RESEARCH BRIEF

TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES AND POTENTIAL OF GREATER MASAKA VIS-À-VIS EACOP PROJECT RISKS

IGEN

INCLUSIVE GREEN ECONOMY NETWORK-EAST AFRICA (IGEN-EA)

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About IGEN-EA

The Inclusive Green Economy Network-East Africa (IGEN-EA) is a network that unites over thirty-six (36) private sector players and civil society organisations (CSOs) from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The organisations undertake research, stakeholder awareness raising and advocacy to promote green economic alternatives including clean energy, sustainable tourism, organic agriculture and fisheries as well as forestry and natural resources management. The above work is undertaken to create economic opportunities for all East African citizens in key green economic sectors while promoting environmental conservation, climate action and human rights protection. The network was officially launched in 2021.

Acronyms

IGEN-EA	Inclusive Green Economy Network-East Africa
AFIEGO	Africa Institute For Energy Governance
CAI	Climate Accountability Institute
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CSOs	Civil society organisations
EACOP	East African Crude Oil Pipeline
ESIA	Environmental and Social Impact Assessment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDD	Horizontal Directional Drilling
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
MTWA	Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities
MWE	Ministry of Water and Environment
NCEA	Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment
NFA	National Forestry Authority
PAU	Petroleum Authority of Uganda
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UCDA	Uganda Coffee Development Authority
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UTB	Uganda Tourism Board
UWA	Uganda Wildlife Authority

Executive summary

About the Greater Masaka sub-region

This brief has been produced by IGEN-EA to document and raise stakeholder awareness of the tourism potential and opportunities of the Greater Masaka sub-region.

The region is composed of nine districts including Kalungu, Masaka, Rakai, Sembabule, Lwengo, Kalangala, Lyantonde, Bukomansimbi (Bindhe, 2025) and Kyotera.

The region, which is located in Southern Uganda, is replete with sites of tourism potential but tourism in the region is under-developed, and key stakeholder awareness of this potential is limited.

The EACOP and Greater Masaka

Amidst the above, projects which risk harming the tourism potential of the region such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) are being implemented. The pipeline will cross four of the region's nine districts. The districts that would be crossed by the EACOP in Greater Masaka include Lwengo, Sembabule, Rakai and Kyotera (EACOP, 2025).

The Ugandan government alongside its partners including TotalEnergies and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) argue that they are developing the project to promote economic development (EACOP, 2025).

However, experts and others argue that the envisaged benefits of the project are overstated (Netherlands Commission on Environmental Assessment, 2020), while the project could harm thriving livelihoods (StopEACOP, 2025) in the agriculture, fisheries, clean energy and other sectors.

Indeed, negative impacts to farmers and fisherfolk arising from the EACOP and the upstream Tilenga as well as Kingfisher oil project activities have already been documented (AFIEGO, 2023 and AFIEGO, 2024).

Tourism as a tool for ending poverty

Uganda is classified as a least developed nation, with a poverty rate of 30% (World Bank, 2023) and an unemployment rate of 12% (Uganda Bureau of Statistics –UBOS-,2019). Efforts must be made to end poverty for all in line with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 while promoting SDGs 13, 14 and 15 on climate action, life on water and life on land respectively.

The above status quo begs the question: Are there green, sustainable economic alternatives that respect human rights, and promote biodiversity conservation as well as climate action that could be promoted in the Greater Masaka sub-region to promote thriving livelihoods?

This brief proposes sustainable tourism as a green economic alternative that could be promoted in the region. It documents the sustainable tourism opportunities and potential of the Greater Masaka sub-region and analyses the economic viability of sustainable tourism in the region. Further, the brief assesses the income that could be earned from promoting sustainable tourism in Greater Masaka and discusses the risks presented by the EACOP to the tourism sites in the region. The brief makes recommendations to promote sustainable tourism in the Greater Masaka sub-region.

The brief focused on assessing the sustainable tourism potential of Greater Masaka because agriculture especially coffee growing is already a thriving industry in the region (Uganda Coffee Development Authority, Undated) while fishing is also fairly well-established. However, tourism largely is not.

Yet Uganda's Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities (MTWA) notes that attracting more leisure visitors, persuading tourists to stay longer in Uganda and increasing leisure as well as conference guests to the country could add 18% to the country's exports and 2.6% to GDP while generating an additional $220 million in receipts per annum (MTWA, 2014).

Methodology

To document the tourism potential of the Greater Masaka sub-region, the consultants that produced this brief conducted field visits, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 63 respondents and document review. The above were done between July 2024 and January 2025. The following were their findings.

Key findings

Greater Masaka is home to at least 32 tourism sites that can be harnessed to promote eco-, religious, dark and cultural tourism. These range from Musambwa Island in Kyotera district to Bigo bya Mugenyi, a UNESCO World Heritage Site (UNESCO, 2025) in Sembabule district to the St. Charles/ Karoli Lwanga site in Masaka.

Promoting sustainable tourism in the region is viable as the region boasts the attractions, accommodation, accessibility (infrastructure) and others needed for successful visits. More investments in infrastructure and accommodation are however required, this brief asserts.

Further, promoting selected sustainable tourism activities such as expeditions to Lake Nabugabo, visits to the St. Karoli Lwanga site, as well as expeditions to Musambwa island and Bigo bya Mugenyi could see Uganda earning about USD 1,022,000 a year (over UGX 3.7 billion). While the Greater Masaka sub-region has sustainable tourism potential, the EACOP could negatively impact it by further fueling the climate crisis, causing biodiversity loss, and driving a population influx among others.

