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SCIENCE DIPLOMACY FOR GORILLA ECOTOURISM

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Ecotourism is a style of tourism that has seen steady growth since the 1970s, when the concept of “sustainable development” came into existence. It has drawn attention as an enterprise aimed at blending tourism, environmental protection and rural development. While there have been some high-profile successes around the globe, ecotourism has not been free from criticisms. Major complaints include that it is based on value monism, that the demand for economic efficiency is transforming it into mass tourism with increasing burdens on the environment, and that it is not contributing to local development.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Gorilla tourism, in which I have been engaged, has faced similar problems. The popularity of gorillas has been sustained by the image of King Kong created by Europeans in the 19th century. As for Rwanda's mountain gorillas, more than 70 percent of the wild population has already been habituated for human observation. Tourism is the top generator of foreign currency in Rwanda, but it is hard to say that its benefits are properly being returned to local communities. To solve these problems and promote ecotourism in its original form, I think we need a new form of science diplomacy.


With the support of the Japan Science and Technology Agency (JST) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), we launched in 2009 a project titled "Conservation of Biodiversity in Tropical Forests through Sustainable Coexistence between Humans and Wild Animals," in cooperation with the National Center of Scientific Research and Technology (CENAREST) of the Gabonese Republic. Ecotourism is a key means of achieving its objectives. I will explain why this project constitutes an attempt to deal with the problems of ecotourism.

First of all, active engagement by scientists will help create better management programs. So far, the planning of ecotourism has been led by the tourism industry, with scientists merely adding explications. This practice has resulted in putting too much emphasis on economic value and hampering the development of tours tailored to local ecosystems. What should come first is the study and understanding of the local ecosystem, which enable us to identify key plants and animals and consider conditions necessary to maintain the ecosystem. Scientists should select suitable natural resources for eco-tours and consider target visitors and possible observation learning courses based on their findings. After all, ecotourism is an enterprise that allows visitors to savor the tales woven by nature over a long period of time.

The natural environment has been affected by local people, and people have exploited this environment in various ways in their daily lives. The history of nature is a history of human beings. Ecotourism has so far been too focused on natural attractions without due attention to local culture. This is because ecotourism has been driven by a sort of orientalism, a quest for untamed nature

teeming with savage threats now lost in Western civilization. Encouraging greater learning and awareness and introducing Westerners to diverse cultural values is one of the objectives of ecotourism.

The rural community that we are studying has seen its local culture destroyed as a result of colonization and deforestation. The rejection of local traditions, severed ties with nature, and a labor force brought in from outside fundamentally altered village autonomy. Having come through such a period of confusion, villagers are now set again to live in harmony with nature by gathering traditional knowledge in a piecemeal fashion. What we scientists are trying to do is back up their endeavors to revive traditional skills and wisdom and then to create a new culture harmonious with nature.

Japanese science and technology may help make the lives of Africans residing in tropical forest settings sustainable at a low cost. This requires first of all pride among local people in their natural surroundings and traditions. The purpose of our project is to help local people reevaluate their natural surroundings and traditions and create a space where visitors can learn the value of coexistence between nature and human beings together with local people. Having temperate rainforests of its own with ecosystems similar to those of tropical forests and having no history of colonizing Africa, Japan may be able to present a collaborative model different from those offered by Western countries. 

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