

Assessment of Ecotourism Potentials in the North West Region of Cameroon

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To cite this article:

Fonge Beatrice Ambo, Nfor Frederick, Tabrey Hans Tata, Enoh Christly Anyi-Nju. Assessment of Ecotourism Potentials in the North West Region of Cameroon. *Earth Sciences*. Vol. 11, No. 5, 2022, pp. 250-259. doi: 10.11648/j.earth.20221105.12

Received: August 9, 2022; **Accepted:** August 26, 2022; **Published:** September 8, 2022

Abstract: The tourism industry is playing an increasingly important role in the global economy, contributing 5 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 30 percent of service exports and 235 million jobs. In the world today, ecotourism has become a significant component in the lexicon of international development policy and assistance, referred to routinely as a potential new source of income for any area with a scenic landscape, whether natural or cultural. The North West Region of Cameroon is one of the most spectacular ecotourism destinations in the country and can be termed as an ecotourism cornucopia because of her richness in floral and faunal biodiversity, juxtaposed with beautiful undulating terrain, mountain, hills, caves, forests, water falls, lakes as well as an amazing cultural diversity. The main objective of this study was to identify and survey the ecotourism potentials in the North West Region of Cameroon. Data were obtained mostly through field survey though the use of questionnaires and focus group discussions were also employed. Also, secondary data sources were made use of. The data were analysed using SPSS Version 21 statistical package to produce simple charts for the interpretation of each of the sections in the questionnaires answered. The Microsoft Excel package was used to produce simple modules. The topographic map was drawn using Map Info. Pictures were edited and organized using Canon picture softwares, Zoombrowser and Photorecord respectively. Results revealed that the North West Region is endowed with 112 physical ecotourism potentials with Mezam Division having the highest number (33) followed by Bui Division with 19 ecotourism potentials while Menchum Division has the least with 8 ecotourism potentials. It is also within the North West Region that we find Mount Oku, the famous Oku Montane Forest which is a biodiversity hotspot covering some 20,000 hectares, offering floristic richness, endemic birds, and unique monkeys. Most of these potentials have not been developed largely due to inaccessibility constraints. Results also revealed that there are 10 active cultural festivals that occur in the region every year. Meanwhile, there has been the continuous development of the cultural potentials in all the divisions in the region because culture is part and parcel of a 'Grassfield man'. This study therefore recommends a win win partnership between the government and the local councils through the new law on decentralization so as to ensure the constructions and maintenance of efficient road network to these ecotourism sites.

Keywords: Assessment, Ecotourism, Ecotourism Potentials, Biodiversity, North West Region

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is playing an increasingly important role in the global economy, contributing 5 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 30 percent of service exports and

235 million jobs. Indeed, each year, approximately 1 billion people travel internationally and it is now known that over the past half century, tourism has become one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world [1, 2]. By 2030, consumer spending on tourism, hospitality and recreation in Africa is projected to reach about \$261.77

billion, \$137.87 billion more than in 2015. From 1998 to 2015, service exports, including “industries without smokestacks” such as tourism, have grown about six times faster than merchandise exports in Africa [3, 2]. Around the world, ecotourism which is a niche of tourism has been hailed as a panacea: a way to fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, instill environmental awareness and a social conscience in the travel industry, satisfy and educate the discriminating tourist, and, some claim, build world peace [4]. Ecotourism is often claimed to be the most rapidly expanding sector of the tourism industry [5, 6] but when its growth is measured, ecotourism is often lumped together with nature, wildlife, and adventure tourism.

The development of ecotourism potentials consist of ecological and cultural potentials. The sustainable exploitation and management of these resources are paramount. Hence, Ezeala [7] stated that:

‘We should be able to harness the potentials of our forests in the development of ecotourism and scientific research rather than revel in illegal logging and wildlife trafficking’

It should be noted that ecotourism has become a significant component in the lexicon of international development policy and assistance, referred to routinely as a potential new source of income for any area with a scenic landscape, whether natural or cultural. The United Nations International Year of Ecotourism in 2002 was itself an indicator of the importance that multilateral agencies attach to ecotourism [8]. According to McCool and Mosey [9], the development and promotion of ecotourism is internationally recognized. The United Nations through Agenda 21 of 1992 and the World Conservation Strategy shared this view that countries and communities endowed with natural attractions should develop such attractions and advertise them for easy consumption by ecotourists. Only when planned properly, however, can ecotourism integrate conservation of biodiversity with socio- economic development of local communities through poverty alleviation [10].