This brief particularly raises concerns about the EACOP risks to the Sango Bay-Musambwa Island-Kagera (SAMUKA) Ramsar Wetland System and Bigo bya Mugenyi on River Katonga.

To harness Greater Masaka's sustainable tourism potential, this research brief recommends that further assessments covering the entire Greater Masaka sub-region to show the sustainable tourism potential of the region are undertaken by government or development partners. Due to resource constraints, this research brief covers only five –Masaka, Lwengo, Kyotera, Sembambule and Kalangala- of Greater Masaka's nine districts. The brief also does not discuss all the sites with tourism potential in the aforementioned districts due to resource constraints.

The Uganda Tourism Board should also develop and market tourism products in the region. Finally, the EACOP project developers should consider rerouting the pipeline to avoid wetlands belonging to SAMUKA and River Katonga among others to protect tourism in Greater Masaka.

Map showing some of the disricts in Greater Masaka including Lwengo, Sembabule, Kyotera and Rakai that will be crossed by the EACOP

1. Introduction

Uganda, which is located in East Africa, is referred to as the "Pearl of Africa" because of the country's diverse natural endowments and beauty. Uganda also has a rich cultural diversity, boasting of over 66 tribes, languages and dialects (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2014).

The country also has ten national parks (Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities [MTWA], 2021), 12 wildlife reserves (MTWA, 2021), 13 wildlife sanctuaries (Uganda Wildlife Authority [UWA], 2024), and five community wildlife management areas (UWA, 2024). Further, forests cover an area measuring 1,265,741 hectares (National Forestry Authority [NFA], 2025), with the country's forests boasting of unique endowments.

Tourism is an important economic activity in Uganda with the sector employing nearly 1.6 million people (UBOS, 2023), which accounts for 14.7% of jobs in Uganda. The sector also accounts for 3.64% of the country's GDP (UBOS, 2023).

Some of the most popular types of tourism activities in Uganda include business, spiritual and religious related visits as well as leisure and holiday (UBOS, 2023). Ecotourism that is reliant on Uganda's natural heritage is an integral feature in Uganda's tourism sector with national parks being some of the more visited features by leisure tourists in the country.

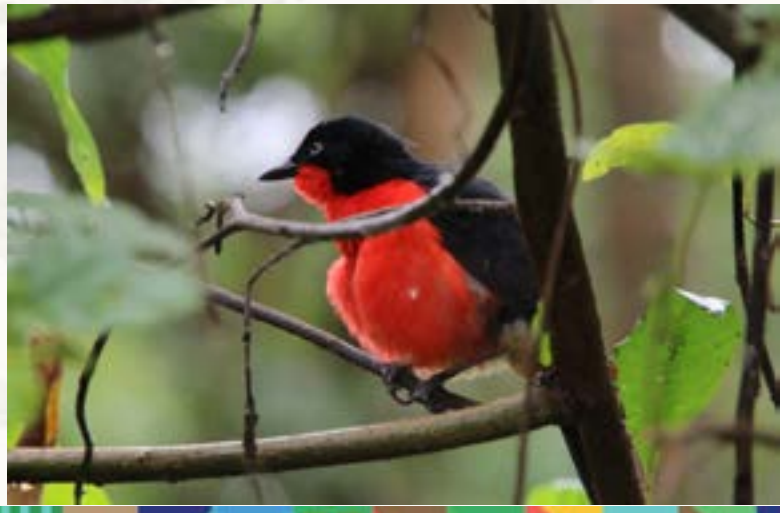
Some of the regions that are most visited in Uganda include the central, south-western, western and north-eastern regions (Destination Uganda, 2025). The Greater Masaka sub-region which comprises nine districts including Kalungu, Masaka, Rakai, Sembabule, Lwengo, Kalangala, Lyantonde, Bukomansimbi (Bindhe, 2025) and Kyotera, is located in the southern region, is not one of the most visited.

Yet it is endowed with cultural heritage, natural beauty, and historical significance, making it an important sub-region where tourism could be promoted. The sub-region's tourism potential largely remains untapped. Conversely, projects such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) that pose climate change and biodiversity conservation risks (Busingye, 2025), are being implemented in four of the sub-region's nine districts. Proponents of the project argue that it is necessary to drive economic development (EACOP, 2025), while opponents of the project assert that the social, biodiversity, climate change and other impacts of the project (StopEACOP, 2025) will erode any benefits.

With Uganda being one of the world's least developed countries with a poverty rate of 30% (World Bank, 2023) and an unemployment rate of 12% (UBOS, 2019), it is important to provide information on green economic activities that Uganda can pursue.

Through this research brief, IGEN-EA proposes sustainable tourism as a green economic alternative that can be pursued alongside other green economic activities in the Greater Masaka sub-region.

Sustainable tourism is concerned with the effects of tourism on people, nature and communities, and seeks to provide tourism which benefits host communities, involves the local community, promotes cultural heritage, improves working conditions, and benefits nature (Leslie, 2012).



