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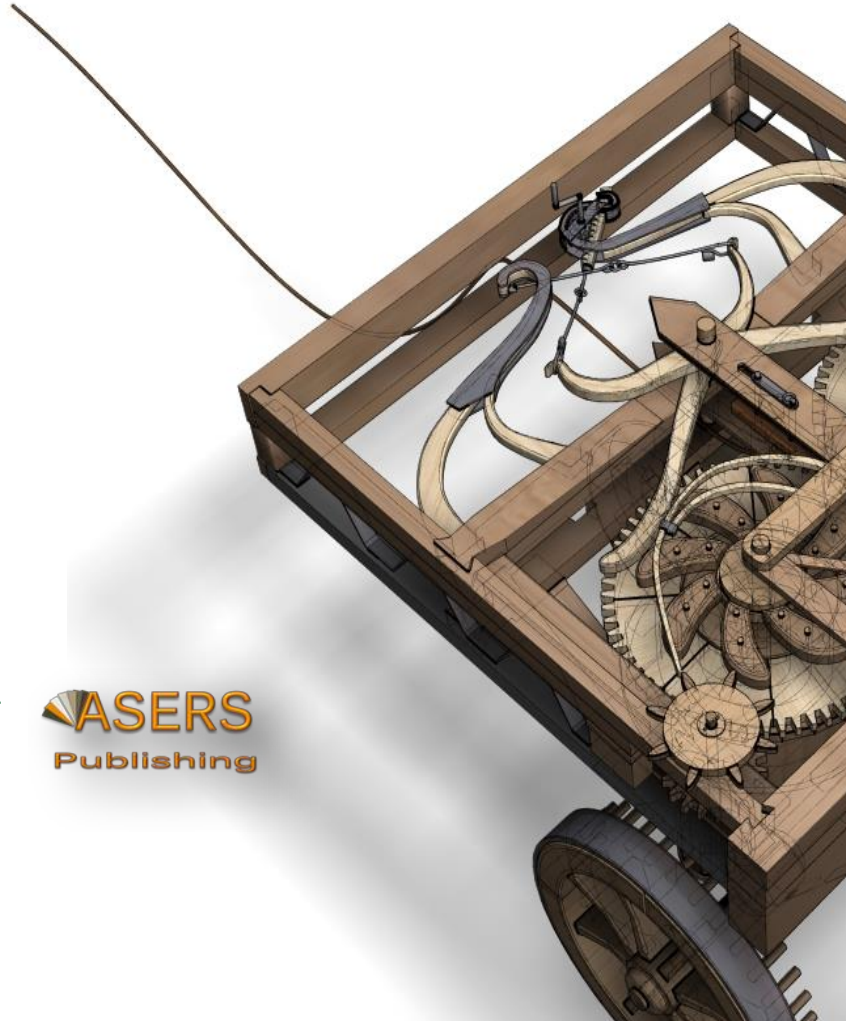


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Winter Issues 2023

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Ecotourism and Outdoor Recreation Development in Harego and Bededo Urban Fringe Protected Areas, Ethiopia: Exploring Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

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Abstract: Ecotourism, outdoor recreation, and protected areas are interlinked and thus, most of the ecotourism and outdoor recreational activities are conducted in protected areas. The study's primary purpose is to describe the opportunities and challenges and pinpoint possible strategies for outdoor recreation and ecotourism development in the urban fringe protected areas of Harego and Bededo protected areas, Ethiopia. The primary data was collected through a qualitative approach, interviews with purposely selected experts and personal observation. From the findings, several opportunities were identified including the availability of other tourist attractions around Harego and Bededo, the geographical position of the sites, the coming newly constructed railway, and the presence of the Kombolcha integrated industrial park. Even though opportunities exist some challenges were also identified. These challenges include the presence of unwanted trash in the natural protected areas, the encroachments of the local community on the protected areas, the planting of non-indigenous trees, unplanned management of protected areas of Harego and Bededo, landslides, and erosion problems. Finally, possible strategies were identified and presented for developing ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the study area.

Keywords: ecotourism; outdoor recreation; urban fringe; protected area.

JEL Classification: Z32; Q23; L83; R11.

Introduction

The Ecotourism Society (ES) defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that promotes conservation and improves local people's well-being (Almeida-Gomes *et al.* 2022). Ecotourism, outdoor recreation, and protected areas are interlinked and thus, most of the ecotourism and outdoor recreational activities are conducted in protected areas (Nigatu and Tegegne 2021). As one form of nature-based tourism, ecotourism, and outdoor recreation are fast-growing industries (Simon *et al.* 2007). By its nature, ecotourism relies on natural resources as well as environmental education, and conservation of local culture and natural

environment, ensuring economic benefit for the local and sustainable development of the areas (Mondino *et al.* 2019).

