 103 respondents were purposively selected. Selection criteria were: i) their position in regional offices, zone or districts; ii) their level of knowledge and experience to the tourism industry; iii) the most senior experts and iv) the most relevant individual who can give crucial data to achieve the objectives of the research.

Data Collection Methods

There are 3 zones and 13 Woredas to conduct inventory of natural tourism potentials of the Gambella Region. Since it is difficult for a single person to collect data from those zones and Woredas, it is crucial to involve data collectors and assistants during field work. Thus, three data collectors from Gambella Tourism Organization were purposively selected. The reasons of their purposive selection were: a) since they are experts in Gambella Tourism Organization, they know better about tourism potentials of the Region, b) since they are professionals they better understand the concept of the survey questionnaire, c) they can easily communicate and gather data.
from the woredas administrators and senior experts, and d) they are our primary stakeholders in this particular study. Hence, discussion was held for this particular study how to collect data from the 3 zones and 13 woredas. Preliminary field visitation and data collection was done together. Gambella Tourism Organization Office experts further gave training for other woreda level data collectors as necessity. They gave full orientation for woreda level data collectors before they were left alone. In all circumstances, monitoring, seldom field visit, cross-checking and verification was done in order to ensure reliability of the data. According to scheduled plan, in-depth interview using open ended questions was held with purposively selected key informants. Respondents were given opportunity to express deeply their ideas, opinions, feelings and knowledge about natural tourism potentials of the region as well as their respective zone or woreda. Furthermore, the research crew was also made field observation through recording important information, note taking, photo camera capturing, etc. regarding natural tourism potentials of the region. On the other hand, secondary data sources (published documents, articles, books, unpublished data, archives, brochures, etc.) have been referred for the further clarification of the data.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done in both quantitatively and qualitatively. The data gathered first edited, categorized, arranged and organized before encoding into the software. Frequency and percentages were calculated using SPSS software version 20 and charts and graphs were used to show results. Text explanations and descriptions used in case of qualitative data analysis. Likewise, data collected through field observation were analyzed in content descriptive way to relevant meaning and summarization (qualitatively).

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

In this particular study, demographic characteristics like sex, education level, income levels, age categories, as well as marital status of the respondents were observed. As the table 1 show below about 83.5% of the respondents were males. Concerning education level, most of the respondents were educated one (first degree holders) (74.76%) and 22.33% of the respondents were diploma holders. Most of the respondents (68.93%) were between the ages category of 26-35 whereas a few respondents (6.8%) were in age interval of 46-55. Regarding marital status, most of the respondents were married (95.15%) (Table1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sampled population (n=103)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Sample Categories</th>
<th>Regional officials</th>
<th>Zones officials</th>
<th>Woredas officials</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentages (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Education Levels</td>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>74.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Age Categories</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>68.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>95.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Natural Tourism Potentials of the Gambella People’s National Regional State

Natural tourism resources consist of all natural elements and factors that possess a high degree of attractiveness like fauna and flora, mountains, landscapes, hydrographical and bio-geographical aspects, biosphere reserves, protected areas and so on. Most of the respondents 98(95.15%) underlined that waterfalls are the major natural tourism potentials followed by Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve (MFBR) 95(92.23%) which has endowed with astonishing fauna and flora species, waterfalls, lakes, valleys, spectacular landscapes, and cliffs. About 90(87.38%) of the respondents notified that Gambella National Park (GNP); the home of various wildlife species, wetlands, lakes, rivers, valleys, grasslands, and woodlands is the major natural tourism potential of the region. Similarly, informants 87(84.47%) and 81(78.64%) stressed that various lakes and rivers respectively are undeniable natural tourism potentials of the region (figure 2).

Figure 2: Respondents perception concerning natural tourism potentials of the Region

Source: Field survey 2018/19

Lake Burey

Burey Lake is the unique natural lake found in Majang zone, Mengeshi woreda at 13km north-west from Meti town, the capital town of Majang zone. It is said to be the source of worshiping and an implementation area of traditional believes. Shone River is a very narrow tributary stream that silently crosses through Burey Lake; leaving a miracle visible boundary line on the lake.
Lake Burey (Mengeshi woreda, Gubeti Kebele)
Source: (MELCA office, 2018; GCTB, 2018; GTO, 2018; Field observation, 2018)

Lake Nyimulu

This lake is located in Itang special district at the Ebango kebele; 28k/m away from the Gambella town, capital town of the region. It is sometimes called amphibian lake for it had been once at the site of service in keeping different amphibian and reptile species.