According to Mowforth and Munt [11], in recent years, the image of the Third World in western minds has emerged in part from that of cataclysmic crisis of famine and starvation, deprivation and war to represent the opportunity for an exciting ‘new style’ holiday. Offering the attraction of environmental beauty and ecological and cultural diversity, travel to many Third World countries has been promoted, especially among the middle classes, as an opportunity for adventurous, holidays and as a means of preserving fragile, exotic and threatened landscapes and providing a culturally enhancing encounter with the host communities. At the same time, some Third World governments have seized upon this new-found interest and have promoted tourism as an opportunity to earn much-needed foreign exchange – another attempt to break from the confines of ‘under-development’. The significance of ecotourism potentials in environmental and cultural preservation have been recognized internationally

through the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) [2002] (which had as *raison d’etre* the setting up of a preliminary agenda and a set of recommendations for the development of ecotourism activities in the context of sustainable development), the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development [2002] and a number of related international processes and events. Ecotourism remains a key area of the work of the UNWTO and it is also one of the priorities in its Special Programs for Sub-Saharan Africa [1, 12].

In Cameroon for example, and considering the country’s vast latitudinal coverage of 11°, a varied relief made up of plains, plateau and mountains, a wide-range of climate and vegetation as well as a heterogeneous fauna and cultural mix, Cameroon is indeed an archetypical (eco) touristic country [13, 14]. With its unusual varied landscape, Cameroon is a pocket version of Africa and a home to a kaleidoscope of ethnic groups with widely differing socio-economic systems [15-17]. This country has long been a touristic destination since from the time of the Carthaginians who spotted ‘*The Chariots of the gods*’. This fire-spitting mountain now known as Mount Cameroon was the country’s first best-selling (eco) tourism attraction and it is still a marveling structure right up to the present date [15]. But it was not until around the 1970s that tourism in Cameroon started seeing the light of day despite its spectacularly beauty panoramas, scenic splendours and magnificent views and unique wildlife. This country possesses 297 species of mammals, 848 species of birds, 300 species of amphibians, 9000 species of plants, 29 species of primate and 39 swallowtail butterflies. Hence, Cameroon is an ecological heaven [18-20]. Most of Cameroon’s potential wealth thus lies in its natural resource base which is essential for ecotourism development. Cameroon in 2010, received 572,728 visitors thereby making it a touristic destination according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) standards [21]. Hence, according to the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure [21], (eco) tourism has been identified as one of the sectors that can propel Cameroon to its emergence (Vision 2035).

As the world is becoming a global village, (eco) tourists are looking for new attractions and these are well represented in Cameroon at large and in the North West Region in particular [22]. The North West Region of Cameroon is one of the most spectacular ecotourism destinations in the country characterised by gentle undulating hilly savannah, patches of forest, lakes, waterfalls and mountains [23, 24]. This region is also endowed with ecotourism potentials that may go a long way to attract (eco) tourists into the region and ensure sustainable development if proper harnessing and management of these potentials are put in place.

2. The Study Area

The North West Region of Cameroon is located between latitudes 5°40’N and 7°N and longitudes 9°45’E and 11°10’E. Situated at an average altitude of 1550m above sea level it is bounded to the North by the Adamawa Region, to the East by the Western Region, to the West by Nigeria and to the South by the South West Region (Figure 1).

the area from the villagers and other stakeholders. The entire ecotouristic potentials identified were geo-referenced using GPS Garmin Nuvi 205W. Photographs of the ecotouristic potentials were taken using a NikonD80 professional digital camera. All the geo-referenced data were taken to the remote sensing unit of the University of Buea for a geo-reference topographic map for all the ecotourism potentials that were done.