2. Problem statement

The Greater Masaka sub-region is replete with natural and cultural heritage sites such as the Musambwa Island, Lake Nabugabo, Lake Birinzi, the Lambu Genocide Memorial Site, Bigo Bya Mugenyi, and others. The sub-region is home to at least 27 natural and cultural heritage sites, making it viable for the promotion of eco- and cultural tourism.
The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education".

Cultural tourism is defined as the journeying of people to specific destinations that offer cultural attractions including historical sites and cultural events among others (Achieve Global Safaris, 2025).

The Greater Masaka sub-region is also home to at least five sites of religious importance that could be used to promote religious tourism, which is defined as travel to visit holy centres, places or events (Mercadal, Undated).

In addition, the population living in the Greater Masaka sub-region is known for their coffee-growing ways and rich culture (Uganda Coffee Development Authority [UCDA], Undated), providing an opportunity for agro- and cultural tourism.

The estimated combined global value of eco, cultural, religious and agro-tourism in 2024 was USD 453.25 billion with ecotourism accounting for USD 181.1 billion (Samal and Dash, 2022) and religious tourism accounting for USD 174.98 billion (The Business Research Company, 2025).

On the other hand, cultural tourism accounted for USD 30.88 billion (BusinessWire, 2024) and agro-tourism accounted for USD 66.29 billion (Business Research Company, 2025).
Through the Tourism Development Master Plan of 2014 to 2024, Uganda noted that doing the following would grow the country's exports and have a positive impact on the country's GDP:

- Attracting 100,000 additional leisure visitors would add 11% to exports and 1.6% to GDP;
- Persuading every tourist to spend one additional night in Uganda would add 7% to exports and 1% to GDP;
- An 8% annual growth in leisure and conference tourists would generate an additional $220 million in receipts per annum.

Uganda also envisioned creating an estimated additional 151,400 direct jobs if investment in training and upskilling were undertaken in the tourism sector.

While an assessment of the performance of the Tourism Development Master Plan are unavailable, available information shows that tourism contributes 3.64% to GDP (UBOS, 2023). There remains room for the sector to grow.

Key to the growth of the sector is developing and diversifying tourism products and services, promoting and marketing Uganda as a destination (awareness raising), as well as promoting the conservation of natural and cultural heritage resources. The above areas of work are identified in the Tourism Development Master Plan.

While product development and awareness raising remain integral to promoting tourism, green jobs and economic growth in Uganda, public awareness of the tourism products in the Greater Masaka sub-region remains limited. Further, projects such as the EACOP that could negatively impact conservation of Uganda's natural heritage are being implemented in the sub-region.
These challenges need to be addressed.

3. Objectives

3.1. Main objective

The main objective of this research brief therefore is: To document, profile and assess the tourism opportunities and potential for the Greater Masaka sub-region.

It is hoped that the research brief will be used by the targeted stakeholders to raise public awareness of the tourism potential and opportunities in the Greater Masaka sub-region.

It is also hoped that relevant entities will use the information in this brief to further develop tourism products in the Greater Masaka sub-region to support tourism, green job creation, sustainable economic development, environmental conservation and climate action.

The specific objectives of the research brief are:

i. To document the tourism opportunities in Greater Masaka;
ii. To provide best case scenario of economic viability of the identified tourism opportunities;
iii. To make projections of the anticipated income from these opportunities when developed;
iv. To discuss how the EACOP could negatively impact the tourism opportunities of the Greater Masaka sub-region; and
v. To make recommendations for development and promotion of the tourism opportunities of the Greater Masaka sub-region.

4. Methodology

To acquire in-depth understanding of the tourism opportunities of Greater Masaka, this research brief employed a qualitative research approach.

Document review, field visits and key informant visits (KIIs) were conducted with a questionnaire being administered to 63 respondents to understand the tourism opportunities of Greater Masaka.

Financial modelling was also undertaken to estimate the revenue or income that could be earned by promoting selected tourism activities in the Greater Masaka sub-region.

Further, field visits and document review to understand the best-case scenario of economic viability of tourism in the region were undertaken. Expert interviews and document reviews were also undertaken to understand how the EACOP could negatively impact the touristic potential of the Greater Masaka sub-region.

Further, KIIs were conducted to support the making of recommendations for the development and promotion of tourism in the Greater Masaka sub-region.

Worth noting is that the respondents that were engaged for this research brief were purposively sampled due to their knowledge of the tourism opportunities of Greater Masaka and the EACOP project risks to biodiversity conservation. The respondents were engaged in KIIs between July 2024 and January 2025.

In addition, of the region's nine districts, five including Masaka, Lwengo, Sembabule, Kyotera and Kalangala were covered for this research brief. The districts were sampled because they have the highest tourism potential with eco-, cultural and religious tourism potential being identified in the districts.

Production of this brief including conceptualisation, data collection and analysis, report writing and validation took place between May 2024 and January 2025. Ethical considerations were ensured by acquiring informed consent from the research participants among others.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1.0. Tourism opportunities of Greater Masaka

The Greater Masaka sub-region region is endowed with various potential tourist attractions that would attract religious, cultural, eco- and agro-tourists among others. These tourist attractions are discussed hereunder:

5.1.1. Eco-tourism potential of Greater Masaka

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines ecotourism as the: environmentally responsible visiting of relatively unspoilt natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features—both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

The Greater Masaka sub-region has a number of sites with eco-tourism potential. These include the following:

Lake Nabugabo: Lake Nabugabo, which is located in Masaka district in Southern Uganda, was formed about 5,000 calendar years ago (Stager, 2005) following its isolation from Lake Victoria.