The broadest definition of outdoor recreation is all recreational activities undertaken for pleasure that generally involve intentional physical exertion and occur in nature-based environments outdoors (Highfill and Smith-Nelson 2018). Using natural landscapes as a recreational centre has increased in the recent decade, and it is expected to continue to increase. In the 21st century of cities and urbanization, the extension of city s and cities brings multifaceted impacts not only on biodiversity management but also on the social, political, and economic life of the people (Hornsten 2000); people are less connected to natural areas. Population growth and regional shifts in demographics and expansion, as well as socioeconomic trends, affect who engages in outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism (Winter *et al.* 2020). Winter *et al.* (2020) recognize the positive benefits of outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism/ecotourism. Visiting natural settings and being outdoors is widely recognized for improving human health and well-being, connecting people with their natural and cultural heritage, generating revenues for conservation, contributing to local economies, fostering local or indigenous identity, and developing a conservation consciousness. Outdoor recreation and ecotourism development are necessary around the protected area. Due to this reason, tremendous growth has been shown in urban fringe areas to regain a connection with nature and with wild landscapes and forested areas to participate in different outdoor recreation and ecotourism activities (Nigatu and Tegegne 2021). Eventually, the reasons include physical exercise, release from city life, fresh air, getting closer to nature, enjoyment of the scenery, strenuous hiking into wild mountainous areas, etc. While for most people it is probably a combination of reasons (Bell 2008).

Although some research has been conducted regarding protected areas' role in the conservation of biodiversity, ecotourism development potential, ecological preservation, biodiversity threats, and ecotourism as a sustainable livelihood option in Ethiopia (Asmamaw and Verma 2013; Chane and Yohannes 2014; Deribew *et al.* 2022; Eshetu 2014; Fetene *et al.* 2012; Mellaku *et al.* 2022), still the practice of using protected areas for ecotourism and outdoor recreation development is very limited and under-researched. Local communities' participation and willingness to engage in protected area management is also another key factor in the long-term conservation of natural resources and ecotourism development (Asmamaw and Verma 2013, Nigatu 2017). In this regard, previous studies in the area showed that local communities have a positive attitude towards ecotourism and outdoor recreation development (Nigatu and Tegegne 2021). More specifically, Dessie, the present study area is situated at the foot of a mountain, which makes it an ideal location for outdoor recreation and ecotourism. On the other hand, population and rural-to-city migration is too high in the surrounding city s (Dessie, Kobolecha, and other small city s like Haik and Sulela), and urban expansion is increasing due to overpopulation. Hence, the people living in the city s and visitors want fresh air from the surrounding protected areas to escape urban traffic. Therefore, the present study addressed ecotourism and outdoor recreation development opportunities, challenges, and possible development strategies in Bededo and Harego urban fringe protected areas.

The study has significance for the local community, governmental and non-governmental organizations in different ways. For instance, the findings would help to utilize as input for the administrators, culture, and tourism offices, NGOs, and volunteers concerned with tourism development, promote the site for visitors and conservationists, and help to develop a tourism and recreational management plan ecotourism and outdoor recreation development in the sites. Moreover, the study can contribute to the existing literature knowledge on ecotourism and outdoor recreation development agendas.

The study addressed the following objectives.

- To explore the existing opportunities in Harego and Bededo protected areas for ecotourism and outdoor recreational development.
- To assess the threats to Harego and Bededo urban fringe protected areas
- To pinpoint the possible ways and planning strategies for urban fringe protected areas of Harego and Bededo to become ecotourism and outdoor recreational areas.

1. Literature Review

Many countries, institutions and organizations have adopted the definition of protected area given by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and its categorization (Kabil *et al.* 2022; Williamson 2006). According to IUCN, a protected area is a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated, and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values (Lausche 2011). IUCN also classifies protected areas ranging from strict nature reserves, wilderness area, national park, natural monument or feature, habitat/species management area,

protected landscape/seascape to protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources (Miller *et al.* 2023). Many protected areas such as national parks, wilderness area, nature reserves and protected landscapes received high level of recreational use predominantly areas near the large human population. Protected areas also play a dual role of conserving natural resources while providing access for outdoor recreation that are enjoyed by millions of people worldwide (Larson 2019; Monz *et al.* 2020). It has been promoted for its environmental conservation benefits, opportunities for outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism, and associated economic opportunities (Miller *et al.* 2023). For instance, the information posted by American outdoor industry association (2017) noted that outdoor recreation activities around protected areas are very prominent and the visits are recently estimated to account about 8 billion resulting \$ 600 billion visitor spending annually at global level. As literature witnessed, the reason behind is that nature-based recreation is vital for human health and for building connections with nature that can help to foster pro-environmental behaviors. Protected areas can promote sustainable development of local communities and help alleviate poverty, primarily through economic opportunities provided by recreation and ecotourism. In the same manner, outdoor recreation fosters connections with nature and sense of place and has been linked to increased pro-environmental behaviors, improve ecological conditions where visitors are engaged in stewardship experiences and support for conservation organizations (Larson 2019; Winter *et al.* 2020).

Protected areas are biodiversity conservation centers and major tourism assets for a nation, particularly for developing countries like Ethiopia through providing sustainable benefit to the local community while supporting for maintenance and rehabilitation of the protected areas themselves (Fetene *et al.* 2012). As a result, Ethiopia has huge potentials for ecotourism development with more than 139 protected areas, cover about 17.01% of the country's land area (UNEP-WCMC, 2023). The researchers tried to summarize the categories and figures of protected area in Ethiopia with the following table.