The data were analysed using SPSS Version 21 statistical package to produce simple charts for the interpretation of each of the sections in the questionnaires answered. The Microsoft Excel package was used to produce simple modules. The topographic map was drawn using Map Info. Pictures were edited and organised using Canon picture softwares, Zoombrowser and Photorecord respectively.

4. Results

4.1. Natural Ecotourism Potentials in the North West Region

Ecotourism assets are essentially the main factors that encourage and motivate (eco) tourists in choosing a particular destination. Notwithstanding, it is worth postulating that the

North West Region of Cameroon is a honey-spot for ecotourism owing to the huge ecotourism potentials that the region is endowed with. This Region is endowed with multifarious natural and cultural attractions which if judiciously or efficiently harnessed could make the ecotourism sector in the North West Region of Cameroon a lucrative one. For example, the unique attractions that the region is endowed with include: the second highest mountain in West Africa, Mount Oku which is a home to birds such as the Bannerman's turaco, which is unique to this region. There are also many crater lakes such as Lake Oku, Lake Awing, and Lake Nyos. Figure 2 presents the spatial location of ecotourism potentials in the North West Region. Also in the Region can be found the largest remaining mountain forest, the Kilum-Ijim Forest (in Boyo and Bui Divisions), the Menchum Fall (in Menchum Division), and Abbi Fall (in Momo Division). Other ecotourism potentials in the Region include: lakes, craters, caves, forests reserves, game reserves, landscapes, swamps, wildlife and plants. Culturally, there exist a number of well renowned palaces characterised by attractive artefacts stored in museums such as the Bafut Palace/Museum, the Mankon Palace/Museum, the Babungo Palace/Museum, and the Oku Palace/Museum among others (Figure 2).

