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## **Abstract**

There is no denying the fact that tourism is the largest industry in the world in terms of earnings and employment generation. Visitor Choice Behavior is the post visit behavior intentions of visitor on future choices. The choices are based on distinctiveness of travel experience which is greatly affected by environmental degradation in destinations. Tour operators play a critical role in promoting sustainable environmental practices in destinations. The purpose of this study was to evaluate stakeholder networks in tour operators' sustainable environmental practices and their influence on visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya. The study was informed by Stakeholder theory approach theory and Rational Choice Theory. The design used was descriptive survey research design. The study population was 176 tour operators registered by Tourism Regulatory Authority, and members of Kenya Association of Tour Operators and have access to Narok county and 397 visitors visiting attractions in Narok County. Questionnaires were issued to visitors and tour operator staff to collect primary data. Interviews schedules were used to get information from high ranking official of tour operators and tourism officials. Data was analysed using statistical package for social science SPSS software version 20.0. The coefficient of tour operators' sustainable environmental practices had a positive and statistically significant effect on visitor choice behavior ( $\beta=.557$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). The coefficient of communities indicated a positive and statistically significant effect on visitor choice behavior ( $\beta=.298$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). The study concludes that there is need for the Kenya Association of Tour Operators to partner with the Ministry of tourism with the aim of educating and sensitizing visitors about the need to protect environment. There is need of periodic sustainable tourism and environmental related seminars and workshops to sensitize both the visitors and tour operators for the need to uphold sustainable environmental practices. There is need for joint participation in the development of sustainable tourism embedded in environment conservation.

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**Keywords:** *Stakeholder networks, Tour operators, Sustainable environmental practices, Visitor choice behavior, Narok County.*

## 1.0 Background to the Study

There is no denying the fact that tourism is the largest industry in the world in terms of earnings and employment generation (UNWTO, 2020). According to Streimikiene, Svagzdiene, Jasinskas and Simanavicius (2021), tourism is one of the most important aspects in the field of travel and tourism. The tourism which is happened for recreational, leisure, business purposes on beach is called beach tourism. Many visitors like to travel in beach for several reasons such watching the wave of the sea, hearing the sound of water, and observing the natural beauty of the sea and like the sea breeze and salt water. Some visitors want see clear blue vision of the sea/ocean. Beach tourism is one of the best types of tourism because it gives high income to the place and it attracts more visitors. Sustainable environmental practices not only conserve the environment, but ensures that the destinations offer unmatched quality and experience to their visitors. It is the only way they can remain competitive and attract more traffic each season, or year round (Saufi, Andilolo, Othman, & Lew, 2016). In the tourism literature, an increasing interest in networks is divisible into two main streams of application. First, networks are understood as a useful framework for analyzing the evolution of business, product development, packaging and opportunities for further development (Hribar, Visković & Bole, 2021). Second, networks are seen as an important conduit for managing public-private relationships and understanding structures of tourism governance (Hribar, Visković & Bole, 2021).

Destination contains a number of key elements that attract visitors and meet their needs upon arrival. The elements of tourism destination can be categorized into: primary (activities, physical settings and social/cultural attributes), secondary (catering and shopping), and additional elements (accessibility and touristic information) (Munyao, 2021). According to Shariffuddin, Azinuddin, Hanafiah and Zain (2022), destinations are composed of many parts: attractions, facilities, infrastructure, transportation and hospitality Buhalis (2020) suggests six important components of a destination, which include: attractions, accessibility, amenities, available packages, activities and ancillary services. Saito & Strehlau (2018), notes that factors determining destination choice made by tourist are perception of the product, reference groups and the travel experience which include feelings during the trip and post behavior intentions. Therefore tour operators' sustainable environmental practices on visitor choice behavior, needs to be assessed in order enhance competitiveness in destinations. A major threat to provision of unique experiences across the globe has been global warming, which has depleted the capacity of destinations to regenerate (Higgins, 2011). Besides, the behavior of tourists at these destinations, such as littering is also a threat to the quality of experience tourists can derive.

Moreover, visitors have various purposes and reasons to travel to a destination and they divide destination into different types, which relate to a geographical location, environment and nature or man-made structures of the tourism destination, In accordance with the main features of attractiveness, classified destinations into several categories: urban, seaside, alpine and rural destinations (Yu & Xu, 2019). In Australia there is a high standard tourism program that awards certification to tour operators that voluntarily implement sustainable environmental practices. There are efforts to conserve the destinations and popularize new ones, such as the gorillas in Rwanda, which is part of the success conservation story (O'Brien, Morris, Marzano, & Dandy, 2017). Ecotourism Kenya disseminates information on sustainable environmental practices and has also partnered with Travel Life to provide avenue to guide tour operators to attain

sustainability in their business (EK, 2020). According to Pan, Rasouli and Timmermans (2021), there are three core stages in a tourism destination choice. The first stage is called the awareness set; the second is a disposing of some of those destinations to form a late consideration or evoked set; and the last destination chosen from those in the late consideration set. Tourists are exposed to the vast amount of information that they have to analyze and, consequently, consumers choose a destination they need.