Lake Thatha

This lake is located in Anywaa Zone, Gog Woreda at Thatha kebele; 119 km away from Gambella town, capital town of the region. It is known for its accommodation of different species of fishes and colorful birds. It is also believed that it highly gives an honor and respected by the surrounding community as the one of the resources where they was practiced their traditional believes.
Lake Wahigan

This lake is located in the Nuer zone, Akobo Woreda. It is near to the the village called “Kankan”. The area is mostly known for its swampy and wetland ecosystem. The gio river is the major tributary to this lake.

Baro River

This river is one of the permanent rivers of the region and natural tourism attractions. It separates the Gambella town (capital city of the region) in to two parts and on which Openo Bridge was built. The length of this bridge is 305m, with the width of 13 m and 10 m high. It is the only navigable river in Ethiopia that can serve as a trade route between Gambella, Ethiopia and the Republic of South Sudan via Abol, Itang, Jikawo, Metar and Akobo Woredas. It supports different species of birds on the river bank and variety of fish species like Nile perch, tilapia, cat fish, star fish, and golden fish. It has remarkable tourism potential to experience like beach tourism, fishing, bird watching, boat services, swimming and so on.

Gilo River

This river is found in Anywaa Zone, Gog Woreda of Ogeng kebele. It is 2, 91 and 113 km far from Ogeneg kebele, Abobo and Gambella town respectively. This river also crosses Wanthawa Woreda of Nuer Zone and far away 12,42 and 185 km from Metar town, Neur zone (Nyinnyang) and Gambella town respectively.
Gilo River
Source: (GCTB, 2018; GTO, 2018; Field observation, 2018)

Akobo River

This river is found in Nuer Zone, Akobo Woreda and 20 km far from the woreda town. It is the major tributary to the Lake Wahigan and enters in to the swampy and wetland areas. It supports various amphibian and fish species.

Alwero River

This river is among the major permanent rivers of the Gambella Region. It is rich in different species of the fishes and supports livelihood of the local community. It is the river on which Alwero Dam was built in Anywaa Zone, Abobo Woreda.

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Alwero River
Source: (GCTB, 2018; GTO, 2018; Field observation, 2018)

Deretek Waterfall

This green roofed astonishing waterfall is found in the Majang zone, Godere Woreda, in the Semuy Kebele. It is home of numerous fauana and flora species which adds aesthetic value of the surrounding and waterfall itself.

Deretek Waterfall (Godere Woreda, Semuy Kebele)
Source: (MELCA office, 2018; GCTB, 2018; GTO, 2018; Field observation, 2018)
Dike Waterfall

This high falling attractive waterfall is located in the Majang zone, Godere Woreda, in the Gelesha Kebele. It is enclosed with green flora species and supports multiple fauna species. It has a good tourism potential to experience ecotourism activities like ecotrekking, walking, hiking, biking, mountain climbing, etc. and enhances mental satisfaction.

Jay Waterfall

It is known as a tributary to Yobe (gilo) River along with Shone River meet at a certain place to jump from one tip of the mountain to another creating a noisy powerful fall with showery moisture weather, being accompanied by a colorful rain bow. The water fall is located in the south-east of Meti town, capital of Manjang Zone. The fall is accounts 50 meter high.

Waki Waterfall

It is located in Majang zone, Mengeshi woreda (60 km far) in Tengi kebele. Waki Fall is derived from the name of Waki River and it has six tributaries and falls down. This water fallen is covered by dense forest for its destination.
God’s Bridge

God’s Bridge is the exiting natural concreted bridge sometimes named as Mot Bridge which stands for “Death Bridge”. It is naturally built on the River Yobe or Gilo as it passes through Gog Woreda. It is located in Majang Zone, South East of Godere Woreda (Gelesh Kebele) and 28 km far away from Meti town, capital of Majang Zone. The length of the bridge is estimated as 100-120 m, with the width of 20-30m and has height of 60-70 m from water surface.