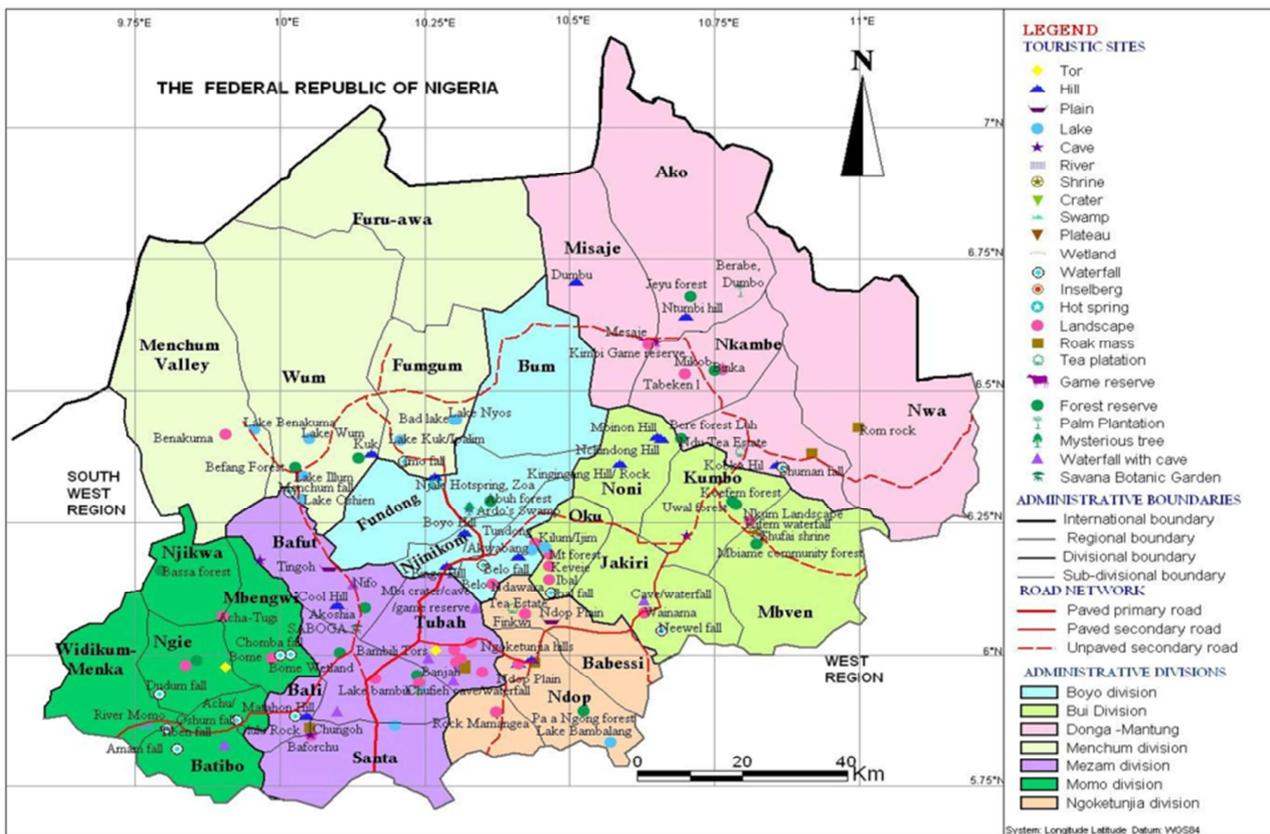


Figure 2. Spatial location of ecotourism potentials in the North West Region.

Mezam Division has the highest sighted ecotourism potentials while Menchum and Ngoketunja Divisions have the lowest potentials. The possible reason for this is that Mezam Division is the most accessible. Ngoketunja Division

is the smallest division (with three sub divisions) though accessible while Menchum although the biggest division in the Region is most inaccessible. Most of the potentials found in the region are lying idle and unexploited. It should be

noted that majority of the lakes found in the North West Region are in Menchum (Table 4). With respect to waterfalls, Momo Division has the majority (Table 3). With the North West being predominantly grassland, patches of forest are found mostly in Mankon (Mezam), Mbiame and Kovifen (Bui), Luh and Ako (Donga-Mantung), Kilum-Ijim (Boyo/Bui). The cave found in Kom has many bats and annually, bats are caught and used to feed the entire village.

This is done sustainably because some of the bats are released before the catch is made. Other caves having bats include Abi Fall cave in Mbengwi and Mboateng in Babanki-Tungoh. Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 presents the distribution of identified ecotourism potentials per division in the North West Region of Cameroon and Figure 3 presents some of the fascinating ecotourism potentials that the region is endowed with.

Table 1. The Distribution of Identified Ecotourism Potentials in Mezam Division.

S/N	Name of Site	Location	Sub-Division	Description	Accessibility
1	Lake Awing	Awing village	Santa	Beautiful crater lake	A
2	Sabga-landscapes	Sabga	Tubah	Beautiful landscapes	A
5	Bamenda station landscapes	Station hill	Bamenda 1	Beautiful landscape	V. A
6	Lake Bambili	Bambili	Tubah	Beautiful Crater Lake	Poorly accessible
7	Babanki-Tungoh crater	Bambili	Tubah	Beautiful crater	Poorly accessible
10	Akoshia Forest	Bafut	Bafut	Rich flora	Partially accessible
13	Banjah forest	Banjah	Bamenda 3	Rich fauna	A
14	Ngo Nfana rock, cave, waterfall	Bambili	Tubah	Beautiful site	A
15	Bambili tors (Ngomushong mobuh)	Bambili	Tubah	Beautiful tors	A
17	Mboateng cave/waterfall	Babanki-Tungoh	Tubah	Habitat for Bats	Partially accessible
19	Chomba cave/waterfall	Chomba	Bamenda 2	Beautiful waterfall	Partially accessible
21	Matahon	Bali	Bali	Beautiful hill	A
22	Bali water supply (waterfall)	Mbanmade d	Bali	Beautiful waterfall	A
24	Chungoh cave	Mantum	Bali	Beautiful cave	Partially accessible
28	Ngubonya rock	Babanki- Tungoh	Tubah	Beautiful rock	A
30	Bamenda station Waterfall	Station hill	Bamenda 1	Beautiful landscape	V. A
33	Mbewi Forest	Bafut	Bafut	Rich flora	Partially accessible

Table 2. The Distribution of Identified Ecotourism Potentials in Ngoketunja Division.