In Kenya, tour operators are members of specific associations such as: (a) Kenya Association of Tour Operators (KATO), (b) Kenya Association of Hotel-keepers and Caterers (KAHC), and (c) Kenya Association of Travel Agents (KATA). Narok County is a leading tourist destination because of Masai Mara National reserve and other ecosystems such as Mara River, forests and conservancies. Masai Mara National Reserve is fundamental to Kenya's tourism product however the reserve is facing huge threats such as over development which has negative effect on tourist experiences (World Bank, 2010). Saufi, Andilolo, Othman, & Lew (2016) notes that tour operators are in a position to promote environmental sustainability since they maintain contacts with almost all stakeholders. Responsible tourism optimizes the positive impacts tourism has on host communities, generating mutually beneficial social situations, avoiding harming the environment, and providing aid and support to the inhabitants and cultures of the community (Saufi *et al.*, 2016).

The travel industry has changed the way in which people view the world, and tour operators have contributed to the development of isolated areas all across the globe making remote lands accessible to outsiders, empowering communities to represent their cultures, and bringing economic gains to areas that lack resources (Jeyacheya & Hampton, 2020). In recent years, people have become more environmentally conscious. Cars are transitioning to electric power, straws are now made of paper and houses are powered by solar panels. People are making drastic lifestyle changes in hopes of leaving their descendants with a beautiful, thriving Earth for years and years to come. According to Hamid, Isa and Kiumarsi (2021), there is need for research that addresses tourist attitudes, perception and behaviors in relation to tourists' understanding of tour operators' sustainable environmental practices. In this regard, this study examined the extent to which respondents are familiar with tour operators' sustainable environmental practices. There is need for both the private sector and government to cooperate and provide the required resources to support sustainable environmental practices (Hassan, 2012). The greater appreciation of the role of sustainable environmental tour operation practices in the future development of the country is important.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Personal safety during the trip is the top motivational attribute in attracting tourists to visit a destination, and destinations considered to be unsafe by tourists may not be considered to be suitable holiday choices and it is clear that violent attacks do strongly influence the choice of destination in a negative way (Ullah, *et al.*, 2021). Poor environmental practices are likely to negatively impacts that experience. Kenya's national tourism blueprint 2030 echoes the need to create visitor awareness of responsible behavior in the environment, develop bare minimum standards on sustainable tourism and support tourism businesses such as tour operator to enable implementation of sustainable environmental practices (Ullah *et al.*, 2021). The big four tourism plan 2018- 2030 recognizes the need to achieve sustainable development goals (GoK, 2017). In order for tourism to flourish, there is a need to manage the relationship between residents and tourists in a sustainable manner. What makes this challenging in urban areas is that residents and tourists are often sharing the same physical spaces with very different objectives in mind. Residents, unless engaged in the provision of tourism services, are often simply following their daily lives whereas tourists seek leisure experiences involving monetary

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and non-pecuniary exchanges that impact on residents' lives often unintentionally and without the tourists realizing it.

One of the aims of sustainable tourism is to increase tourist satisfaction with satisfaction being conceptualized in different ways, and according to this different types of satisfaction have been defined such as either a transaction-specific measure or an overall evaluation. However, according to World Bank (2015), Masai Mara National Reserve, one of the leading tourist attractions in Narok County, and fundamental to Kenya's tourism product, is facing huge threats, such as over development which has negative effect on tourist experiences. The Masai Mara conservancies are as well facing increase in settlements, competing grazing animals and agriculture activities (World Bank, 2010). Tourist arrivals have declined due to detracting of tourist experience caused by overcrowding within Masai Mara, littering and poor level of sanitation. Mara river basin is facing loss of forest cover due to poorly planned tourism facilities, water pollution and unregulated water abstraction by urban settlements (WWF, 2007). Various policy documents such as tourism act 2011 (GoK, 2011) and Vision 2030 (GoK, 2007) support sustainability in tourism industry but does not provide clear guideline on adoption of sustainable environmental practices among tour operators. Therefore this study sought to fill the gap by evaluating stakeholder networks in tour operators' sustainable environmental practices and their influence on visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya.

## **1.2 Research Objective**

To evaluate stakeholder networks in tour operators' sustainable environmental practices and their influence on visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya.

