
LOCAL COMMUNITY INTERPRETATION OF HERITAGE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY-BASED HERITAGE TOURISM IN MOUNT KENYA REGION, KENYA

^{*1}Festus Maina Mburu, ²Dr. Alice Ondigi & ³Dr. Shem Maingi

¹Student, Department of Tourism Management, Kenyatta University

^{2,3}Department of Tourism Management, Kenyatta University

*Email of corresponding author: festus.mburu7@gmail.com

Publication Date: September 2025

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study was to determine the local community interpretation of heritage and its influence on sustainability of community-based heritage tourism in Mount Kenya Region, Kenya.

Research Methodology: A pragmatic research philosophy and an ex-post facto research design were adopted for this study. The target population for the study was 3,527,669 residents around Mount Kenya National Park. A sample of 384 residents was selected and questionnaires were distributed. Data were collected using questionnaires and interview guides. Both inferential and descriptive statistical analyses were conducted, including regression and correlation analyses.

Findings: The study found that 84% of respondents demonstrated knowledge of community-based tourism, while 58.7% valued Mount Kenya as heritage that should be protected. Community forums existed in 54% of the areas surveyed, and 47% reported presence of community-based organizations. The study established that local interpretation directly influences heritage sustainability through community understanding and appreciation of heritage resources.

Conclusion: The study concluded that local community interpretation substantially affects heritage tourism sustainability in Mount Kenya region. Communities with better heritage understanding demonstrate stronger conservation behaviours and more effective tourism practices. Consequently, the study recommends strengthening community interpretation programs to enhance sustainable heritage tourism.

Recommendation: The study recommends that communities in Mount Kenya region should strengthen heritage interpretation capabilities through education programs, community forums, and organizational support. Future research in other heritage sites in Kenya is suggested to facilitate the comparability of findings.

Keywords: *Heritage Interpretation, Community-Based Tourism, Cultural Knowledge, Sustainable Tourism, Mount Kenya*

INTRODUCTION

Local community heritage interpretation remains a critical component for achieving sustainable tourism development in protected areas worldwide (Sarm, 2013). Heritage interpretation involves activities designed to give relational meaning to heritage attractions through descriptive media that connects visitors to the reality of the heritage site. According to Shalaginova (2012), interpretation serves as an informal education process that engages tourists by providing reliable heritage information to enhance visitor experiences while promoting heritage conservation. In Mount Kenya region, where local communities coexist with a UNESCO World Heritage site, effective heritage interpretation becomes particularly crucial for sustainable tourism development.

The concept of heritage interpretation encompasses multiple dimensions that influence sustainability outcomes. Heritage perception facilitates understanding heritage value and implications, enabling communities to reconstruct cultural meaning and develop a sense of place (Han-yin Huang, 2011). Communities that can effectively interpret their heritage develop stronger connections to conservation efforts and participate more actively in tourism development processes. However, research indicates a persistent tension between academic perspectives and local community interpretation practices, highlighting the need for inclusive approaches that respect indigenous knowledge systems.

Heritage sustainability depends fundamentally on local community engagement and understanding. When heritage sites are respected, managed, and used by local communities, they demonstrate higher chances of preservation and restoration (Emerton, 2000). Local community perception shapes interpretation behaviours and conservation outcomes, making community knowledge and understanding essential components of sustainable heritage tourism development. This study explored how local communities in Mount Kenya region interpret their heritage and examines the relationship between interpretation capabilities and sustainable tourism outcomes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The role of local communities in heritage interpretation has evolved significantly, yet their impact on sustainable tourism development remains inadequately understood (Han-yin Huang, 2011). While extensive research exists on heritage interpretation by professional guides and tourism operators, the literature demonstrates a critical gap regarding local community interpretation capabilities and their influence on sustainability outcomes. Previous studies have

predominantly focused on top-down approaches to heritage management, leaving unexplored the ground-level dynamics of community interpretation and its effects on conservation behaviors and tourism practices.

In Mount Kenya region, despite the presence of a UNESCO World Heritage site, there exists limited understanding of how local communities interpret their heritage and how this interpretation influences sustainable tourism development. Current research has failed to adequately examine the relationship between community interpretation capacity and actual conservation outcomes in the region (Mbogo et al., 2021). The industry has largely overlooked the potential of community interpretation as a tool for achieving sustainable heritage tourism goals.