Table 1. The categories of protected area of IUCN and Ethiopia

IUCN Protected area categories'		Ethiopian protected area categories'		Number
Ia	Strict Nature Reserve	NA		
Ib	Wilderness Area	Wildlife reserve		6
II	National Park	National Park		24
III	Natural Monument or Feature	NA		
IV	Habitat/Species Management Area	Wildlife sanctuary		6
		Open hunting area		3
		Controlled hunting area		39
V	Protected Landscape/ Seascape	National forest priority area		57
VI	Protected area with sustainable use of natural resources	International designation	UNESCO-MAB biosphere reserve	3
			world heritage sites	1

Source: UNEP-WCMC (2023).

There are numerous opportunities for ecotourism in protected areas (Rana *et al.* 2010) and now a day, it becomes the most interesting topic to the nature lover and policy maker throughout the world due to various reasons; economic benefits (Azmaiparashvili 2017; Fetene *et al.* 2012; Kabil *et al.* 2022), livelihood option (Eshetu 2014), maintaining sustainability (Saidmamatov *et al.* 2020; Trisic *et al.* 2023), biodiversity conservation (Bekele *et al.* 2021; Asmamaw and Verma 2013; Bell *et al.* 2007) and helps to re-examine different strategies for the development of specific forms of tourism (Thao and Bakucz 2022). Even though many organizations and scholars tried to define ecotourism in different ways, Baromey (2019), summarized as the travel to fragile and pristine areas, usually protected, with the objective of causing low impact and at a low scale. Relatively, it is a new concept in tourism, which was originally sparked off by the idea of making harmonious co-existence with nature, as people are more and more looking to connect with nature while minimizing their impact on the environment. As a form of nature-based tourism, it is a conservation tool heavily connected to protected areas

that support and raising awareness of the many important values of protected areas including ecological, cultural, sacred, spiritual, aesthetic, recreational and economic values (Asmamaw and Verma 2013; Miller *et al.* 2023).

As a conservation and economic development advocacy, ecotourism in developing countries particularly in Africa is a major industry. For instance, Kenya and Tanzania derived more than 80 % of their GDP from ecotourism (Fetene *et al.* 2012). The spectrum of ecotourism passes nature-based, natural resources conservation, educational, economic, sociocultural well-being, and sustainable development components (Deribew *et al.* 2022). The presence of natural resources found to be a key contribution to ecotourism development in both high and low-income countries. In this regard, Ethiopia is also a country endowed with the vast array of ecotourism resources (protected areas, parks, natural bridge, dense forests, cave, waterfalls, endemic birds, mammals, and hot springs associated historical resources) and has indispensable opportunities to get its share from the industry (Ashefo, 2018; Bekele *et al.* 2021; Deribew *et al.* 2022).

The other important activity associated with protected areas is outdoor recreation (Bell *et al.* 2007). Outdoor recreation refers to activities that people undertake out of doors in places where they can access nature (Bell *et al.* 2007) and describes what we do, why we do it, and what we gain from our nature tourism experiences (Miller *et al.* 2023). It provides opportunities to engage in recreational activities ranging from passive activates to active doings including learning about natural systems and develop attachments to places that contribute to positive spillover effects (Trišić 2023). More importantly, it enables people to regain lost energy and to derive a sense of joy, refreshment, and satisfaction which can heal physical and mental fatigue and strain (Winter *et al.* 2020). Outdoor recreation is mostly performed in protected areas, while the significance of performing it around urban fringe areas is two folds. Urban Fringe, a landscape interface between city and country or an area that situates between urban and rural dynamic and swiftly changing area (Tali and Nusrath 2014), is an ideal place for outdoor recreation since the urban people want to escape from urban hassle and reconnect with nature. Because of its complex nature of explaining outdoor recreation practice, it has diverse activities to be involved. For instance, Henley Centre Head light Vision (2005) identified recreational activities including; being outdoor (like watching wildlife and picnicking), creative activities (like art and photographic work), health or relaxation (like jogging), utility journey (like safe routs to school), informal game or play (like sledging), high adrenaline non-competitive activity (like canoeing and mountain biking), commercially run activities (like pigeon racing and shooting), studying the environment (like geological surveys and field studies), educational activities (like school trips and expeditions), conservation volunteering (like picking up litter), and sustainable journey to the outdoor (like walking and cycling).