## **1.3 Research Hypothesis**

H<sub>0</sub> - There is no significant relationship between stakeholder networks and tour operators' sustainable environmental practices in influencing visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1.1 Stakeholder theory approach theory**

A Stakeholder theory approach, Freeman (1984) stated that an organization can be characterized by its relationships with the organization's stakeholders. Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organizations objectives. The sustainability principle practices must be understood as an action centered on the mobilization capacity of the persons involved, in the motivation of their behavior and in the recognition of the importance of their opinion to the decision process (Phillips, Barney, Freeman & Harrison, 2019). Since Freeman's first work on stakeholder theory, stakeholder theory has been incorporated into business management literature (Clarkson, 1995, Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

According to Phillips et al. (2019), stakeholder theory can describe the multiple elements of tourism in a community, the history of tourism development in the community, the procedures and policies that relate to the development and management of tourism in the area, the types of attractions in the community, the overall economic impact to the community, the size of the tourism industry in the community, and the connections between the different agencies and organizations that are involved in tourism. This theory was considered relevant to study since sustainable tourism development in Narok County, Kenya may entail the stakeholder networks in tour operators' sustainable environmental Practices and government support as well as collaboration of the private sector, thus the stakeholder theory was ideal to underpin the study.

2.1.2 Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which is also called Rational Actor Theory, has its origins in microeconomics but has been used in a variety of academic fields (Boudon, 2009). In rational choice theories, individuals are seen as motivated by the wants or goals that express their 'preferences' (Scott, 2000). They act within specific, given constraints and on the basis of the information that they have about the conditions under which they are acting. At its simplest, the relationship between preferences and constraints can be seen in the purely technical terms of the relationship of a means to an end. Most tourism risk perception literature is inaccurately evaluated according to simple consumer behaviour, as opposed to complicated, multivariate choice, comprehension and behaviour (Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002).

As it is not possible for individuals to achieve all of the various things that they want, they must also make choices in relation to both their goals and the means for attaining these goals. Rational choice theories hold that individuals must anticipate the outcomes of alternative courses of action and calculate that which will be best for them. Rational individuals choose the alternative that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction (Caterino & Schram, 2006). Choosing a travel destination is a very complex process with many influencing factors. Understanding the underlying destination choice processes of tourists and its antecedents is a fundamental issue both from an academic and destination management point of view (Karl, Reintinger, & Schmude, 2015), due to the fact that the tourism industry is one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

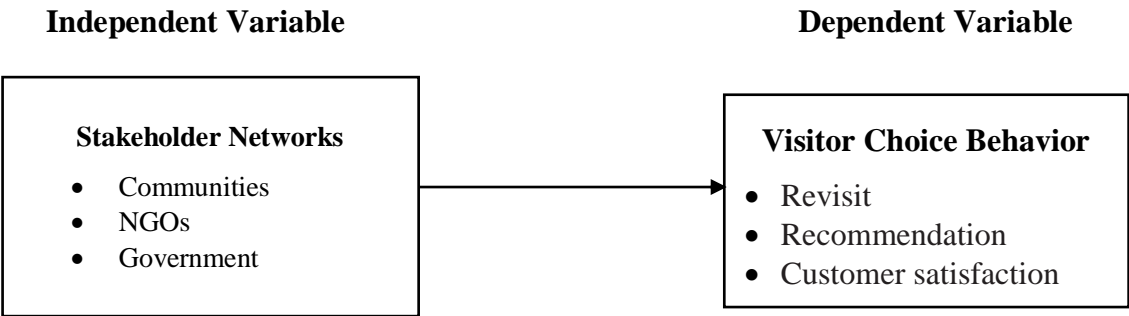


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2.3 Empirical literature review

2.3.1 Concept of Visitor Choice Behavior

Tourists' post-visit or future behaviour can be predicted from their behavioural intentions, and tourists who during a tour in a given destination, develop positive evaluations of the destination will most likely present positive behavioural intentions (Leri & Theodoridis, 2019). Behavioural intentions refer to the extent to which a tourist has developed conscious plans to undertake or not undertake some specified future behaviour. That is the tourist's likeliness to revisit a destination or how willing he or she is to recommend the destination to others (Westerbeek & Shilbury, 2003). Visitor choice behavior is the post visit behavior intentions of visitor on future choices. The choice of destination may be differed from the one intended due to the tourist interaction with certain situational variables in the destination such as environmental degradation.(Maingi, 2014, Atieno & Njoroge, 2018 and Capitello, Agnoli, Charters & Begalli, 2017).