The development of effective heritage conservation strategies requires comprehensive understanding of how local interpretation practices affect sustainability outcomes. Without such understanding, heritage management authorities risk implementing policies that fail to leverage community knowledge and engagement, potentially undermining long-term conservation goals. This research gap necessitates investigation into local community interpretation of heritage and its specific influence on sustainable tourism practices in Mount Kenya region.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To determine the local community interpretation of heritage and its influence on sustainability of community-based heritage tourism in Mount Kenya Region, Kenya.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Heritage Interpretation Theory serves as the anchoring framework for understanding local community interpretation of heritage and its connection to sustainable tourism development. Developed by Freeman Tilden (1957) and further elaborated by Uzzell (2015), Heritage Interpretation Theory posits that effective interpretation creates understanding, which leads to appreciation, and ultimately results in protection of heritage resources. This theoretical progression, known as the Tilden Dictum, establishes a clear causal relationship between interpretation capacity and conservation outcomes, making it particularly relevant for examining how community interpretation influences sustainability in Mount Kenya region.

The theory emphasizes that interpretation is not merely information transfer but rather an educational process that creates emotional connections between people and places. According

to Shalaginova (2012), successful interpretation requires understanding three critical elements: the interpreter, the visitor, and the heritage site in context. This triangular relationship demonstrates how local communities, as primary interpreters, must possess both heritage knowledge and understanding of visitor motivations to create meaningful experiences. In Mount Kenya context, where communities serve as cultural bridges between traditional knowledge and tourism experiences, this theoretical framework helps explain how interpretation effectiveness influences sustainable practices.

Heritage Interpretation Theory further suggests that communities possessing strong interpretation capabilities develop enhanced stewardship behaviours, directly contributing to heritage conservation. The theory aligns with Orbe (1998) Muted Group Theory, which explains how traditionally marginalized groups can gain voice through effective communication. In Mount Kenya, local communities have historically been excluded from heritage management decisions, but their growing interpretation capacity provides platforms for meaningful participation in sustainable tourism development. This theoretical integration demonstrates how interpretation serves as both a conservation tool and an empowerment mechanism for local communities.

The theory also incorporates elements of Experiential Learning Theory, emphasizing that interpretation should be experiential rather than didactic. According to Biesen (2016), effective heritage interpretation connects visitors emotionally to sites while providing local communities with frameworks for articulating heritage values. This experiential approach ensures that interpretation creates lasting impressions conducive to conservation behaviours among both tourists and community members. The theory's emphasis on multi-sensory engagement and personal connection aligns with traditional storytelling methods used by Mount Kenya communities, suggesting that effective interpretation builds upon existing cultural practices while introducing contemporary tourism perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage interpretation involves creating meaningful connections between visitors and heritage sites through various communication methods. According to ICOMOS (2011), interpretation encompasses destination tours, publications, educational activities, community programs, and training initiatives designed to promote heritage awareness. Shalaginova (2012) identifies three critical elements: the interpreter, the visitor, and the heritage site in context. This framework

demonstrates how successful interpretation requires understanding both heritage content and visitor motivations.

Local community interpretation serves multiple functions essential for sustainable tourism development. Heritage interpretation theory, grounded in the Tilden dictum, establishes that understanding leads to appreciation, which ultimately results in protection (Uzzell, 2015). This progression becomes particularly relevant in Mount Kenya, where communities must balance traditional knowledge preservation with contemporary tourism demands. Jamal (2016) indicates that community-based heritage tourism provides opportunities for cultural value maintenance while generating economic benefits that support conservation efforts.

The effectiveness of heritage interpretation depends significantly on community capacity and organizational support. Community forums play a pivotal role in developing interpretation skills and sharing cultural knowledge among residents. According to Woodley (2003), the success of community participation in heritage contexts requires understanding stakeholder roles and ensuring equitable benefit distribution. In Mount Kenya region, various community organizations facilitate interpretation activities, though coordination and resource availability remain challenging.

Sarm (2013) on heritage interpretation at Angkor Wat Temple revealed that effective interpretation contributes significantly to conservation goals and sustainable tourism practices. Similarly, research in Bolivia's La Yunga region demonstrated that heritage sites appreciated and managed by local communities achieve higher protection levels (Santilli, 2009). These findings underscore the importance of developing local interpretation capacity for long-term heritage sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed descriptive survey research design to examine local community interpretation of heritage and its relationship to sustainable tourism in Mount Kenya region. The target population comprised 3,527,669 residents living around Mount Kenya National Park across five counties: Nyeri, Meru, Kirinyaga, Embu, and Tharaka-Nithi. Using Fisher's formula, a sample size of 384 respondents was determined. Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires for community members and interview guides for park management staff.