Despite the enormous importance of protected areas and ecotourism as an economic activity, the negative impact that tourism may have on these areas must not be overlooked (Kabil *et al.* 2022). Historically, ecotourism and recreation mostly have been concentrated in only some parts of protected areas, but expanding and changing due to increasing demand, and new technologies that increase access to and within protected areas (Monz *et al.* 2020). Consequently, many ecotourism destinations faced major challenges for ecotourism development including the clash between ecotourism development and conservation practices, the conventional and unsustainable practices of tourism (Hakim 2017), impact on local infrastructure and facilities, create competition for scarce resources, unwelcome marketing of indigenous products and traditions, influx of nonlocal workers, business owners, and amenity migrants (Winter *et al.* 2020), habitat alteration, and noise (Miller *et al.* 2017). Our lands, rivers, and seas are being impacted by dramatic changes which affect the management of resources and the development of tourism. In different parts of Ethiopia, unsustainable tourism business practices create pressure on the natural resources. For example, Deribew *et al.* (2022) notified that the northeastern Ethiopia particularly Raya areas subsistence agriculture put pressure on the natural resources. Inadequate sustainable financing and other environmental pressures associated with population growth (Aseres and Sira, 2021), undefined demarcation of sanctuaries, illegal killing of wildlife, pouching, human wildlife conflict, unsustainable use of natural resources and exploitation (Chane and Yohannes 2014; Fentaw and Jatni 2017) were among the threats of protected areas in Ethiopia.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in South Wollo Zone, Amhara Regional State. South Wollo Zone is one of the Zones found in Amhara region and endowed with different historical, cultural, and natural attractions which make the tourists entertained, amazed and create breath taking feeling. To list some of the tourism resources of the zone; Dessie Museum, Niguse Mikael complex in Dessie, battle field and historic site of Mekedela Amba, Boru Meda historic site, historic site of Yisma Niguse, Jema Neguse Mosque, Tedibabe Mariyam and its environs, Tenta St.

Mikael church, Gishen Debre Kirebe Monastery, Lake Aredibo and Haik, Borena Sayint Worhimen National park, Wolqa Abay Tasabi Park, Yegof mountain, Harego and bededo protected forests and Tossa Mountain and many other unexplored and untapped tourism resources are found (south Wollo culture and tourism department, 2019). Our study was focused on one of the near protected areas of Bededo and Harego. The two sites are found near Dessie city. Harego is found in between Dessie and Kombolcha city in the Southeast direction of Dessie within 20 kilometers. Bededo is also found in the north direction of Dessie and South direction of Haik and Sulula town. The protected forests covered the mountainous areas surrounding Dessie and nearby small towns of Sulula, Bededo, Qorke and Jeme.

2.2 Study Design

The objective of this study was assessment of opportunities, challenges, and prospects of Bededo and Harego protected forests for ecotourism and outdoor recreation. To address the main objective of this study the researchers followed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative data allows the researchers to gain detailed perspectives from the experts and communities involved in ecotourism and outdoor recreation. By using qualitative data collection tools, the researchers are able to identify the specific opportunities and challenges that arise within the local context of Harego and Bededo Urban Fringe Protected Areas. Qualitative data gives the researchers valuable insights into emerging trends and prospects of ecotourism and outdoor recreation development in the study area. The researchers engaged with stakeholders through qualitative methods to uncover innovative ideas, identify potential opportunities, and assess the feasibility of new initiatives. This information informs policy and decision-making processes related to sustainable development and conservation efforts in the areas (Saunders *et al.* 2007).

2.3 Data Type and Data Collection Techniques

For this study the researchers used both secondary and primary data. The secondary sources of data were collected from published and unpublished sources. Literatures that were found in the form of magazines and brochures from the Zonal and Woreda level were also incorporated. On the other hand, primary data was collected through key informants' interviews and observation.

Interview: To extract basic and important data from different experts, researchers conducted interviews. Semi structured interview questions were prepared, and interview conducted with key informants because semi structured interview is semi-structured explanatory and descriptive approach. It was conducted with 26 experts from South Wollo Zone culture and tourism department experts, Zone agriculture and environment conservation experts, Qalu Woreda culture and tourism office experts, Amhara Forest and Wildlife enterprise Kombolcha branch office experts, Tehuledere Woreda culture and tourism officers, Tehuledere woreda agriculture and environment conservation officers, rural Kebele leaders and selected local administrators, farmer who have an adjust land area with the protected areas, and Dessie city culture and tourism officer in order to understand the public use of the protected areas and to understand their view towards the management and conservation as well as the future development of the sites as an ecotourism and outdoor recreation site. Threats and opportunities and the type of ecotourism and outdoor activities more suitable in the study sites were also identified.

Observation: The researchers took observation of the sites to identify and triangulate the opportunities, threats and more importantly to suggest possible ecotourism and outdoor recreation developmental strategies with the help of checklists, photographically and note taking. By using observation as a major data collection tool, the researchers gained first-hand understanding of the natural environment, residents, wildlife and human interaction, and the challenges that existed.

2.4 Sampling Techniques

Sampling is a valid alternative when studying the population due to time constraint and impracticability (Saunders *et al.* 2007) in any study. For the effectiveness of this study the researchers select samples from the sample frame. Experts, kebele leaders and farmers who have adjacent land with the protected areas were purposefully selected considering their expertise, knowledge, and concern about the issue under investigated. Thus, a purposive sampling technique was applied to study this research. Using purposive sampling technique for this study allowed the researchers to deliberately select participants who possess the specific knowledge, expertise, or experience relevant to the study. In the case of ecotourism and outdoor recreation development, the researchers incorporated residents, government officials, experts in agriculture office to gather information from key informants who can provide in-depth and meaningful insights. For this study expert's knowledge and local experiences are greatly utilized. Therefore, purposive sampling approach allowed researchers to access

participants who possess expert knowledge or information about the subject matter. This can also support the researchers to gain insights into specific aspects of ecotourism and outdoor recreation development and the experts provided in-depth explanations, share best practices, and offer recommendations based on their expertise, which enhanced the quality and relevance of the study findings. The researcher selected 26 samples from the kebele leaders, experts, and farmers for semi-structured interview purpose.