### 2.3.2 Research on Visitor Choice Behavior

For many people, tourism is a way of satisfying their psychological needs such as travelling, performing leisure activities, exploring novelty and capabilities, self-expression and self-assurance, creativity, competition, need for relaxation, and belongingness (Walters, Wallin & Hartley, 2019). The intrinsic motivations pertain to assuring one's capabilities on different emotional fronts. Intrinsic motivation drives the tourists to opt for tourism for intangible rewards such as fun, assurance, and other emotional needs. Motivation of the tourists stems from the domain of human psychology, and it is the satisfaction-forming factor. Many factors come into play when tourists are deciding on their travelling destinations. Zaidan and Abulibdeh (2018) explain that these motivations include the desire to 'escape' and also to seek experiences they consider authentic. Recent studies show that profile of visitors has been changing over the past few decades.

In order to predict travel behaviour it is important to understand how individual characteristics of a person interact with the characteristics of the situation, therefore understanding the positive and negative evaluative factors influencing destination choices of the tourists (Pestana, Parreira & Moutinho, 2020). For instance, Capitello, Agnoli, Charters & Begalli (2017) note that tourists' behavior indicates that there is a growing awareness among the tourist of about the environmental impact of tourism. As a result, an increasing number of tourists are keen on ensuring that their consumption of tourism products does not have a negative impact on the environment. Knowledge regarding travel behaviour can assist in marketing and product planning and development which can increase the number of visitors to tourism products such as resorts. Tourists are subject to certain behaviour before, during and after travelling. This is conceptualized as travel behaviour. This behaviour is the direct result of interaction between certain personal and environmental variables on a continuous basis.

### 2.3.3 Concept of Profiling Tour Operators' Sustainable Environmental Practices

Tour operators have contributed to the development of isolated areas all across the globe making remote lands accessible to outsiders, empowering communities to represent their cultures, and bringing economic gains to areas that lack resources (Wondirad, Tolkach & King, 2020). In recent years, people have become more environmentally conscious. Tour operators' sustainable environmental practices (SEP) is initiatives that embraces to create a positive impact on the environment in destinations. According to Nyurenberger, Kvita, Shchetinina and Gromoglasova (2019), there is a belief that when tourists desire destinations with specific aesthetics, that they will be willing to participate in activities that protect the destinations. The unique role that tour operators such as yourselves have in the travel sector gives you the opportunity to make sustainably conscious choices around where you send your customers, what businesses you choose to use in the local area and the information you provide your customers with before they go (Wondirad *et al.*, 2020).

### 2.3.4 Concept of Stakeholder Networks

Managing a stakeholder network means understanding that interdependency and working to see each stakeholder group, not in a silo, but as part of a connected network of influence with a common objective (Romestant, 2020). The stakeholders in tourism destination includes local residents, local companies, media, employees, government, competitors, tourists, business associations, activists and tourism developers. The network of stakeholders is an important part of tour operators' sustainable environmental practices that will influence visitor choice behavior. Serravalle, Ferraris, Vrontis, Thrassou and Christofi (2019) identify stakeholders in a tourism destination broadly, as the government, the tourists, local community, tourism

business such as tour operators and trade unions, institutions and training facilities, media and tourism professional and other interest groups.

### **2.3.5 Research on Stakeholder Networks in Tour Operator's SEP**

The involvement and collaboration of multiple individuals and organizations is widely recognized in destination marketing to promote a destination (Nguyen, Dong & Ho, 2021). Internal stakeholders of a destination and their collaboration are frequently studied in destination marketing research, but little attention is paid to the involvement of external stakeholders. Festa, Shams, Metallo and Cuomo (2019) assert that a major point of consideration is to identify all stakeholders of the key areas of cooperation is to give proper recognition to all stakeholders. For greater impacts, operators in many countries come together into a collective that then manages activities of their members.

Network interactions between organizations and individuals within and outside a tourism destination are recognized as an essential condition for the effectiveness of destination marketing (Aarstad, Ness & Haugland, 2015). In tourism literature, a network approach is applied to understand the structure of tourism destinations and the roles of tourism stakeholders in marketing activities. Weaver & Oppermann (2010) notes that tour operators and other stakeholders in the tourism industry can cooperate in reaching out to the local community and educate them on sustainability activities. The wider engagement of the local community creates an enabling environment for the success of sustainability practices.