The lake, which is a Ramsar site or wetland of international importance, was formed as a result of sand dunes, resulting from strong winds, separating it from Lake Victoria (Kasozi, 2004).

The lake covers an area of 3,600 hectares (USAID, 2018) and lies at 00°24'S latitude and 31°54'E longitude. Lake Nabugabo is a vital place to both palearctic and intra-African migrant bird species. Holding about 15% of the world's population of the Blue Swallow, the lake supports five internationally threatened and near-threatened birds including: Blue Swallow, ShoeBill, Great Snipe, Pallied Harrier, and the Papyrus Gonolek Laniarius (Ministry of Water and Environment, Undated). This makes Lake Nabugabo a great place for birding, and immersing oneself in nature.

Worth noting is that alongside lakes Kayanja/Birinzi, Manywa and Kayugi, Lake Nabugabo is home to over 300 plant species, 14 of which are not found anywhere else within Uganda, and two flowering plants endemic to the site (USAID, 2014).

In recognition of its ecological significance, Lake Nabugabo Wetland System was designated a Ramsar Site in 2004 (Kasozi, 2004).

Lake Nabugabo is already a fairly established tourist destination frequented by domestic holiday makers and a few foreign travellers. Lodging facilities are available for overnight stays. Camping and team-building activities can be arranged. As regards activities, bird-watching and boat cruises on the serene lake are available upon request and prior reservations.

Lukunyu island: Lukunyu island is situated in Kyotera district (Kyanjo, 2023) and is about ten nautical kilometres off Kasensero landing site. It's a partly rocky island with greenery in form of gardens and trees. A motorized canoe is the available form of transport and the voyage leads across a phenomenal point at the mouth of River Akagera/Kagera. At this point, Kagera river (Lake Victoria's largest tributary) enters Lake Victoria from Rwanda and Tanzania. The waters of Akagera have a muddy appearance whereas those of Lake Victoria appear clear and still. Worth noting is that Lukunyu island holds a palace for the

King of Buganda. The palace was referred to as Nangoma, and it was used for easier administration of the county of Buddu, which forms part of Buganda Kingdom. This kingdom is Uganda's largest. The palace is also where Buganda once launched her wars of expansion against the Bahaya and Kiziba kingdoms in present-day Tanzania (Bindhe, 2016). The palace was a beloved private residence of Edward Mutesa II, Uganda's first president, where he occasionally went with members of the Royal Family (Bindhe, 2016).

Lake Birinzi: Lake Birinzi, which is located along Masaka road in southern Uganda, is in the same ecosystem as Lake Nabugabo. It's about three kilometers from a section of Lake Victoria called Nakigga and about 10kms from Lake Nabugabo. The lake is a pretty small fresh-water body that nestles in a valley surrounded by a marsh and scanty forest. Its oval or roundish in shape and is a walkable distance from St. Charles/Karoli Lwanga's shrine. One can combine visiting the lake with a pilgrimage to the most revered Uganda Martyr's home.

Other ecotourism sites in the region include Kalangala, which is made up of 84 islands famously known as Ssese islands and Kagera wetland in Kyotera district.

Some of the sites in Nabugabo

5.1.2. Religious tourism potential of Greater Masaka

Religious tourism' refers to travel that is primarily inspired by spiritual beliefs (Smith, 2012). It serves as one of humanity's oldest religious practices as well as one of the earliest examples of tourism (Timothy, 2011). Religious tourism is undertaken by believers that are seeking blessings, are fulfilling a vow, or are connecting with the deity or spiritual figure. It can also be out of the need to learn about a particular religion and/or culture, or to experience a sense of peace and rejuvenation.

Sites of religious importance in the Greater Masaka sub-region include:

St. Charles/Karoli Lwanga site: On February 17, 1879 the first two Catholic missionaries, Pere Siméon Lourdel Marpel (aka Mapeera) and brother Delmas Amans, landed at Kigungu in Entebbe (Daily Monitor, 2021), outside Uganda's current capital, Kampala. This marked the beginning of the Catholic faith in Uganda. The faith grew and coverts were baptised. One of those that underwent the religious ritual was Charles or Karoli Lwanga, who was baptised by two priests, Pere Ludovic Girault and Pere Simeon Lourdel, on November 15, 1885 (Find a grave, Undated).

On the day that Charles Lwanga was baptised, Joseph Mukasa Balikuddembe, another Christian convert who was a leader of the faithful, was martyred (Kampala Archdiocese, Undated). Lwanga assumed Balikuddembe's duties. A chief of royal pages, Lwanga secretly baptised his four fellow pages: Gyaviira, Kizito, Mbaga Tuzinde, and Muggaga.

St. Charles Lwanga, Joseph Mukasa Balikuddembe and 20 other Catholic converts were executed on the orders of Buganda's King Danieri Mwanga by burning, stabbing, dismembering and other forms of brutal execution. This was done because the king was threatened by the religious. Twenty-three (23) Anglican and tens of Muslim converts were executed as well. The executions took place between January 31, 1885 and January 27, 1887 (Britannica, Undated).

In 1920, Lwanga and his 21 other Catholic companions were beatified by Pope Benedict XV, and, on October 18, 1964, they were canonized by Pope Paul VI (Britannica, Undated).