3. Research Results and Discussion

3.1 Opportunities for Ecotourism and Outdoor Recreation Development

The pursuit of ecotourism and outdoor recreation as catalysts for regional development has been invigorated by a confluence of factors in the Harego and Bededo protected areas. Situated in proximity to Dessie City, Kombolcha City, and Haik Town, these areas are poised to capitalize on their unique attributes, fostering sustainable growth and cultural enrichment. In this lens the researchers discuss the existing opportunities that shape the potential of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in this domain in Harego and Bededo protected areas.

- **The presence of Wollo University and other higher educational institutions nearby:** The presence of higher education in and around the tourism sites benefit a lot and is taken as opportunity for the development of the sites. In this regard, the presence of Wollo University was a great opportunity to develop ecotourism and outdoor recreation in Bededo and Harego protected areas. Different departments of the university primary tourism and hotel management, forestry, natural resources management, geography and environmental studies conduct research and engaged in community outreach programs. Besides Wollo University, Dessie W/ro Sehen Poly technical college, Kombolcha Poly technical college and Haik Poly technical colleges participate in the same issue and are taken as the opportunities to develop ecotourism and outdoor recreation in Harego and Bededo protected areas.

- **Availability of other tourist attractions around Harego and Bededo:** By its nature, tourism is the amalgamation of different tourism resources. Therefore, the presence of other tourism resources around Harego and Bededo protected landscape are significance for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation. These resources are found in Dessie, Kombolcha and Haik areas. In Dessie city a lot of tourism resources are found. These are Mereho historic palace, Dessie Museum, Ayteyf and its complex historical palaces, Wollo Bahil Amba and many other cultural and natural beauties. In addition, Haik town and its surrounding areas with a remarkable Logo Lake are also reflected as the best opportunity for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the study area. These resources are helpful to add value and enhance tourist experiences through eco-cultural tourism practices.

- **Government attentions for the development of tourism in the country:** In the last ten years; the government of Ethiopia has been giving due attention for the development of tourism and worked towards making tourism as one of the primary economic sectors. In the second Growth and Transformation Plan, the government of Ethiopia incorporates tourism as one form of wind of change and encourages tourism related investments. This special consideration of tourism as a driving force of Ethiopian economy directly or indirectly put positive impact on the present study area. In this regard, the government enabling policies and strategies focusing on developing community-based ecotourism development is being strengthened and expanded in South Wollo Zone specifically in Logo Lake. Logo Lake is the fourth site which is going to be developed as a community-based ecotourism site by the government of Ethiopia under 'Dining for Ethiopia' project next to Friendship Park, Koisha and Gorgora. This would create an enabling situation to develop Harego and Bededo protected areas as ecotourism and outdoor recreation hubs.

- **The geographic position of the sites:** Harego and Bededo protected areas are found in nearby Dessie City, Kombolcha city and Haik town. The sites are very suitable for recreational purposes for the urban community because of its proximity to the city and city communities.

- **The availability of land and air transport:** Relatively these sites are found near Dessie- Kombolcha airport and accessible for visitors. The land transportation to reach the sites is relatively very good because these two sites are crossed by asphalt road from Addis Ababa to Woldiya and Mekelle. This is also a blessing for these sites for the future development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation.

- **The coming of newly constructed railway:** The railway connects the capital with the northern extension of Woldia, Mekele, Kombolcha and Awash Hara Gebeya. This railway cross Kombolcha city near the Harego protected landscape. This railway has a clear strategic significance by connecting the North Ethiopia with Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway and with Ethiopian lifeline port of Djibouti. This in turn facilitates the travellers to visit the protected landscapes within the domain. This is not the only blessing; another blessing is after passing a minor railway station it reached the third major railway station in Kombolcha city with two major platforms.

▪ **The Presence of Amhara Regional State Forest Enterprise development office in Kombolcha:** In Ethiopia forestry plays in the setting of sustainable and green development path. To support the forest sector sustainability, regional governments establish and operate regional and local forest enterprise development office. Amhara Regional State also opened an office in Kombolcha to run such tasks in Eastern Amhara. This office supports the development and management of forest resources in the region in general and in East Amhara in particular. Therefore, the presence of the office in Kombolcha city is one of the best opportunities for the development and management of forests for ecotourism and outdoor recreational purposes in a sustainable manner.

▪ **The presence of Kombolcha integrated industrial park:** It is known that; Kombolcha industrial park is one of Ethiopian big project in the ways of its industrial transformation. The presence of this industrial park gives a good opportunity for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in Harego protected area because many foreigners are residing in the city and demand to refresh their mind in the nearby recreational centre.