## **3.0 Research Methodology**

Descriptive survey research design was used to examine if tour operators' sustainable environmental practices influence visitor behaviour and involved both quantitative and qualitative research. The study area was Narok County. Narok County is home to the famous Masai Mara National Reserve, several conservancies and other ecosystems such as the Mara River and Forests. This makes Narok County a major tourism destination and priority region for improving existing tourism experiences with the aim of increasing tourism performance in Kenya. Sustainability strategy is one of the actions put in place to deal with environmental degradation experienced in the county and its attractions. Narok County is located in the South Rift region, which according to the National Tourism Blue Print (NTB), is at the stagnation stage in the Tourism Area Lifecycle, hence the need to ensure that tourism in the region does not decline due to poor environmental practices by tourism stakeholders (GoK, 2017). The researcher focused on 313 registered tour operators by Tourism Regulatory Authority who are also members of Kenya Association of tour operators (KATO, 2020). The study sought their engagement in sustainable environmental practices. The visitors from selected tour operators also give their perception on environmental sustainable travel experiences. The total visitors visiting tourists attractions in Narok county is 76,217 (KNBS, 2015). 10 key tourism officials also formed part of the population owing to their insight on sustainable environmental tour operations practices.

The researcher employed stratified random sampling technique to categorise the respondents of the study which are in three clusters which include tour operators, visitors and tourism officials. Stratified sampling is effective since the respondents from the sample come from different groups (Kothari, 2004). The population of tourism officials is small thus a census was used to interview the officials. The study used Slovin's formula to calculate the sample size of tour operators and visitors. The formula allows researcher to sample population with a desired degree of accuracy. According to Israel (2013) this formula is appropriate when determining sample size of total population which is known.



Equation 1      
$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where “n” is the desired sample size, “N” is the population size, and “e” is the margin of error [0.05]

Equation 2      
$$N = \frac{313}{1+313(0.05)^2} = 176 \text{ Tour operators}$$

Equation 3      
$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where “n” is the desired sample size, “N” is the population size, and “e” is the margin of error [0.05]

Equation 4      
$$N = \frac{76217}{1+76217(0.05)^2} = 397 \text{ Visitors}$$

The study employed mixed method research design where a collection of both qualitative as well as quantitative data was employed. Blumberg, Cooper, and Schindler (2014) notes that in such a study, the key assumption is that the two sets of data provide different types of information. Structured questionnaire, interview guide and observation checklists were used to collect data. Data collected was subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis. The data was cleaned, coded and entered into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized information through the use of the tables, graphs and charts. Inferential statistics which is structural equation model was used to test the relationships between the dependent and independent variable. Analysis of the interview results was based on thematic analysis.

**4.0 Findings and Discussion**

A total of 176 questionnaires were distributed to tour operators whereas 153 questionnaires were properly filled and returned. This represented 87.0 percent response rate. Further, 397 questionnaires were distributed to tourists. A total of 294 questionnaires were successfully filled representing 74.1 percent response rate. Also, 7 tourism officials out of 10 tourism officials participated in the interview sessions representing 70% participation rate. In terms of demographic characteristics, most 32% of the tour firms are registered as sole proprietorship, 26.1% as partnership and 15% limited company. It was also established that 10.5% of the tour firms are family owned, 9.2% faith based enterprises and 7.2% NGO based. A majority 59.5% of the tour firms were Kenyan owned. It was also established that 24.2% have sought of mixed ownership while 16.3% are foreign owned. Regulations on how to promote tour operators’ sustainable environmental practices may vary based on type of ownership. The study established that the average years of operations for the tour firms was 12.71 years. The tour firm that had been in existence for longer period of time was 25 years old while youngest tour firm had been operational for 1 year. Further, the average number of employees at the tour firms was 26 employees. The largest tour firm had 78 employees. The smallest tour firm had 7 employees. Inters of gender, majority 63.4% of the tour firms employees were male compared to 36.6% female. Majority 59.5% of employees were on temporary terms. It was also established that 40.5% of the employees were on permanent basis. The results imply that majority of employees working as tour operators in the tour firms are employed on temporary terms.

#### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

The study investigated visitor choice behaviour from tour operators' perspective. The descriptive results regarding revisit, recommendation and customer satisfaction are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Visitor Choice Behavior from Tour Operator Perspective**

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
<b>Re visit</b>							
Visitors intend to book a holiday again with environmental sustainable tour operators.	5.2%	13.1%	7.2%	37.3%	37.3%	3.9	1.2
Visitors prefer to revisit environmental sustainable destinations.	4.6%	18.3%	6.5%	37.3%	33.3%	3.8	1.2
<b>Recommendation</b>							
Visitors recommend environmental sustainable tour operators to friends and family	3.9%	14.4%	7.2%	39.2%	35.3%	3.9	1.2
Visitors recommend environmental sustainable destinations to friends and family.	5.2%	15.0%	8.5%	37.3%	34.0%	3.8	1.2
<b>Customer satisfaction</b>							
Visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences memorable.	2.6%	13.1%	8.5%	35.9%	39.9%	4.0	1.1
Visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences authentic.	3.3%	11.8%	9.8%	40.5%	34.6%	3.9	1.1
Environmental sustainable travel experience meets visitor's expectations.	6.5%	16.3%	7.2%	37.3%	32.7%	3.7	1.3
Visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences distinctive.	9.8%	14.4%	2.0%	34.6%	39.2%	3.8	1.4
Visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences in touch with nature.	7.8%	15.7%	5.2%	35.9%	35.3%	3.8	1.3

