

Kilimanjaro Tourism and What It Means for Local Porters and for the Local Environment

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Abstract

Mount Kilimanjaro attracts a large number of climbers each year. This stimulates the local economy, as the climbers use local tour agencies and hire many local people as guides, porters and cooks. On the other hand, working conditions are often far from satisfactory. As for conservation, the National Park Authority has been fairly successful in protecting the fragile mountain ecosystem from the dual pressures of tourism and the demands of a growing population. However, the rapid decrease in the amount of ice and snow on the summit is serious cause for concern. This report considers the impacts of tourism on the porters and on the local environment, and looks at various initiatives introduced to improve the situation.

Keywords: Kilimanjaro, trekking tours, porters, biodiversity impacts

1. Introduction

Tourism, the world's biggest industry and employer, has great potential for alleviating poverty in some of the world's poorest countries. The UNWTO recognized this in 2002 when it initiated its Sustainable Tourism - Elimination of Poverty (ST-EP) Programme (UNWTO 2010). However, relatively little of the money spent by tourists reaches areas where poverty is greatest. On the contrary, "the nature of tourism and the lack of engagement of the poor can cause much tourism spending to leak away from poor destinations" and "the income that remains may not end up benefiting the poor, reaching instead the better educated and well-off segments of society" (UNWTO 2010). One factor that restricts the potential for tourism to alleviate poverty is that relatively few tourists venture into rural areas, where poverty rates are especially high.

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One significant exception is trekking tourism. In 2009, 132,929 visitors to Nepal went trekking or climbing (Ministry of Tourism and Aviation). 90% of them went on one of three popular trekking routes (Annapurna, Sagarmatha and Helambu/Langtang), each of which passes through villages where trekkers can receive meals and accommodation. Many of them were accompanied by guides and local porters, for whom this kind of work represents an important, though seasonal, source of income.

There is a significant demand for porters not only in Nepal but also in Peru, primarily on the Inca Trail, which attracted so many trekkers that the government had to impose a quota of 500 people per day, of whom around 300 are porters, cooks and guides (andeantravelweb.com). They are also indispensable for the growing number of tourists attempting to climb Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania. Not surprisingly, there are similarities between the three countries as regards not only the benefits gained from tourism by porters and their families, but also problems related to the conditions in which they work, and potential solutions to those problems.

In addition to stimulating local economies, tourism in its more sustainable forms has the potential to protect the environment. Local communities are more likely to refrain from logging, hunting and other unsustainable activities if they recognize that these resources are worth more as tourist attractions than as logs, bushmeat and marginal farmland. However, the expected benefits from tourism often fail to materialize. Moreover, tourism itself has significant impacts on the environment, and trekking tourism is no exception.

2. Trekking Tourism in the Kilimanjaro Region

Tanzania is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 187th by GNP Purchasing Power Parity in 2010 (World Bank 2011). The total contribution of tourism to GDP is approximately 13%, second only to that of agriculture, and tourism accounts directly and indirectly for over 11% of all employment (WTTC 2011). While Tanzania has many other tourist attractions, including the vibrant culture and white beaches on the coast and Zanzibar, about 72% of Tanzania's total revenue from tourism comes from a single region: Kilimanjaro and the Northern Safari Circuit (Serengeti, Ngorongoro, Manyara and Tarangire), which attracts about 300,000 tourists a year (UNWTO 2010). Mount Kilimanjaro National Park (MKNP) alone earns about \$50 million a year, accounting for about 45% of all income generated by Tanzania's 15 national parks (TANAPA, 2005). Climbing and safari tourism in the Kilimanjaro region are thus very important for the local people.

Mount Kilimanjaro attracts over 35,000 climbers a year, plus 5000 day visitors (Mitchell et al. 2009). Most are North Americans and Europeans who book their tours

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through a tour operator in their own country. The local arrangements are generally made by Tanzanian tour agencies, which charge about \$1200 for a 7-day Kilimanjaro package, including the first and last nights in a hotel (UNWTO 2010). In addition to the Tanzanian agency's fee, tourists also spend on average \$170 on tips and souvenirs, etc. So the average visitor climbing Kilimanjaro contributes \$1370 to the Tanzanian economy. According to Mitchell et al., of that amount, almost half (47%) goes to the National Park authority (\$60 per day for the entry fee, \$40 per day for the camping fee and \$20 for compulsory rescue insurance). The rest consists of wages and tips (18%), profit for Tanzanian tour agencies (16%), accommodation (6%), food and drink (6%), souvenirs and other services (4%), and transport (3%). Each group of climbers has at least one guide and one cook, and each climber has at least three porters, in accordance with MKNP regulations. Mitchell et al. estimate that average annual income from Kilimanjaro treks, including both wages and tips, is \$1830 for guides, \$842 for porters and \$771 for cooks. This is far higher than the average national income of about \$300 per person, despite the fact that the climbing season is of limited duration.