▪ **The country image as a developing country and the way of its transformation:** After the end of growth and transformation plan I; Ethiopia transformed and working with growth and transformation plan (GTPII) starting from 2015/16-2019/20. In this transformation plan, the Ethiopian government working towards realizing Ethiopia as 'low middle income country by 2025. This national vision gives power for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the protected areas.

3.2 Threats

The rise of difficulties inside the calm expanse of naturally protected areas threatens to destabilize the delicate balance between conservation and human activities. The Harego and Bededo protected area emerges as a focal point in the heart of these landscapes, exemplifying the complicated interplay between environmental preservation and human impact. In this study, the researchers identify and examine the primary obstacles to outdoor recreation and ecotourism growth in the Harego and Bededo urban fringe protected areas.

The presence of unwanted trash in the natural protected areas: Especially this challenge was seen in Harego protected area. Due to the presence of road that cross Harego protected area; many unwanted trashes were dumped in the left and right sides of the road from Dessie and Kombolcha city business operators (majorly Juice houses and vegetable and fruit stores) or even individual household trash.

The encroachments of the local community to the protected areas: - These two areas encountered the threat of urban expansion and encroachments from different direction. One of our informants described the problem.

'I think protected areas are designed for the conservation of nature by benefiting the local...however here in our locality, the population is growing in alarming rate... in order to accommodate the needs of the growing population; we observe that there is an expansion of illegal houses construction at the edge of the forests'.

Planting of non-indigenous trees: - In the current time; planting of non-indigenous trees is very common especially Eucalyptus tree because of its fast growth, easily establishment and maximum yields throughout Ethiopia. But this tree has a negative consequence and conquers the growth of indigenous trees of Ethiopia.

Unplanned management of protected landscapes of Harego and Bededo: Effective and efficient planning is the key issue to success in providing ecotourism and outdoor recreational opportunities. Planning is the process which involves setting wider goals and objectives as well as establishing standards and criteria to achieve them. However, in Harego and Bededo protected areas; there is no planning strategy to conserve, manage and to balance the demand and supply for ecotourism and outdoor recreation activities.

Land slide and erosion problem: Dessie City and its surrounding areas are susceptible to landslide problem, and this is severe around Harego protected area, surrounding Dessie. This problem would be a great threat for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the study area. Due to the presence of Borkena river which crosses Harego conserved landscape a very large erosion occurs from the high place of Harego to the lower valley of Borkena river.

There are some undesirable activities in the sites: In our observation, some undesirable activities are seen in the forest areas especially in Bededo. The first unethical and unwanted threats was few young men's and women take a trip and chew 'Khat' and take substances within the forest. These might be a great headache in the future for the management as well as exacerbate the problem in to organized substance abuse, sexual practice as well as other immoral activities.

3.3 Possible Ways and Strategies for Ecotourism and Outdoor Recreational Areas

The merging of nature and human interaction poses complicated difficulties and opportunities in the field of ecotourism and outdoor recreational areas. This research identifies potential techniques and mechanisms for developing outdoor leisure and ecotourism in special urban periphery protected zones. The practical answers and methods developed by the research participants were referred to as 'grassroot level solutions.' The strategies are discussed and summarized by researchers. These strategies encompass zoning approaches, conservation management plans, awareness creation, marketing and promotion, resource management, continuous monitoring, infrastructure development, safety measures, and community engagement. Each strategy encapsulates a distinct facet of the effort to create a harmonious coexistence between thriving ecosystems and the recreational pursuits of both local communities and wider audiences.

Zoning of the protected forest in different development zones: Zoning is one of the major strategies for the management of the forest as well as for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the natural forests. Conceptually zoning is allocating different areas of the forest for different activities and uses. In our case, the protected areas of Harego and Bededo were not divided for different uses. Therefore, if the concerned stakeholders are committed for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in these areas, it has to be alienated for different sections/purpose with the consultation of the local communities, researchers, and forest expertise as well as tourism professionals.

Prepare conservation management plan for the sites: The observation and key informant interview illustrates that these protected landscapes have no management plan for their sustainability. Because of this, the sites are managed and conserved in traditional and unscientific ways. Conservation management plans have a significant value for the preparedness of the sites for ecotourism and outdoor recreation purposes. The respondents affirmed that without the conservation management plan the sites faced so many challenges such as ownership conflict, control as well as resources exploitation. Therefore, it is an urgent issue to culture, tourism and environment offices in collaboration with the concerned stakeholders to prepare a conservation management plan for the sites sustainability as well as for efficient operation of ecotourism and outdoor recreation.

Awareness creation program to the local: All the interviewees confirmed that; raising the awareness level of local communities about the pros and cons of ecotourism and outdoor recreational activities is the first and foremost steps of capacity building to fully enhance awareness of environmental conservation specially to protect trash dump. The awareness creation program must involve the local officials, local leaders, community residences, business owners and other stakeholders. One of our informants told that:

'For the development of ecotourism/outdoor recreation in these areas, it is a must to consult the local community and other stakeholders on tourism business operation, and nature conservationist. Skill based training must be also given for the officials, locals control of tourism business, management, and governance issues...'