Majority of the tour operators were agreeing that visitors intend to book a holiday again with environmental sustainable tour operators as indicated mean response of 3.9 and standard deviation of 1.2. It was also established that majority of tour operators were in agreement that visitors prefer to revisit environmental sustainable destinations (Mean response=3.8; SD=1.2). Focusing at recommendation as an indicator of visitor choice behaviour, majority of tour operators were agreeing that visitors recommend environmental sustainable tour operators to friends and family as indicated by mean of 3.9 and standard deviation of 1.2. Majority of tour operators also agreed that visitors recommend environmental sustainable destinations to friends and family as indicated by mean response of 3.8 and standard deviation of 1.2.

In addition, visitor operators responded on statements regarding customer satisfaction. Regarding the statement that visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences memorable, majority of the tour operators were agreeing with it as shown by mean response of 4.0 and standard deviation of 1.1. Tour operators also showed that majority of them were in agreement that visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences authentic (Mean response=3.9; standard deviation=1.1). Majority of the tour operators also agreed that environmental sustainable travel experience meets visitor's expectations as indicated by mean of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.3.

Majority of the tour operators also agreed that visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences distinctive as indicated by mean response of 3.8 and standard deviation of 1.4. Regarding the statement that visitors find environmental sustainable travel experiences in touch with nature, majority of tour operators were agreeing with it as indicated by mean response of 3.8 and standard deviation of 1.3. In an interview, key informant 6 was quoted saying:

“..There a gap between visitor expectations and environmental sustainable travel experiences. Many visitors are expecting an integration of tour and leisure activities that are environment-based sustainability to fulfill visitor expectations and experiences, however, many tour firms cannot fill this gap. There is need to promote environment conservation by engaging all stakeholders in this noble task. The stakeholders include communities, government, private organizations and NGOs”[Key informant interviewee 6, April 2021]

**Table 2: Visitor Choice Behavior from visitor perspective**

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
I intend to book a holiday with your tour operator again	10.5%	10.2%	11.6%	35.7%	32.0%	3.7	1.3
Masai mara national reserve would be my first choice for a vacation in the region	12.2%	9.5%	9.5%	39.5%	29.3%	3.6	1.3
I would recommend the tour operator to friends and family	9.5%	11.9%	9.9%	37.8%	31.0%	3.7	1.3
I would recommend friends and relatives to visit Masai mara National reserve	11.2%	8.2%	13.9%	38.1%	28.6%	3.6	1.3
The tour operator provided an unforgettable and quality travel experience	11.9%	9.9%	9.2%	33.7%	35.4%	3.7	1.4
The travel experience made me feel in touch with nature	9.2%	11.6%	11.6%	33.3%	34.4%	3.7	1.3
The travel experience was authentic	10.5%	11.6%	10.2%	37.8%	29.9%	3.6	1.3
The travel experience met my expectations	10.9%	9.9%	13.3%	42.2%	23.8%	3.6	1.3
The travel experience was distinctive	11.2%	13.9%	13.3%	33.3%	28.2%	3.5	1.3
The travel experience was sustainable	11.6%	13.3%	10.5%	33.3%	31.3%	3.6	1.4



Visitors/tourists responded to statements regarding visitor choice behavior. Regarding the intention to book a holiday with the tour operator again, majority of the visitors were agreeing as indicated mean response of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.3. It was also established that majority of visitors acknowledged that Masai Mara national reserve would be their first choice for a vacation in the region as shown by mean response of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.3. Majority of visitors were in agreement that they would recommend the tour operator to friends and family as shown by mean response of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.3.

Regarding whether the visitors would recommend friends and relatives to visit Masai mara National reserve, majority of the visitors were very willing as indicated by response of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.3. Majority of visitors were agreeing that the tour operator provided an unforgettable and quality travel experience as indicated by mean of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.4. Results of the study also revealed that majority of visitors agreed that the travel experience made them feel in touch with nature as indicated by mean response of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.3.

In addition, majority of visitors agreed that travel experience was authentic as indicated by mean response of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.3. Regarding the statement that the travel experience met the expectations of the visitors, majority of them were in agreement as indicated by mean response of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.3. Majority of visitors overwhelming agreed that also showed that the travel experience was distinctive (Mean response=3.5; standard deviation=1.3). Majority of the visitors also agreed that the travel experience was sustainable as indicated by mean of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.4.