No	Name of Site	Location	Sub-Division	Description	Accessibility
1	Bambalang Lake	Bambalang	Ndop	Huge lake like an Island with waves	A
2	Rock Mamangieh	Bafanji	Balikumbat	Beautiful landscape	A
3	Ngoketunja hill	Ndop	Ndop	Beautiful landscape	A
4	Ndop Plain	Ndop	Ndop	Beautiful landscape	VA
9	Finkwi landscape	Babungo	Babessi	Beautiful landscape	A
10	Bambalang Sacred forest	Bambalang	Ndop	Contains a shrine	A

Table 3. The Distribution of Identified Ecotourism Potentials in Momo Division.

S/N	Name of Site	Location	Sub-Division	Description	Accessibility
1	Abbi Falls,	Mbengwi	Mbengwi	Rapid falls	A
2	Oshum Waterfalls	Oshum	Batibo	Rapid falls	A
3	Eka waterfalls	Eka village	Widikun/Menka	Fast falls	N. A
4	Womenga cave & waterfall	Guzang	Batibo	Beautiful falls over a cave	N. A
5	Bassa waterfall	Bassa	Njikwa	Rapid falls	N. A
6	Dudum waterfall	Tezeh	Ngie	Very heavy during the rainy season	N. A
7	Guneku cave	Guneku	Mbengwi	Close to 4m ² inside	NA
8	Amam waterfall	Ewoh village	Batibo	Very heavy falls during the ainy season	NA
9	Bassa forest	Bassa	Njikwa	Rich wildlife	NA
10	River Momo	Widikum	Widikum/Men ka	Rich in fishes	A
11	Ngwekwung tors	Acha-Tugi	Mbengwi	Beautiful Tors	A
15	Tiben Waterfall	Tiben	Batibo	Beautiful fall	A

Table 4. The Distribution of Identified Ecotourism Potentials in Menchum Division.

No	Name of Site	Location	Sub-Division	Description	Accessibility
1	Menchum Fall	Befang	Menchum Valley	Rapid Heavy & attractive Falls	Poorly accessible
2	Lake Nyos	Nyos Village	Fungom	Crater Lake	Very poor accessibility
3	Lake Illum	Befang	Menchum Valley	Crater lake	NA
4	Lake Wum	Wum Town	Wum Central	Wild Life Pro-ected Species	A
5	Lake Aguli	Aguli	Fungom	Very fascinating	NA
6	Benakuma lake	Benakuma	Menchum Valley	Very fascinating	NA
7	Lake Kuk	Bafmeng	Fungom	Very fascinating	N. A
8	Imo Waterfall	Bafmeng	Fungom	Very fascinating	N. A.

Table 5. The Distribution of Identified Ecotourism Potentials in Boyo Division.

S/N	Name of site	Location	Sub-division	Description	Accessibility
1	Mbi crater, cave & game reserve	Ndawara	Belo	Characterised by a number of wildlife species	Very poor accessibility
5	Kimbi game reserve	Kimbi village	Bum	Characterised by a number of wildlife species	Poor accessibility
6	Bingo hill	Bingo	Belo	Beautiful hill	A
8	Tundong/Akuabang hills	Aboh	Belo	Beautiful hills	A
9	Ijim community forest	Ijim	Belo	Plantlife sanctuary	Poor accessibility
10	Belo waterfall	Belo	Belo	Heavy during rainy season	A
11	Kom cave	Fundong	Fundong	Habitat for very large quantity of bats	Partially accessible
13	Fundong waterfall	Fundong Town	Fundong	Heavy during rainy season	A