Unbeknownst to many people, Charles Lwanga hailed from a little village called Birinzi (Daily Monitor, 2021), in the Masaka Catholic Diocese. The site where Charles Lwanga's family stayed is preserved in commemoration of St. Charles Lwanga. Every first Sunday of July, pilgrims travel to this site. This event attracts Catholics from all over Uganda and the Federal Republic of Germany. There is potential for growth in numbers.

Worth noting is that pilgrims to Birinzi end up at a nearby little-known lake also called Birinzi. It is a pristine marshy fresh-water lake with potential for water activities and a lodging facility for pilgrims.

Other sites of religious importance in the Greater Masaka sub-region include the sites where Sr. Amadeo Byabari and Msgr. Aloysius Ngobya lived. Msgr. Ngobya was attached to Our Lady of Sorrows, Kitovu church.

Snapshot of some of pilgrims at Birinzi in July 2024

5.1.3. Cultural/Heritage Tourism

Culture can be defined as the sum of characteristics that shape and distinguish one society or community from another.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, cultural tourism is "movements of persons for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and cultural tours, travel to festivals and other cultural events, visits to sites and monuments, travel to study nature, folklore or art, and pilgrimages."

Cultural tourism also encompasses the participation of visitors in cultural activities whether those activities are the primary purpose of their travel or not. Some of the sites of cultural significance in the Greater Masaka sub-region include:

Musambwa island: Musambwa Island, which is located approximately five nautical kilometres from Kasensero landing site on Lake Victoria in Kyotera District, is an island of spirits. Indeed, musambwa is a local language word meaning spirit.

The over 8-hectare island is rocky (BirdLife International, 2012) with scanty vegetation. Cultural practices and nature conservation are fused at the island, with wildlife being given a sacred status. It is believed that the spirit after whom the island is named appears in the form of snakes (Bamuturaki, 2024).

Consequently, killing of snakes and all wildlife is forbidden on the island. So is tampering with nests and breaking of birds' eggs. Further, girls and women are not allowed on the island (Bamuturaki, 2024) to prevent permanent settlements to aid nature conservation. Sexual intercourse is also forbidden on the island.

The island is a biodiversity hotspot, and Important Bird Area (BirdLife International, 2001). As of 2001, the island was the only known breeding grounds for the little egret (Egretta garzetta) and Long-tailed Cormorants (Phalacrocorax africanus) in Uganda (Ramsar Sites Information Services, 2025). Further, per the Ramsar Sites Information Services, (2025), the island is the biggest known breeding colony of Grey-headed Gulls (Larus cirrocephalus).

Worth noting is that Musambwa island is part of the Sango Bay-Musabwa island-Kagera (SAMUKA) Ramsar wetland system which is renowned for "hosting an average of 16.5% of Grey-headed gulls, and hosts globally endangered mammals such as elephant, black and white colobus monkey and a sub-species of the Blue monkey" (Ramsar Information Services, 2005).

Musambwa island is also home to rock cobras, and is a spiritual place where worshippers pray for blessings (Bamuturaki, 2024).
A combination of its biodiversity and cultural practices make the island a gem worth visiting.

Life on Musambwa Island

Bigo bya Mugenyi:

Bigo bya Mugyenyi, which is situated in Sembabule district (Kitara Foundation for Regional Tourism, 2025), is a 10 sq. kms series of archaeological earthworks dating between the 14th and 16th centuries A.D (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025).

Bigo bya Mugenyi, which is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site, is characterised by an outer trench system which runs around a ridge and joins the Katonga river banks on the north and south. The inner trench system is composed of four enclosures which open into each other.

The Bigo bya Mugenyi earthworks are associated with the legendary Bacwezi, who are believed to have been the first settlers in Uganda (Focus East Africa Tours, 2025). The Bacwezi, who lived under a two-dynasty rule of Ndahura and Wamala, are associated with the introduction of long horned cattle which came to dominate the economy of the Great Lakes region.

Today, Bigo Bya Mugenyi serves as much more than a historical site. It is a traditional worship centre that attracts worshippers from Uganda, Tanzania, DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Kenya among others. People who visit the site revere gods such as Ndahura, Kagoro, Kayizzi, Wamala and the main god of the site, Nakayima, among others. There's no soothsayer or spiritual mediator on site. It is said that the people who visit the site do so after getting a spiritual revelation and/or instructions through a dream.
Other sites of cultural importance in Greater Masaka include Lukunyu island, which was previously discussed in this brief.

Picture of Nabuzaana, the main house, at Bigo bya Mugenyi

5.1.4. Proposed itinerary

The following is a sample itinerary that tourists to Greater Masaka could adopt:

- Banana, pineapple and coffee tourism;
- Walk in the footprints of the Christian faithful (Birinzi, Kitovu, Fr. Ngobya and Sr. Amadeo);
- Dark tourism visits to the Lambu, Kasensero and Golo genocide memorials dedicated to those that died, and whose bodies floated to the above sites, during the 1994 Rwanda genocide;
- Nature visits to lakes Nabugabo, Birinzi and the Ssese Islands;
- Visit to some of the Buganda clan seats including that of the Kamuswaga, Kijanebalora and Sango bay;
- Bird watching at Musambwa island, Sango bay and Kagera wetland; and
- Exploring the 82 Ssesse islands

5.2. Viability of tourism in the Greater Masaka sub-region

To promote tourism in a place, six pillars that are dubbed as the Six As should be available. These include:
Attractions: Attractions include drivers that interest travellers to plan and make a trip to a given destination. These drivers could be good weather, a beautiful scenery or landscape, wildlife, a unique physical feature, culture, an event, food and people among others.