Market and promote the destination for the local community and the wider audiences: Marketing and promotion is used as a significant tool for the conservation of nature and culture as well as for the development of tourism business in the market. Promotional works should be developed to market the resources for the locals as well as for larger audiences. The local communities and the urban dwellers (Dessie and Kombolcha) should be addressed with an effective and efficient marketing work in order to induce understanding of how much the areas are breath taking and attractive for outdoor recreation in their spare time. It is possible to address these portions of the community through leaflets, booklets, direct personal promotion, FAM trips, organized office group tour for familiarization, advertising through television, radio, and other electronic Medias. The larger audience should be also addressed through promotion, leaflets, booklets, public signs, website development, and inclusion of the sites in tourist map and tourist destination areas and many other promotional and marketing tools.

Management of resources, conservation: For the sustainable development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the study area, these efforts are crucial. To ensure sustainability, it is imperative to involve and empower local communities, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards natural resources. Most interview respondents expressed pride in their resources and wanted to showcase them.

The government, particularly the culture and tourism offices, recognizes the vital role of local communities as custodians and guardians of the site's natural resources. The interviewee, an office head, acknowledged the communities living in the adjacent areas as guardians of the resources. As a result, they are leveraging them to provide alternative livelihoods, such as tourism and sustainable agriculture. Communities understand the

importance of resource conservation and have taken steps toward achieving it. This is done through community cooperation and indigenous knowledge development.

This foundation laid by the communities serves as a steppingstone for ecotourism and outdoor recreation. Product development plays a crucial role in this process, aligning with evolving resource interpretation. Effective interpretation of resources is necessary for optimizing ecotourism and outdoor recreation activities, ensuring visitors can fully appreciate and engage with the natural environment. The researchers recommend conducting environmental impact assessments, determining carrying capacity, and developing destination management plans before advancing ecotourism and outdoor recreation to higher levels. Furthermore, conserved forests should prioritize maintaining outdoor recreational activities for the wider community. This approach ensures that ecotourism and outdoor recreation benefits are accessible and enjoyed by a broad range of stakeholders. Overall, the integrated approach of resource management, conservation, and product development, supported by community involvement and appropriate planning, will contribute to the sustainable development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the study area.

Research and continuous monitoring and evaluation of the sites: During our discussions with interviewees, a significant amount of time was dedicated to research on resource inventory, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. This was done in Harego and Bededo protected areas. Thus, the researchers found that there are considerable challenges related to resource inventory, research on ecotourism business models, and monitoring and evaluation most participants believe the area was neglected and lacked proper attention.

Based on the participants' perspectives, the researcher has identified future strategies that can serve as recommendations for the relevant authorities. Firstly, it is imperative that researchers demonstrate their commitment to resource inventory and ecotourism development. Research efforts should concentrate on comprehensive resource inventories, effective management strategies, and business models with relevant policy implications.

The second strategy focuses on continuous monitoring and evaluation of sites. Given the fragility of these conserved forest landscapes and their slow recovery process, considerable labor and financial resources are required. Therefore, local and national governments must establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework at the sites. This framework will ensure the sustainability of the sites and support the development of business operations. By addressing these recommendations, the concerned bodies can work towards overcoming the challenges identified. This will pave the way for effective resource management, successful ecotourism development, and long-term sustainability in the Harego and Bededo protected areas.

Preparing trial route, camping and other recreational facilities works: To promote Harego and Bededo protected areas for ecotourism and outdoor recreational activities it is crucial to establish trial routes, camping sites, and various development and management corridors. The planning, construction, and marking of forest landscape roads and trial routes should consider recreational needs and environmental values. During our interviews, one of our expert informants emphasized the importance of aligning the development of these routes, walking paths, and camping sites with ecological standards. This is because development strategies can negatively impact ecological processes through eco-tourists' footprints and outdoor activity participants.

Recreational facilities are a key requirement for eco-tourists and recreational participants in protected forests. These facilities should include walking routes, seating areas, picnic spots, way markers, information boards, signage, and viewing points, among others. This depends on the characteristics of the forests. However, during our research, researchers found that these facilities were lacking in the Harego and Bededo protected areas. This hindered the development of ecotourism and outdoor leisure activities. In the future, the fulfilment of these facilities will be crucial in determining the progress of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in these forests.

Based on our observations, walking in the forest appears to be the most suitable form of outdoor recreation and ecotourism activity. Therefore, walking paths/routes should be planned to maintain environmental values and optimize visitors' preferences through scientific planning and research. By incorporating these measures, the Harego and Bededo protected areas can enhance their appeal as destinations for ecotourism and outdoor recreational activities. This is while preserving their ecological integrity.

Ensuring safety and security in the forest: Natural and man-made hazards, as well as safety concerns, should be carefully considered and strategically managed. It is essential to identify and eliminate major hazards to create a safe environment for visitors. To enhance safety and security, various measures are necessary. Prohibition signs, warning signs, and other relevant safety and security measures should be installed throughout the site. These signs inform and guide visitors, helping them understand potential risks and adhere to safety guidelines. Furthermore, these measures also contribute to the overall conservation of the environment by promoting responsible behavior among visitors.