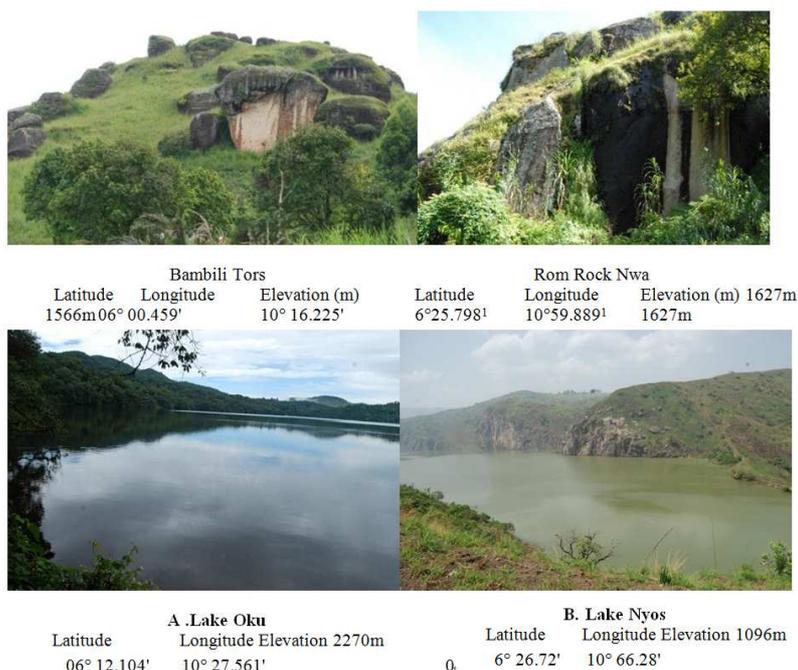
Table 6. The Distribution of Identified Ecotourism Potentials in Bui Division.

S/N	Name of Site	Location	Sub-Division	Description	Accessibility
1	Kilum mountain forest project	Kilum	Oku	Rich fauna, unique vegetation varied bird species	A
2	Lake Oku	Oku	Oku	Crater Lake on a hill	N. A
3	Mbiame Community Forest	Mbiame	Mbvem	Virgin forest	A
6	Neewel landscape/water fall	Jakiri	Jakiri	Beautiful landscape and waterfall	Partially accessible
7	Jakiri cave/waterfall	SODEPA	Jakiri	Beautiful waterfall over a cave	A
10	Iselberg	Mbiame	Mbven	Beautiful scenery	A
11	Kifem waterfall	Kifem	Nkum	Beautiful waterfall	A
13	Bamkika-ay waterfall	Kumbo	Kumbo	Beautiful scenery	Partially accessible
14	Ibal waterfall/scenery	Ibal	Oku	Beautiful scenery	A
15	Ibal landscape	Ibal	Oku	Beautiful scenery	Partially accessible
17	Mbinon rock	Mbinon	Noni	Beautiful scenery	A
19	Nchindong rock	Nchindong	Nkum	Beautiful scenery	A

Table 7. The Distribution of Identified Ecotourism Potentials in Donga/Mantung Division.

S/N	Name of Site	Location	Sub- Division	Description	Accessibility
1	Romrock 1	Nwa	Nwa	Fascinating	A
5	Mbaw Plains	Nkambe	Nkambe	Beautiful landscape	A
6	Binka Landscapes	Binka	Nkambe	Undulating Hills with tors	A
7	Mbot Landscapes	Mbot	Nkambe	Undulating Hills and Valleys	A
8	Dumbo hill	Dumbu	Misaje	Beautiful landscape	A
9	Misaje landscape	Mesaje	Misaje	Undulating Hills with tors	A
10	Binka Landscapes	Nimiye	Nkambe	Beautiful landscape	A
11	Luh Forest	Luh	Ndu	Characterised by flora and fauna	A
12	Mikob Forest	Nkambe	Nkambe	Characterised by flora and fauna	NA
14	Jeyu Forest	Jeyu	Ako	Characterised by flora and fauna	A

N. B: A= Accessible, Dev.= Developed, VA= Very Accessible, NA = Not Accessible.



4.3. Diversity of Ecotourism Potentials Per Division and Their Relative Proportions

Field survey revealed that Mezam Division is the highest in diversity and number of ecotourism potentials while Menchum Division is the lowest in diversity (Figure 4).