Jejebe Mountain/hill

The mountain is found in the Gambella town, capital of the region along the Jejebe River. It is very attractive when you reach to the top of the hill; you have a good view of the whole part of Gambella town. And it is also serving as spiritual place by Ethiopian Orthodox Church; where the church called Abun-Aregawe was built on the top of the hill.
Jejebe mountain/hill  
Source: (GCTB, 2018; GTO, 2018; Field observation, 2018)

Gambella National Park

The Gambella National Park (GNP) is located extreme west of Ethiopia, established in 1973 in the central plain principally lying between the two major Rivers; Baro and Gilo River. During establishment the park covers an area 6051 km$^2$; but after demarcation it was reduced to 4575 km$^2$. Geographically it is located between the coordinate of 07° 30’-08° 15’ N and 33° 45’-34° 15’ E. The park is located in the central lowland plain of the region and falls in six woredas, namely; Abol, Abobo, Gog, Jor, Itang and Jikawo. GNP is known to be one of the richest biome which conserves a diversified assemblage of fauna and flora species (table 2).

Table 2: Wildlife Resources of Gambella National Park

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Wildlife Species</th>
<th>No. of Species in GNP</th>
<th>No. of Species in Ethiopia</th>
<th>% Species in GNP from Ethiopia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mammals</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>21.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>37.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reptiles</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Amphibians</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fishes</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>53.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Plants</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>6500-7000</td>
<td>7.04 - 7.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Vreugdenhil, 2012; Young, 2012; Amare, 2015; GNP Office, 2018; Field observation, 2018)

Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve

Nowadays, Ethiopia has 5 biosphere reserves which are registered under UNESCO; namely Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve (2017), Lake Tana Biosphere Reserve (2015), Sheka Forest Biosphere Reserve (2012), Kaffa Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve (2010) and Yayu Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve (2010) (Selemon, Chiranjib and Alemken, 2019). Geographically, Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve is located in between 07°08’-07°23’ N latitude and 35°04’- 035°19’ E longitude. Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve supports diversified fauna and flora composition and is important elements for tourism development like photo capturing, bird watching, mammal watching, forest waking, hiking, mountain climbing, and so on (table 3).
Table 3: Fauna and Flora Composition of the MFBR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Fauna and Flora</th>
<th>No. of Species in MFBR</th>
<th>No. of Species in Ethiopia</th>
<th>% of species in MFBR from Ethiopia</th>
<th>Endemic Species in Ethiopia</th>
<th>Endemic Species in MFBR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Higher Plants</td>
<td>550: 90 Families</td>
<td>6500-7000</td>
<td>7.86- 8.46</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mammals</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>10.31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fishes</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>172</td>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>20.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Reptiles &amp; Amphibians</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>240*</td>
<td>16**</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Amphibians</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Amphibians ** Reptiles

Source: (Vreugdenhil, 2012; Young, 2012; MELCA Office, 2018; Field observation, 2018)

IV. CONCLUSION

Tourism industry plays significant role in eradicating poverty, good image building, sharing best experiences, and international communication. It is made up of attraction, accommodation and transportation components. Ethiopia is known for its enormous natural tourism potentials with its unique biodiversity composition, fauna and flora, remarkable landscapes, mountains, valleys, cliffs, water bodies (lakes, rivers, and waterfalls), protected areas and biosphere reserves. Gambella Region is one of the potential tourism destinations located at South West of Ethiopia. The region has endowed with various natural tourism potentials like water bodies (lakes, rivers, waterfalls, and wetlands), mountains, natural bridges, caves, valleys, landscapes, fauna and flora. The Region possesses also Gambella National Park and Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve with their astonishing natural biodiversity. Hence, the region has undeniable wonderful natural tourism potentials to attract international as well as domestic tourists, ecologists, researchers, higher education students, environmentalists, explorers, film makers, drifters, naturalist and other segment of visitors towards its valuable biodiversity.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conducting further research in identifying hidden natural tourism potentials.
- Enhancing promotion and marketing of existing natural tourism potentials to attract various visitors from the different corners of the World.
- Strengthening collaboration, integration and commitment of all concerned stakeholders for the sustainable conservation and development of tourism industry in the region.

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