Accessibility is about the availability of transport infrastructure to a certain destination. A given destination may have unique attractions sought after by travellers but if there is no way to get there, then the tourism potentiality of that place cannot be realised.

Accommodation: In tourism, accommodation ranges from tents at a campsite to campervans, lodges, inns, motels, guesthouses, Airbnb, and hotels among other types of lodging. While short-distance travel may not require accommodation, long-haul travel requires lodging facilities for travels.

Activities: Activities make holidays/ vacations and or general travel worthwhile. They may demand a certain level of physical fitness or they may just be easy and open even to the elderly and infants. Activities determine how long one stays. The longer tourists stay at a given destination, the more they pay.

Amenities: These are little-touches and/or small elements of hospitality that are vital in ensuring comfort, convenience, pleasure and or enjoyment. These are things like good internet connectivity, a wellness center, and private butler service among others.
Availability: Lodging, transport, attraction and activities to be engaged in by visitors should be available at the time of intended travel.

As discussed in section 5.1. of this brief, the 6As are available in the Greater Masaka sub-region with attractions, transport, accommodation and potential tourist activities being available.

Worth noting is that some of the tourist attractions in the Greater Masaka sub-region including the Ssesse Islands are identified in the Tourism Development Masterplan of 2014-2024.

The plan recognises the need for strategic marketing in international markets, better crisis management, increase in the number of mid-range accommodation facilities, improving transport services and better mapping of historical sites among others. Some of the above needs are also seen in the Greater Masaka sub-region. The amount of money needed to implement the above needs is not available in the Tourism Development Masterplan.

5.3. Anticipated income from promoting tourism in Greater Masaka

Our assessments show that Ugandans could earn over USD 1 million per year if key tourism activities were to be promoted in the Greater Masaka sub-region.

For instance, if only ten tourists visited Bigo bya Mugenyi per day and these paid USD 50 for a tour, Ugandans would earn USD 500 per day.

In addition, if ten tourists each paying USD 80 were to visit Musambwa island, USD 800 would be earned per day.

Further, if the St. Charles Lwanga site was developed and ten tourists each paying USD 50 visited per day, USD 500 would be earned. If ten tourists visited Lake Nabugabo per day with each paying USD 100, USD 1,000 would be earned per day.

Combined, the above activities could see Ugandans earning USD 1,022,000 per year (over UGX 3.7 billion). More can be seen in the table below.

Table 1: Table showing daily and annual income that could be earned from selected activities

Activity	No. of tourists per day	Amount charged	Total per day
Bigo bya Mugenyi	Average ten tourists	US$50.00 per Person	US$500.00
Musambwa Island	Average ten tourists	US$80.00 per Person	US$800.00
St. Charles Lwanga Site	Average ten tourists	US$50.00 per Person	US$500.00
Lake Nabugabo Expedition	Average ten tourists	US$100.00 per Person	US$1000.00
		Total per day	US$2800.00
		Total per year	US$1,022,000.00

5.4. EACOP risks to touristic attractions in Greater Masaka

The EACOP is set to pass through four of the nine districts that comprise the Greater Masaka sub-region. These districts include Lwengo, Sembabule, Kyotera and Rakai (Petroleum Authority of Uganda, 2025). The tourism potential of these districts were assessed by this brief.
Ways in which the tourism potential of the districts could be affected by the EACOP was also assessed as can be seen below.

5.4.1. EACOP risks to SAMUKA Ramsar wetland

The EACOP is set to pass through four rivers - Kibale/Bukora, Kisoma, Kasemugiri, and Jemakunya- that are part of the Sango Bay-Musambwa Island-Kagera Wetland System (SAMUKA) Ramsar Wetland System (AFIEGO, 2023).

The SAMUKA Ramsar Wetland system spans 55,110 hectares and encompasses two Important Bird Areas: the Sango Bay Complex and Musambwa Islands (Fig. 1). This diverse landscape includes the largest swamp forest in Uganda, papyrus and herbaceous swamps, seasonally flooded grasslands, rocky and sandy shores, and three rocky islets about 3km off the coast of Sango Bay. Positioned at the boundary between East and West African vegetation zones, this ecotone is a hotspot for biodiversity.[1]

Tourism development has occurred on Musambwa Island, while the relatively inaccessible Sango Bay forests remain largely undisturbed. However, with overexploitation of resources and grazing affecting the surrounding landscape, forest reserves have

1 https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1641

become increasingly important for local communities.[2] Worth noting is that the area is vital to local communities, providing fish, medicinal plants, grazing lands, and materials for building and crafting, including luxurious furniture like sofas and mattresses.[3]

The SAMUKA was designated as a Ramsar site due to its unique ecological characteristics and its importance for biodiversity. The SAMUKA Ramsar site was created due to its unique ecological features, including its location at a biogeographical transition zone, its support for threatened species and high biodiversity, its role in supporting waterbird populations, its function as a fish spawning ground, its hydrological values, and its socio-economic importance.[4]

SAMUKA is a unique wetland type, located in the transition zone between East and West African vegetation zones, making it a biogeographical ecotone with a unique complex of natural wetland and swamp forest. The area includes the largest tract of swamp forest in Uganda.