With 35,000 climbers paying on average \$1370 each, the local economy thus receives about \$50 million a year. Of that amount, Mitchell et al. estimate that 28% directly benefits the poor. 90% of all the food and drink comes from local farms and markets. 50% of all spending on souvenirs goes to local craftsmen. 16% of all hotel costs are paid to ordinary staff. Even a small share of the hefty National Park fee supports local community projects (over \$1 million in 2006). However, the most significant impact is for guides, cooks and porters, the majority of whom are from local Chagga farming communities. It is estimated that each year, trekking tourism provides 400 jobs for guides, 500 for cooks and 10,000 for porters (Mitchell et al. 2009).

3. Issues of Health and Safety

Things could be much better than they are, however. The work is seasonal and irregular; it is exhausting; and the wages are far from generous. The job is also somewhat dangerous. On 17 September 2002, Kilimanjaro experienced heavy rain and strong winds, and three porters died. The cause of death was established only for one of them: acute cardio-vascular failure, probably due to hypothermia and possibly also altitude sickness. However, according to the Kilimanjaro Porters' Association, all three lacked appropriate clothing (Keats 2002). According to a tour operator quoted in Olesnycky (2003), between 15 and 20 porters die on Kilimanjaro each year. Lacking experience, acclimatization, nutrition, proper clothing and equipment and shelter, the overloaded and underpaid Kilimanjaro porters are more vulnerable than their well-fed clients to pneumonia,



Fig. 1 Porters on Kilimanjaro (D. Peaty)

hypothermia, frostbite, stomach ailments and other illnesses. They are also under greater pressure to continue to climb, even when sick, as abandoning a tour group may lead to their being unable to get work in the future. However, when they are too sick to carry their load, they are likely to be sent down the mountain on their own. Reid (2008) refers to this as the “scandal of the Kilimanjaro sherpas”.

4. Efforts to Improve the Porters’ Conditions

The International Porter Protection Group (IPPG) was founded in 1997 to protect trekking porters from exploitation and neglect in countries such as Nepal, Peru and, more recently, Tanzania. Their website lists five key concerns:

1. that porters be provided with suitable clothes to protect them from cold, rain and snow, including boots and sunglasses;
2. that porters be provided with a proper shelter at night, either in a lodge or a tent, with a sleeping mat and blanket or sleeping bag;

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3. that porters be provided with life insurance and proper medical care no different from what the tourists receive ;
4. that sick porters be taken to safety and treated by someone who speaks their language ;
5. that porters' loads be limited.

Some of these concerns have been addressed, at least in Nepal, according to the IPPG website:

Since IPPG's inception in 1997 there have been positive changes. It is slowly becoming less usual to see trekking porters who are not adequately equipped and sheltered. Aid posts and hospitals report that most sick porters are now accompanied by a trekker, sirdar or group leader instead of coming in alone.

They have also made progress with load limits, which they set at 30 Kg in Nepal, 25 Kg in Peru and 20 Kg in Kilimanjaro. However, porters' insurance is still very rare.

Another organization that has been helping trekking porters is the International Mountain Explorers' Connection, based in Colorado, US. At IMEC's initiative, the Kilimanjaro Porters' Assistance Project was set up in 2003. The aim of the KPAP is to improve the working conditions of the porters on Mount Kilimanjaro by

- lending clothing at no charge to the porters for use while climbing
- offering free classes for the benefit of the porters in English, First Aid, HIV/AIDS awareness, money management and porters' rights
- educating the public on the impoverished porter conditions and providing guidelines for proper porter treatment
- monitoring climbing company practices and highlighting those adhering to the guidelines for proper treatment through IMEC's Partner for Responsible Travel Program (KPAP 2010).

To promote the first goal, they created a program to collect donated equipment and lend it to porters for free. So far, over 8000 porters have benefited. With regard to the second aim, many porters leave school with very little education, intending to earn the money they need in order to continue their education later. However, most of them fail to return to school. The free classes provided by the KPAP have benefited over 9600 porters. As for the other two goals, one reason behind the relative success of the porter protection initiative is the trend towards responsible tourism. As more and more tourists become aware of tourism-related issues such as environmental impacts and workers' rights, pressure increases on international tour operators to appear socially responsible. That

eventually leads to pressure on local tour agencies to follow suit. By 2009, 18 local operators were in compliance with KPAP's Recommended Guidelines for Proper Porter Treatment, which cover wages and tips, loads, clothing and equipment, shelter, food and water and medical treatment (KPAP 2009).