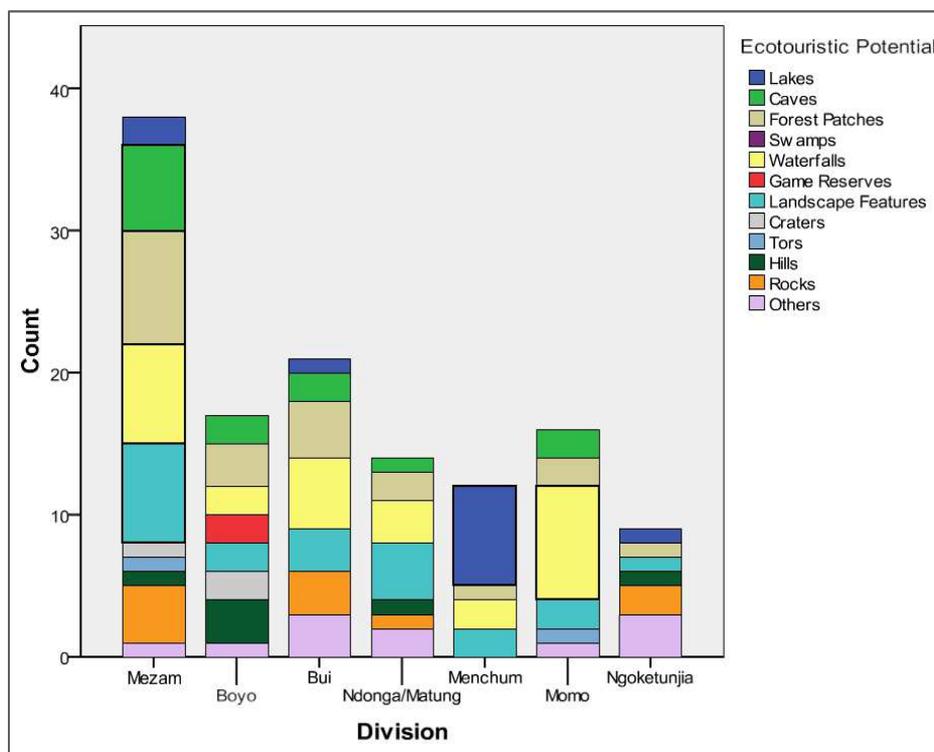


Figure 4. The diversity of Ecotourism Potentials per Division and their relative proportions.

Ngoketunjia Division is lowest in the number of Ecotourism Potentials and Boyo Division is the only Division with game reserve. All divisions have landscapes while only Boyo and Mezam have craters. Lakes are found in four divisions that is Menchum, Mezam, Bui and Ngoketunjia with Menchum recording the highest number and closely followed by Mezam. Waterfalls are recorded in all Divisions with Momo Division recording the highest number, followed by Mezam.

4.4. Lodging Facilities in the North West Region

Regarding the lodging facilities in the North West Region, 133 hotel establishments were identified in 2016, among which are 8 hotels ranked as 3 stars. The accommodation

capacity of the hotel establishments in the North West Region showed a saw-tooth evolution between 2012 and 2016, with a continuous increase since 2014. Arrivals and nights spent by non-residents and residents in accommodation establishments since 2011 has also been on an increase. At first, there was an uninterrupted decrease from 57, 108 arrivals in 2011 to 40, 801 arrivals in 2013, and then later, there was a strong increase from 40, 801 arrivals in 2013 to 47, 039 arrivals in 2015, which then dropped to 43, 819 arrivals in 2016 [18]. Table 9 presents the accommodation capacities (rooms and beds) by division in the North West Region. The raison d’etre of this is to update (eco) tourists on the availability of hotel facilities per division in the region.

Table 9. Accommodation capacities (rooms and beds) per division in the North West Region.

Division	Year									
	2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
	Rooms	Beds								
Mezam	1612	1652	1713	1092	1210	1713	1673	1687	1812	1826
Donga-Mantung	56	58	67	61	71	72	92	92	92	92
Boyo	50	51	50	50	50	50	52	52	52	52
Bui	143	143	100	170	150	163	267	292	287	287
Momo	39	40	40	44	40	44	59	59	59	59
Ngoketunjia	56	89	87	80	80	80	101	101	101	101
Menchum	50	54	61	60	63	64	149	165	149	165
Total	2006	2087	2118	1557	1664	2186	2393	2448	2552	2607

Source: National Institute of Statistics, NIS (2018).