**Table 3: Network with Stakeholders**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
<b>Communities</b>							
Liaise with tour operators to preserve environment	12.4%	9.2%	7.8%	51.0%	19.6%	3.6	1.3
Report incidences of environmental degradation.	8.5%	11.1%	8.5%	51.6%	20.3%	3.6	1.2
Liaise with tour operators promote conservation activities at various tourist destinations.	5.9%	7.8%	11.1%	55.6%	19.6%	3.8	1.0
<b>Government</b>							
Donated funds or in-kind services to sustainable environmental tourism programs	9.8%	11.8%	9.2%	50.3%	19.0%	3.6	1.2
Trains tour operators on sustainable environmental tour operation practices	11.1%	11.8%	11.1%	47.1%	19.0%	3.5	1.2
Provides a legal framework on sustainable environmental tour operations practices	7.8%	7.8%	11.1%	51.0%	22.2%	3.7	1.1
Promote environmental education in destination	5.9%	14.4%	5.2%	52.9%	21.6%	3.7	1.1
<b>NGOs</b>							
Involve local communities in decision making in conservation efforts	7.8%	8.5%	9.8%	49.7%	24.2%	3.7	1.2
Donated funds or in-kind services to sustainable environmental tourism programs	7.2%	12.4%	7.2%	51.0%	22.2%	3.7	1.2
Trains tour operators on sustainable environmental tour operation practices	6.5%	13.1%	8.5%	59.5%	12.4%	3.6	1.1
Promote environmental education in destination	7.8%	8.5%	9.8%	54.9%	19.0%	3.7	1.1

Regarding community as a stakeholder, majority of the tour operators were agreeing that community liaise with tour operators to preserve environment as indicated mean response of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.3. It was also established that majority of tour operators were in

agreement that the community reported incidences of environmental degradation (Mean response=3.6; SD=1.2). Majority of tour operators agreed that the community liaises with tour operators promote conservation activities at various tourist destinations as indicated by mean response of 3.8 and standard deviation of 1.0.

Focusing on government as a stakeholder, majority of tour operators were agreeing that government donated funds or in-kind services to sustainable environmental tourism programs as indicated by mean of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.2. Majority of tour operators also agreed that government trains tour operators on sustainable environmental tour operation practices as indicated by mean response of 3.5 and standard deviation of 1.2. Majority of tour operators also agreed that government provides a legal framework on sustainable environmental tour operations practices as indicated by mean response of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.1. Also, majority of tour operators also agreed that government promote environmental education in destination as indicated by mean response of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.1.

Focusing on NGO as stakeholder, majority of the tour operators were agreeing NGOs involve local communities in decision making in conservation efforts as shown by mean response of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.2. Majority of tour operators also agreed that NGOs donated funds or in-kind services to sustainable environmental tourism programs as indicated mean of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.2. Majority of tour operators also agreed that NGOs trains tour operators on sustainable environmental tour operation practices as indicated by mean response of 3.6 and standard deviation of 1.1. Also, majority of tour operators also agreed that NGOs promote environmental education in destination as indicated by mean response of 3.7 and standard deviation of 1.1.

4.2 Regression Analysis

The study sought to evaluate stakeholder networks in tour operators’ sustainable environmental practices and their influence on visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya. This was undertaken by use of structural equation modeling. The results are presented in Figure 2 and Table 4.