In June 2008, TANAPA, the body in charge of Tanzania's 15 National Parks, introduced a minimum daily wage of \$10 for porters, \$15 for cooks and \$20 for guides working in the Kilimanjaro National Park (TANAPA 2008). However, KPAP's research indicates that some companies pay climbing staff less than that (KPAP 2009). In any case, the cost of food and fuel has risen sharply since 2008. Moreover, it would appear that most companies leave payment to the head guide, who in some cases takes more than his fair share, and who may in addition charge porters for the right to be selected for a trek. Tips from climbers are another important source of income for porters, often amounting to half as much as the wage. However, KPAP's research suggests that many guides also pocket some of the money intended as tips for the porters (KPAP 2009). In order to prevent this, tourists are advised to pay each individual staff member in person, either at the end of the trek or on arrival at the hotel.

The Kilimanjaro National Park authority imposes a maximum load of 25 kg to be carried by each porter, including his or her own necessary baggage. There are scales at every entry point to the National Park, and park employees weigh each load to make sure it is within the limits. However, KPAP's research suggests that many porters have been coerced into carrying loads over the limit. The regulations can be evaded either by bribing the park employees monitoring loads or by registering extra porters who then return home instead of carrying the load registered in their name, which is then redistributed among the remaining porters.

Porters need proper nutrition in order to carry a load of 25 kg or more to altitudes of over 4000 meters. (It should be noted that unlike the Sherpas of the Himalaya, most porters on Kilimanjaro live in villages situated at an altitude of less than 1700 meters). From KPAP's research, however, it would appear that about seven in ten porters have only one meal a day.

The IPPG and KPAP are not the only organizations that seek to help porters. All porters working on Kilimanjaro must belong to a recognized porters' association, of which there are four: the Mount Kilimanjaro Porters Society, the Kilimanjaro Porters' Association, the Mount Meru Porters' Association and the Arusha Porters' Association. The largest of these, with over 700 members, is the Mount Kilimanjaro Porters' Society (MKPS), which was established in 2004 under the auspices of Zara Tours, the biggest local operator. According to the Executive Secretary, Mr Yassim M. Yassim, the MKPS campaigned for a 15 kg load limit (significantly less than the current official limit). They

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also sought a guarantee of three proper meals each day: porridge for breakfast, ugali for lunch and rice and a more substantial meal with rice and meat for dinner. (Yassim pointed out, however, that even those who work for responsible companies often throw away part of their rations because they don't have time for lunch and don't want to carry the extra weight.) The MKPS has also helped their members to manage their wages, in order to avoid being underpaid, by setting up bank accounts and ensuring that the correct amount was paid. The MKPS has a plan to open a used equipment store that would provide free equipment for porters, such as sleeping bags, jackets and boots, donated by trekkers (a service already provided by the KPAP). Yassim is also hoping to set up a porters' insurance scheme, but recognizes that this will take a long time to achieve. (MKPS has on occasions paid for porters' medical expenses from its own limited funds.)

5. Opportunities for Promotion

Given that guides are paid twice as much as porters, it is only to be expected that many porters hope to be promoted. The first step is to be chosen as an assistant guide, a reward for porters showing exceptional diligence and capability. (Unlike ordinary porters, the assistant guide not only has to carry the standard load, but must also accompany visitors to the summit.)

The next step is to obtain the official KINAPA (Kilimanjaro National Park Authority) guide qualification (Mount Kilimanjaro Guides). The Kilimanjaro National Park Authority accepts experienced porters on guide training courses. These last eight days and include two days of lectures at KINAPA headquarters in Marangu and five days of actual climbing. The lectures cover flora and fauna, tour organization and administration, visitor trails, attractions and facilities, rules and regulations, customer care, rescue and first aid, fire prevention and control, and other essentials (Erick 2009). One major obstacle is the need for a secondary school certificate, which many poor porters do not have, and have very little opportunity to get. We met several who said they could not afford to stop work (in both tourism and farming) in order to go back to school.

The most important factor in hiring and promotion is the ability to speak English. The safety of the tourists often depends on good communication. Since there is no helicopter rescue service, anyone suffering from high altitude symptoms must be brought down immediately to the park gate, where they can be transferred to a motor vehicle and taken to the nearest hospital. That difficult and dangerous task is usually assigned to porters. Not a few wealthy foreign trekkers owe their very survival to their poorly-paid, overworked, under-nourished trekking staff.