The safety and security system should address specific challenges and potential hazards in the forest. This may include provisions for protecting visitors from natural risks such as steep terrain, hazardous flora, and fauna, or adverse weather conditions. Additionally, the system should consider man-made hazards, such as potential conflicts with wildlife, crime prevention, and emergency response protocols. By prioritizing safety and security, visitors can have a positive and enjoyable experience while minimizing accidents or harm. An effective safety and security system safeguards visitors and contributes to the sustainable development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation. This is done by fostering confidence and trust among potential visitors. Collaborative efforts between relevant stakeholders, such as local communities, government agencies, and tourism operators, are crucial for the successful implementation of the safety and security system.

Fulfil human resource needs for the development: To transform the Harego and Bededo protected areas into ecotourism and outdoor recreational sites, one of the key strategies is to ensure the availability of necessary human resources for their development. Based on the input from our respondents, the following human resource requirements have been identified as crucial for the successful development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the future.

1 Firstly, ecotourism or tourism professionals will be essential. These professionals will be responsible for marketing, planning, development, and financial management of the sites to facilitate ecotourism and outdoor recreation businesses. In addition to tourism expertise, professionals in forestry and natural resources management will be required. Forestry professionals play a critical role in forest production, forest management, recreation management, re-planting, re-seeding, wildlife management, and the overall conservation of natural resources. Forest engineers are important for designing and overseeing the construction of lodges, roads, infrastructure systems, and communication networks.

2 Furthermore, expertise in fire management, hydrology, genetics, landscape architecture, ecology, and economics will also be necessary for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the Harego and Bededo protected areas. By ensuring the availability of these diverse professionals, ecotourism and outdoor recreation can be developed from various angles. These experts will contribute their knowledge and skills to enhance the sustainability, management, and overall quality of the sites. This will optimize the visitor experience while safeguarding the natural environment.

3 Collaborative efforts among these professionals, local communities, government agencies, and other stakeholders are crucial for effective and holistic development. By combining their expertise and working in synergy, the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the Harego and Bededo protected areas can be realized. This will lead to both economic benefits and the conservation of natural resources and ecosystems.

Conclusions and Further Research

Ecotourism and outdoor recreation in and around protected areas have become increasingly important in recent years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, many tourism patterns seem to pursue to maximize the use of protected areas in various tourism activities. Consequently, the need for ecotourism and outdoor recreation has encouraged researchers to conduct this research. The study concluded that the areas have favorable opportunities for outdoor recreation and ecotourism development. The presence of Wollo University and other higher educational institutions nearby, the availability of other tourist attractions around Harego and Bededo, government attention for the development of tourism in the country, the geographical position of the sites, the availability of land and air transport, the coming newly constructed railway, the presence of Amhara Regional State forest enterprise development office in Kombolcha, the presence of Kombolcha integrated industrial park are among others. Even though several opportunities have existed in the study area, some threats were also identified like the presence of unwanted trash in the natural protected areas, the encroachments of the local community to the protected areas, planting of non-indigenous trees, unplanned management of protected areas of Harego and Bededo, landslide and erosion problem and there are some undesirable activities in the sites. Finally, the following possible strategies were identified and suggested for developing ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the study area. These are zoning the protected forest in different development zones, Preparing conservation management plans for the sites, Awareness creation programs for the community, Market and Promoting the destination for the local community and the wider audiences resources management, conservation, and product development, training naturalist guide and strong security system, research and continuous monitoring and evaluation of the sites, Preparing trial route, camping and other recreational facilities works, safety, and security system in the forest and fulfill human resource need for the development of ecotourism and outdoor recreation in the areas.

This study provides valuable insights into the opportunities, threats, and prospects of outdoor recreation and ecotourism development in the urban fringe protected areas of Bedebo and Harego in Ethiopia. However, it is important to note that this study is not a fully-fledged empirical study. The visitors' we recommend further research in the following areas: exploring the root causes, societal attitudes, and potential policy measures that can address the challenges effectively, economic impact study of ecotourism and outdoor recreation development in protected areas, the ecological carrying capacity of the protected areas since they are urban fringe areas, they need a great check and balance system of management for its sustainability, undertake surveys and studies to assess the quality of visitor experiences and their satisfaction levels.

From the conclusion the following practical recommendations are drawn.

- The South Wollo zone culture tourism and sports department, in partnership with Wollo University, will develop Harego and Bededo protected areas as community-based ecotourism sites.
- To reduce unwanted trash dumping in the forest areas, the culture and tourism office and environmental bureaus should work in cooperation and control.
- The local authorities should refrain from planting non-indigenous trees in the forests.
- Organized planning should be developed for the conservation and management of the protected areas of Harego and Bededo.
- Dividing the protected forest into different developmental zones for the conservation of natural resources of the sites.
- Awareness creation programs should be given to the local community about ecotourism, outdoor recreation concepts, and conservation of resources.
- Marketing and promotion should also encourage outdoor recreation and ecotourism in the Harego and Bededo protected areas.
- Continuous research, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms should be developed to manage the resources.

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Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Tesfaye Fentaw Nigatu: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Validation, Writing – review and editing.

Molla Nigus Aregaw: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review and editing.

Asnakew Atlug Tegegne: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – review and editing, Visualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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