Some examples of hotels in the North West Region include: Ayaba and Penn Pan Hotel in Bamenda (Mezam Division); Morning Star Hotel and Lake Nyos Hotel in Wum (Mechum Division); Plain Hotel Ndop and Ndop Guest House (Ngoketunjia Division); Trans Afrique Hotel Jakiri and Tourist Home Hotel in Kumbo (Bui division); Jomer Inn Nkambe and Millenium Star Hotel Nkambe (Donga Mantung Division); Abi Fall Inn in Mbengwi and Shalom Hotel Mbengwi (Momo division).

5. Discussion

Ndenecho [27] stated that game reserves and other protected areas are potential areas for the development of ecotourism because of their biodiversity, landscapes and cultural heritage of local or indigenous people. Citing the case of Kimbi Game Reserve, he noted that this area is characterised by ecotourism potential in terms of fauna, flora and bird species which has attracted the interest of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (ICUN), The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP). It has been identified as one of the most at risk terrestrial ecological regions. Also Balgah and Nfor (10) noted that Kupe Muanenguba Division of the South West Region of Cameroon is endowed with rich ecotourism potentials in which many of these potentials are still lying unharnessed meanwhile others are not even known to all and sundry. They cited examples such as the Muanenguba montane forest with its rich biodiversity, the Kupe and Muaneguba Mountains, the enigmatic twin Muanenguba Lakes, the Ndebsi hot spring, the Bayang Mbo Wild Life Sanctuary, cultural mix among others.

Based on the findings of the study and the views of Ndenecho [27] and Balgah and Nfor (10) it can be said that the underlying idea on ecotourism development in any destination like the North West Region is based on the availability of natural and cultural potentials. In as much as those in Kupe Muanenguba Division are not known to the inhabitants of the region, the inhabitants of the North West Region are aware of these potentials and look up to the government to harness them so that they can also benefit. The development of these potentials therefore, is a prerequisite for attracting many ecotourists in the Region but yet care must be taken in order to ensure their sustainability (especially with the natural potentials) given that most of these potentials are classified as endangered while others are endemic.

Article 1 of the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO), *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* stresses that 'culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized

and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations [28, 29]. Cameroon is a nation with great cultural diversity which has added an impetus to the ecotourism sector at a micro level like that found in the North West Region of Cameroon. Many (eco) tourists who visit the North West Region do so during the dry season. This is the period when most of the socio-cultural festivals such as Lela of Bali Nyonga, Abinefor in Bafut, Ndong in Awing and Meta Cultural and Development Association (MECUDA) in Meta and Nikia in Babungo do take place (Table 8). During this period, each village displays their cultural know-how to the admiration of (eco) tourists as village works of arts and crafts are also being displayed for sale as souvenirs for the (eco) tourists.

6. Conclusion

The North West Region of Cameroon is rich in natural and cultural patrimonies with abundant biodiversity resources and cultural assets for social benefits and economic development. It is worth recalling that ecological and cultural values are sustainably managed when they are well understood and appreciated so as to foster conservation and hence generate benefits to man. As such this will necessitate a methodical management of ecotourism destinations, by minimizing the impacts from ecotourism activities while offering benefits to the local communities and conservation. From this study, a large proportion of people in the North West Region were ignorant about ecotourism and its potentials indicating that there is a relationship between the individual's educational background and ecotourism. The region has a great potential for ecotourism because of their natural and cultural endowments. The present study has therefore tried to develop an integrated approach for ecotourism development by the identification and location of ecotourism sites.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Acknowledgements

The authors do appreciate the all respondents who provided primary and secondary data that were very useful in conducting this study. The authors thank the remote sensing unit of the University of Buea for geo-referencing the topographic map for all the ecotourism potentials in the North West Region of Cameroon. They also thank the National Institute of Statistics, Regional Branch in Bamenda for the making provision for the necessary secondary data for this study.

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