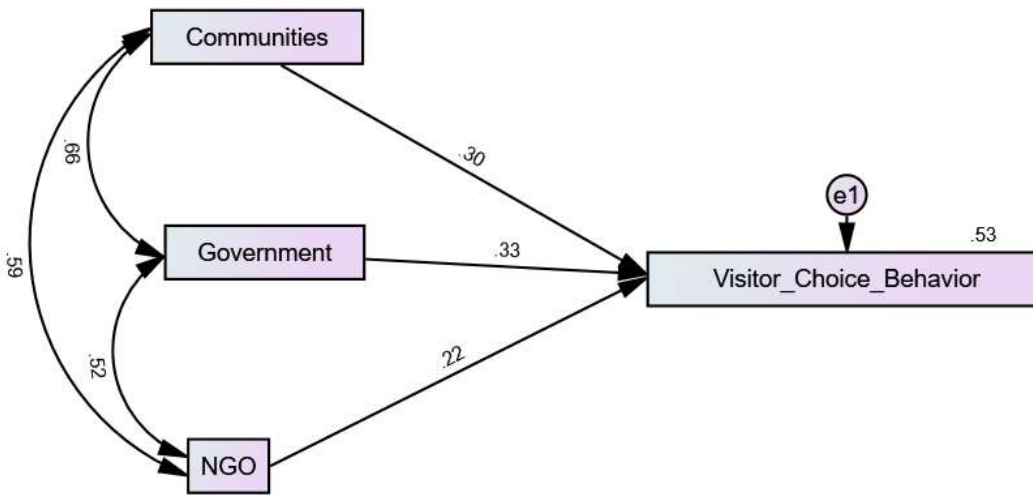


Figure 2: Relationship between stakeholder networks and visitor choice behavior

**Table 4: Stakeholder networks and visitor choice behavior**

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Visitor choice behavior	<---	Communities	.298	.080	3.714	***	
Visitor choice behavior	<---	NGO	.213	.070	3.068	.002**	
Visitor choice behavior	<---	Government	.336	.078	4.284	***	
		Constant	.265	.030	8.718	***	
		Estimate					
R square			.527				

\*\*sig at 5%, \*\*\*sig at 1%

The specific model was:

$$\text{Visitor choice behavior} = .265 + .298\text{Communities} + .213\text{NGO} + .336\text{Government}$$

The coefficient of determination (R square) was .527, an indication that communities, NGOs and government explain 52.7% of visitor choice behaviour. The constant estimate is .265 units indicating the level of visitor choice behavior when other factors are held const. The coefficient of communities indicated a positive and statistically significant effect on visitor choice behavior ( $\beta=.298$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). The beta estimate is .298 implying that a unit change in community engagement in sustainable environmental practices result to .298 units change in visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya.

It was also established that the coefficient of NGOs was positive and significant with visitor choice behavior ( $\beta=.213$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). The results imply that unit change in NGO engagement in sustainable environmental practices result to .213 units change in visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya. Further, the coefficient of government indicated a positive and significant with visitor choice behavior ( $\beta=.336$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). The results imply that unit change in government engagement in sustainable environmental practices result to .336 units change in visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya. In an interview, key informant 5 was quoted saying:

“..There is need to for political goodwill from the ruling governments in protecting the environment. Government environmental agencies need to be strengthened with capacities to implement national environmental legislation, promoting and supporting local and international initiatives on environment conservation. ”. [Key informant interviewee 5, April 2021]

Government engagement in sustainable environmental practices had highest impact on visitor choice behavior, followed by community and NGOs.

### 4.3 Hypothesis testing

The hypothesis was tested using the structural equation result in table 4.11. The study sought to test the given null hypothesis:



*H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between stakeholder networks and tour operators' sustainable environmental practices in influencing visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya.*

The hypotheses were tested using p-value method in the structural equation model. The acceptance/rejection criterion was that, if the p value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, we fail to reject the *H<sub>0</sub>* but if calculated p-value is less than 0.05 level of significance, the *H<sub>0</sub>* is rejected. The p-value calculated was  $0.000 < 0.05$ , hence *H<sub>0</sub>* was rejected and conclusion made that there is significant relationship between stakeholder networks and tour operators' sustainable environmental practices in influencing visitor choice behavior in Narok County, Kenya.

## 5.0 Conclusion

From the study findings, the study concludes that profile of tour operators' sustainable environmental practices influence visitor choice behavior. Tour operators work closely with tourist throughout the entire cycle. Tour operators are therefore an important link with the tourists, and can play a key role in shaping their behavior to make sure that they are environmental friendly which will affect their choice behavior. As intermediaries between tourists and tourism service suppliers, tour operators can influence the choices of consumers, the practices of suppliers and the development patterns of destinations. It was also concluded that stakeholder networks play significant role in visitor choice behavior. Major stakeholders in sustainable tourism management and environmental conservation include the community, the government and the NGOs.

## 6.0 Recommendations

The study established that profile of tour operators' sustainable environmental practices influence visitor choice behavior. Tour operators are therefore an important link with the tourists, and can play a key role in shaping their behavior to make sure that they are environmental friendly which will affect their choice behavior. Tour operators are the primary people who are in touch with visitors on daily basis. The study recommends for the need of the government and Ministry of Tourism to actively involve tour operators in key decisions regarding tourism and sustainable environment. Tour operators have high tendency to influence the behavior of tourist and visitors on whether to recommend or visit back the tour destination. There is need for the Kenya Association of Tour Operators to partner with the Ministry of tourism with the aim of educating and sensitizing visitors about the need to protect environment.

The study found that stakeholder networks play significant role in visitor choice behavior. Major stakeholders in sustainable tourism management and environmental conservation include the community, the government and the NGOs. There is need for joint participation in the development of sustainable tourism embedded in environment conservation. The joint participation have to include the community, government and non-governmental organization. The three groups should participate in joint decision making and strategy formulation for sustainable tourism activities anchored in protected ecosystem.

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