Simple random sampling techniques were utilized to select respondents within each county cluster. Primary data was collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed to local community members engaged in tourism activities. The questionnaires covered topics including knowledge of community-based tourism, heritage value perceptions, community forum participation, and organizational involvement. Secondary data supplemented primary findings through review of county reports and tourism statistics.

Data analysis employed both descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics provided insights into community awareness levels and interpretation practices, while correlation analysis examined relationships between interpretation variables and sustainability indicators. Content analysis was applied to qualitative interview responses to identify themes related to heritage interpretation effectiveness. The study achieved an 85.5% response rate, with 317 completed questionnaires returned.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings revealed significant insights regarding local community interpretation of heritage in Mount Kenya region. Community understanding of heritage tourism demonstrated strong foundations for interpretation activities. When asked about knowledge of community-based tourism, 266 respondents representing 84% indicated familiarity with the concept. These respondents accurately defined community-based tourism as local people inviting, hosting, and guiding tourists for mutual benefit, demonstrating conceptual understanding necessary for effective heritage interpretation.

Table 1: Knowledge on Community Based Tourism

Knowledgeable	F	%
Yes	266	84
No	51	16
Total	317	100%

Heritage valuation among community members showed positive trends essential for interpretation effectiveness. The study found that 186 respondents, representing 58.7% of participants, believed Mount Kenya heritage "matters and should be protected." This finding aligns with heritage perception theory, which suggests that communities valuing their heritage develop stronger motivations for conservation (Han-yin Huang, 2011). However, concern

emerged from responses indicating that 21.8% believed heritage had lost value, while 6.9% viewed it as bothersome, highlighting interpretation challenges requiring attention.

Table 2: Value of Mt. Kenya Heritage

Value	F	%
It matters and should be protected	186	58.7
Has no value to you and future generations	20	6.3
It has lost its value so it should not be protected	69	21.8
It is a bother since it does not help you	22	6.9
I don't Know anything about it	20	6.3
Total	317	100%

Community forum availability significantly influenced interpretation capacity development. Results indicated that 171 respondents, constituting 54% of participants, confirmed community forum presence in their areas. These forums provided essential platforms for heritage education and cultural knowledge exchange. As noted by ICOMOS (2011), such forums facilitate understanding of heritage values through organized education and training activities. The forums focused on teaching conservation strategies, discussing heritage protection, and developing shared understanding among community members.

Table 3: Community Forums

Community Forums	F	%
Yes	171	54
No	146	46
Total	317	100%

Organizational support for heritage interpretation demonstrated mixed outcomes. The research revealed that 227 respondents, representing 47% of participants, acknowledged community-based organization presence in their areas. Primary organizational objectives included supporting culture (43.5%), social mobilization (24.7%), and creating awareness through training (22.4%). Notable organizations included Mount Kenya guide associations and community conservancies engaged in sustainable tourism practices. However, the relatively

low percentage of organizations focusing on sustainable development (3.4%) indicated room for improvement in linking interpretation to sustainability goals.

Table 4: Community Based Organizations

Availability	F	%
Yes	227	47
No	150	43
Total	317	100%

Table 5: Goals of the Community Based Organizations

Objectives	F	%
Support Culture	138	43.5
Social Mobilization	78	24.7
Create Awareness/Training	71	22.4
Generate Income	19	5.9
Promote Sustainable Development	11	3.4
Total	317	100%

Park management interviews corroborated community responses regarding interpretation practices. Management officials confirmed evaluating local tour guide interpretation capabilities to ensure accurate heritage communication. The park actively engaged in community forums to promote heritage awareness and sustainable practices. Management recognized local community contributions to sustainability through various activities including forest conservation, wildlife protection, and cultural preservation programs. These findings validate the Heritage Interpretation Theory's assertion that effective interpretation leads to conservation behaviours (Uzzell, 2015). The relationship between interpretation and sustainability manifested through multiple pathways. Communities demonstrating strong interpretation capabilities participated more actively in conservation activities. Research participants indicated using heritage interpretation to educate tourists about cultural significance while promoting environmental protection. This approach created economic opportunities through tour guiding and hospitality services while ensuring heritage

preservation. Terzic (2014) indicating that heritage connected to community understanding achieves higher protection levels.