6. Community-Based Tourism

Not all visitors to the Kilimanjaro region want, or are able, to climb the mountain. Some, at least, are interested in the local culture. This is evident from the success of a recently developed community tourism project. This type of tourism, now firmly established in India, South East Asia, Latin America and elsewhere, has yet to catch on in Tanzania. However, one successful project exists in the Kilimanjaro region. Kahawa Shamba, meaning 'coffee farm', was set up by the Kilimanjaro Native Cooperative Union (a coffee farmers' association) with help from the British Government Department for International Development, Cafe Direct and Tribes Travel. It offers accommodations, meals and tours in two villages surrounded by coffee farms and lush forest. The village of Lyamundo has a campsite and four traditional huts made of vines and banana leaves; and the village of Urumsumi has a campsite. Visitors can choose from a number of tours, including a village walk, a history hike, a hike to a waterfall and a coffee tour in which they learn all about coffee production (Kahawa Shamba website). The tours, accommodation and meals are managed by the coffee farming community, and all income is paid into a community fund.

7. Threats to the Environment

Kilimanjaro National Park is an area of great biodiversity, due to the huge difference in altitude between the surrounding plateau and the 5895-meter summit and to variations in rainfall patterns. The area above the tree line was designated a national park in 1973, but human settlement continued at lower elevations, even after Kilimanjaro was listed as a World Heritage site in 1987. There are about 18 'forest villages' whose residents obtain fuel wood, medicinal plants, honey and other resources from the forest, and cultivate maize and other crops in cleared areas (UNEP). Various crops including the famous Arabica coffee are grown at lower levels, outside the buffer zone. The Chagga maintain 'homegardens' consisting of plantations of bananas and coffee grown below the tree cover and vegetables at ground level (Meyer 2009). These gardens are generally ecologically sustainable.

Trekking impacts on the environment in various ways. In the past, trees were cut down to provide fuel for cooking and vegetation damaged by campers. Crowded trails such as the Marangu route showed signs of erosion, and garbage was discarded by both trekkers and support teams. However, in 2001, the Kilimanjaro Park Authority (KINAPA) introduced strict regulations to deal with these problems, and management has been



Fig.2 Kilimanjaro's vanishing ice cap (D. Peaty)

greatly improved (supported, no doubt, by the entry fee of \$60 per trekker - the highest of Tanzania's 15 national parks). Compared to my first visit in 1992, I found less erosion, less garbage and better-maintained trails and lodges in summer 2011, despite the huge increase in the number of trekkers.

Most of the present damage to the natural forest was in fact caused not by trekking groups or by the Chagga home gardens, but by fires sparked by slash-and-burn farming, charcoal production and honey collection (the gatherers use smoke to subdue the bees (Hunt 2010). KINAPA has allocated some funds from its considerable budget to enforce the prohibition on logging and on lighting fires and to support reforestation efforts, but it is clear that much more must be done.

The mass media have made much of the gradual loss of Kilimanjaro's glaciers - amounting to 85% loss since 1912 and 26% loss since 2000 (Connor 2009). Whether this is due primarily to global warming - a problem exacerbated by tourists flying long-distance to Kilimanjaro - or to other causes such as deforestation remains to be resolved beyond doubt. At any rate, the disappearance of the ice cap (predicted to occur within 20 years)

will probably be bad for tourism, if only because the mountain will lose some of its visual appeal. It will also exacerbate water shortages that will affect an estimated one million people who depend on Kilimanjaro for water and electricity from dams on the Pangani River (Agrawala et al. 2003). At the same time, the population is likely to continue to increase at the present rate of 1.6% per annum (Turpie et al. 2005), placing a greater demand on the environment and on the need for job creation.

There is an urgent need for forests to be replanted on the slopes of Kilimanjaro. This requires a concerted effort by the National Park authorities, the local community, international conservationists and the tourism industry. It is also important for local communities to work together to ensure the long-term sustainability of all economic activities, including tourism, related to Kilimanjaro National Park.

8. Conclusion

Trekking tourism provides a source of income for a large number of people living in the Kilimanjaro region. Many trekking porters, however, are exploited, poorly-equipped and inadequately nourished. Regulations should be tightened, but in the meantime, tourists should avoid cheap operators and support those who are committed to the KPAP's Partner for Responsible Travel Program and follow its guidelines. The potential exists for alternatives to trekking, such as coffee farm tourism. So far, the KNCU only has community tourism projects in two villages. However, as their reputation spreads, it is possible that more will be established.

The substantial increase in the number of trekkers climbing Mount Kilimanjaro appears to have had little negative impact on the ecosystem. A greater threat is posed by forest fires started by local people and by slash-and-burn farming. This should be addressed not only by stricter enforcement of existing regulations, but also by establishing alternative sustainable income-generating enterprises such as coffee farm tourism. Greater efforts to replant deforested areas with native species are also urgently needed.

The residents of the Kilimanjaro region face an uncertain future. With the tourism industry weakened by global recession, agriculture threatened by a decline in water resources and population growth demanding greater production of food and more jobs for underemployed youths, it is essential for the region's greatest resource to be protected for the benefit of future generations.

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