The Sango Bay–Musambwa Island–Kagera Wetland System supports rare, vulnerable, endangered, critically endangered and threatened species, including the African Elephant, a subspecies of the Black and White Colobus Monkey, a subspecies of the Blue Monkey, and the Sitatunga. It also includes threatened bird species like the Blue Swallow, which has more than 75% of its global population wintering in the area, and the Shoebill.

SAMUKA is crucial for maintaining the biological diversity of the region, as it is rich in plant and animal species. The area has a high diversity of vascular plants, with 331 species recorded.

It is home to rare and endemic forest swamp tree species, some of which are relics of the Albertine Rift area. The site contains a variety of fauna, including 65 mammal species and 417 bird species, including large congregations of migratory birds. The site has a high number of fish species, including endemic ones. It also includes a variety of invertebrate species such as butterflies and dragonflies, with some endemic species.

The wetland system regularly supports over 20,000 waterbirds, with an average of 54,409 wetland birds recorded between 1999 and 2004. It also supports a significant percentage (average of 16.5%) of the population of Grey-headed Gulls.

The site is an important spawning ground and nursery for fish, both within the wetland and in Lake Victoria. The shoreline vegetation provides ideal breeding areas for Nile tilapia and refuge for fry and juveniles of various fish species.

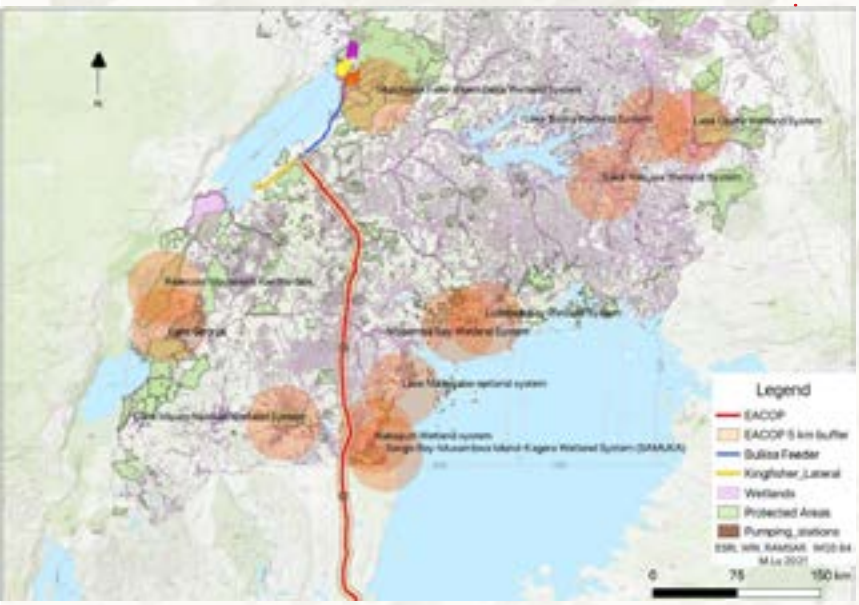
The risks faced by the SAMUKA Ramsar Wetland system due to the EACOP project involve habitat loss, destruction, degradation and fragmentation and biodiversity loss, with upstream and downstream effects. Oil spills or leaks from the pipeline can contaminate the water and the soil, killing aquatic and terrestrial species, with catastrophic effects on the wetland ecosystem, as the capacity of the wetland to filter water, support aquatic life and maintain healthy vegetation can be severely compromised. Oil contamination of groundwater and surface water with oil could lead to long-term pollution with large scale effects on biodiversity and people.

One of the most contentious issues in the construction of the pipeline is the default method of construction that was chosen by the project developers, the open cut method. Per NCEA, the open cut construction method has the potential for more impacts than the horizontal directional drilling (HDD) method.

2 https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1641
3 https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1641
4 https://rsis.ramsar.org/RISapp/files/RISrep/UG1641RIS.pdf

Some of these impacts include stream sedimentation and turbidity, impacting downstream water quality, flora, fauna and their habitats (Hansen and Betcher, 2021).

Further, the planned monitoring of the EACOP, including at river crossings, every five years and using the pigging method, instead of cathodic protection for corrosion control purposes is considered insufficient (NCEA, 2020). This puts river and wetlands such as Kibale/Bukora, Kisoma, Kasemugiri, and Jemakunya that are crossed by the EACOP at risk of oil pollution among other impacts. This could cause biodiversity loss and affect scenic views, thereby negatively impacting the ecotourism potential of islands such as Musambwa.



Kibale/Bukora River (bottom), which is part of the SAMUKA Ramsar Wetland System (top map), has been affected by the EACOP
Source of map: M. Lu, 2021.

5.4.2. EACOP risks to River Katonga

The EACOP ESIA states that the Katonga River forms the boundary between the districts of Gomba to the north and Sembabule to the south. The river would flow in a westerly direction from Lake Victoria in the east to Lake George in the west. The pipeline would pass under the Katonga River in a north to south direction, through superficial deposits of gravelly loam with likely alluvium on the northern and southern banks of the river (EACOP ESIA; Fig. 2). However, other sources of information state that the greater part of the Katonga flows eastwards to Lake Victoria.[5]

Katonga River and its associated wetlands are classed as natural habitat in the EACOP ESIA.[6] Katonga River has flora and fauna species of high conservation importance, and it sustains endemic, range-restricted and freshwater migratory species, such as the fish species Haplochromis katonga (IUCN data deficient) and the hippopotamus, IUCN vulnerable, as well as other Uganda vulnerable species.