CONCLUSION

Local community interpretation of heritage fundamentally shapes sustainable tourism development in Mount Kenya region. The study established that communities possessing strong heritage knowledge and interpretation capabilities demonstrate greater commitment to conservation and sustainable practices. Community members understanding their heritage value become effective advocates for protection while engaging productively in tourism development. The presence of community forums and organizations provides essential infrastructure for interpretation capacity building. However, challenges remain in strengthening interpretation effectiveness. Knowledge gaps among certain community segments and limited organizational focus on sustainability require attention. The research confirms that heritage interpretation creates pathways from understanding to appreciation to protection, validating the theoretical framework guiding this study. Mount Kenya's future as a sustainable tourism destination depends significantly on continued investment in community interpretation capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Communities in Mount Kenya region should strengthen heritage interpretation programs through systematic education initiatives targeting knowledge gaps identified in the research. Existing community forums require expansion and resource support to reach underserved areas, ensuring broader participation in interpretation activities. Community-based organizations should refocus objectives to explicitly include sustainable development goals alongside cultural preservation, creating stronger links between interpretation and conservation outcomes.

Park management and county governments should increase collaboration with community interpreters, providing training resources and certification programs that enhance guide capabilities. Digital technologies offer opportunities for expanding interpretation reach through mobile applications and virtual platforms, complementing traditional methods. Integration of traditional knowledge systems with contemporary interpretation techniques ensures cultural authenticity while meeting modern tourist expectations.

Educational institutions should incorporate heritage interpretation modules into tourism curricula, developing future generation capacity for sustainable tourism management. Research institutions should continue monitoring interpretation effectiveness, providing data-driven insights for program improvement. Long-term sustainability requires consistent investment in community interpretation capacity, recognizing local communities as essential stakeholders in heritage tourism development.

REFERENCES

- Biesen, I. (2016). *Experiential learning in heritage interpretation: Emotional engagement and visitor meaning-making*. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 22(6), 490–502.
- Emerton, L. (2000). *The nature of benefits and the benefits of nature: Why wildlife conservation has not economically benefited communities in Africa*. African Wildlife Foundation.
- Goodwin, H., & Santilli, R. (2009). *Community-based tourism: A success?* ICRT Occasional Paper 11.
- Han-yin Huang. (2011). *Heritage, local communities and the safeguarding of 'Spirit of Place' in Taiwan*. In P. Davis & H. Huang (Eds.), *Heritage and Identity: Engagement and Demission in the Contemporary World* (pp. 123–135). Routledge.
- ICOMOS. (2011). *ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites*. Retrieved from <https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Publications/HR2011-13final.pdf>
- Jamal, T. (2016). An integrated approach to sustainable community-based tourism. *Sustainability*, 8(5), 475. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su8050475>
- Orbe, M. P. (1998). *Constructing co-cultural theory: An explication of culture, power, and communication*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483345321>
- Santilli, R. (2009). *Community-based tourism: A success?* ICRT Occasional Paper 11.
- Shalaginova, I. (2012). *Understanding heritage: A constructivist approach to heritage interpretation as a mechanism for understanding heritage sites* (Doctoral dissertation, Brandenburg University of Technology).
- Shalaginova, I. (2012). *Understanding heritage: A constructivist approach to heritage interpretation as a mechanism for understanding heritage sites* (Doctoral dissertation, Brandenburg University of Technology).
- Terzić, A., Jovičić, A., & Simeunović-Bajić, N. (2014). Community role in heritage management and sustainable tourism development: Case study of the Danube region in Serbia. *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, 10(42), 183–200.
- Tilden, F. (1957). *Interpreting our heritage*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Uzzell, D. (2015). Creating place identity through heritage interpretation. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(1), 1–10.
- Uzzell, D. (2015). Creating place identity through heritage interpretation. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(1), 1–10.

Woodley, A. (2003). *Heritage management and community participation: The case of the World Heritage site of Angkor, Cambodia*. In N. Agnew & J. Bridgland (Eds.), *Of the Past, for the Future: Integrating Archaeology and Conservation* (pp. 82–87). Getty Conservation Institute.