The presence of freshwater migratory, endemic and/or range-restricted species is also likely in the Katonga River.

Rivers are sensitive to change and disturbance. The river channel in Katonga River is formed of uncohesive materials,

5 https://web.archive.org/web/20100717033047/http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/wetlands/pdf/Africa/Region2/UGANDA.pdf

6 As defined by IFC Performance Standard 6 and the accompanying Guidance Note/ As defined by PS6 and the accompanying Guidance Note

such as sand and silt, with thick continuous floodplain swamp vegetation. Sediment transportation due to vegetation loss and substrate removal is therefore expected to occur due to EACOP construction and operation. The flora and fauna associated with the Katonga River are likely to be sensitive to factors such as water quality, suspended sediment and changes in flow.

Indeed, Katonga river, as well as its associated rangeland and wetlands in floodplains, were considered to have a high sensitivity to contamination in the EACOP ESIA. The modeled potential extent of an oil spill with substantial impact if the EACOP were to rupture is 3km of the Katonga River (ESIA, Table I1.3-16).

Further, the proposed open-cut method for river crossings affected by the EACOP has the potential to cause the loss of riparian and swamp habitat, disruption of the natural environment through modifying water quality, water flow and the freshwater habitat.

In addition, the construction would create a physical barrier which inhibits the natural movement of species using the watercourse, with further disturbance caused by noise, vibration and activity by people and machinery.
Worth noting as well is the fact that Bigo bya Mugenyi is located on the banks of River Katonga, which is set to be affected by the EACOP.

Map showing a section of the EACOP in red and the crossing of Katonga river, which connects Lake George with Lake Victoria Source: EACOP ESIA

5.4.3. Climate change risks vis-à-vis tourism

Further, the full value chain carbon emissions of the EACOP are projected at over 379 million metrics tonnes over a 25-year period (Climate Accountability Institute, 2022). Carbon emissions are a driver of climate change which has been implicated in contributing to biodiversity loss, including in Uganda (AFIEGO, 2024). Moreover, climate change negatively impacts agriculture with impacts such as floods, mudslides, landslides, prolonged dry weather conditions and others negatively impacting agriculture and infrastructure. The climate risks of the EACOP thereby present a risk to eco- and agro-tourism in the Greater Masaka sub-region, not to mention all regions of Uganda. The destruction of infrastructure as was seen when River Katonga burst its banks in 2023 and cut off sections of the Greater Masaka region (New Vision, 2023) are also a threat to tourism.

5.4.4. Other risks

In addition, about one-third of the pipeline (460km) will run along the western and southern perimeter of Lake Victoria (Inclusive Development International, 2022), Africa's largest lake, directly supporting the livelihoods of more than 40 million people in the region. The lake is home to islands

such as Musambwa and Ssesse that have greater tourism potential, with more visitors expected to visit the islands upon better marketing (MTWA, 2014) among others. As earlier discussed, the pipeline risks to water bodies include pollution from oil spills among others. Oil spills can negatively impact biodiversity thereby affecting eco-tourism.

The cultural impacts arising from oil-induced population influx among others could also negatively impact the cultural tourism potential of the Greater Masaka sub-region. Oil sector construction activities could also mar scenic views, thereby hurting tourism.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This research brief identifies potential tourism sites in the Greater Masaka region, including St. Charles Lwanga Birinzi Site, Bigo bya Mugenyi, Musambwa Island, Lake Nabugabo, Lukunyu Island, Lake Birinzi, and Ssese Islands, among others. These sites offer diverse cultural, historical, and natural attractions that cater to various interests and preferences. The region's rich cultural heritage, scenic beauty, and unique features make it an ideal destination for tourists seeking an authentic experience. With proper development, marketing, and management, these sites have the potential to contribute significantly to the local economy, create employment opportunities, promote cultural preservation, and contribute to environmental conservation.
To harness the tourism potential of the Greater Masaka sub-region, the following should be done:

Recommendations

i. The Ministry of Tourism Wildlife and Antiquities through her Agency Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) should prioritise development of the sites discussed in this brief including Bigo Bya Mugenyi, SAMUKA, Lukuyu island, and others as tourism destinations. While seeking to promote tourism, conservation of these sites should be prioritised.

ii. The UTB should also develop and promote culinary/ gastronomy activities as well as cultural tourism in the region.

iii. UTB should also work with the private sector to profile existing accommodation facilities and promote minimum standards.

iv. Further, the Catholic Church in Uganda should market St. Charles Lwanga's home as well as site visits to Our Lady of Sorrows, Kitovu Cathedral to attract more pilgrims to Masaka.

v. UTB and development partners should conduct a wider scoping exercise to identify more sites with tourism potential in Greater Masaka.

vi. Finally, working alongside TotalEnergies and CNOOC, the government of Uganda should devise an alternative route for EACOP to avoid the pipeline affecting ecosensitive areas with tourism potential.

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INCLUSIVE GREEN ECONOMY NETWORK-EAST AFRICA

Kampala, Uganda
Website: www.igen-ea.org
Email: contact@igen-ea.org