Assessment of Eco Lodge Operators Compliance towards International Ecotourism Guidelines: A Case Study of Three Eco Lodges in and around Bale Mountains National Park, South East Ethiopia

By Kassegn Berhanu & Sewnet Tesfaye
Debre Berhan University

Abstract- The term Eco-lodge is defined as an industry label used to identify a nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism. The general objective of this study was to examine the Compliance of Eco-lodge Operators towards International Ecotourism Guidelines. The research employed a case study research design, and both primary and secondary data were utilized. Data were gathered via observation checklist, focus group discussions and semi structured face-to-face interviews and analyzed thematically based on the International Ecotourism Society’s Eco lodge Guidelines. Purposive sampling techniques were employed to select respondents. The study revealed that the three lodges in Bale Mountains National Park complied with only some of the international principles of ecotourism.

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GJSFR-H Classification: FOR Code: 060299
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I. Introduction

Nature-oriented tourism has been growing more than any other sector and ecotourism, a segment of this market, has been growing between 10–30 percent per annum (Koeman and Vru Lam, 1999). Eco-lodges have emerged as one of the basic components of ecotourism and the term eco-lodge is defined as an industry label used to identify a nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism* (Ceballos-Lascurain, 2008) Cited in Erdem and Tetik(2013).

The term "eco-lodge" was formally launched on the market at the First International Eco-lodge Forum and Field Seminar held in 1994 at Maho Bay Camps in the U.S. Virgin Islands (Wood, 2002), and Maho Bay Camps was determined as the first eco-lodge (Mehta, 2007).

According to research conducted by Bricker et al (2004), there were a total of 5,459 lodges in 60 countries which were chosen based on their high concentration of nature-based lodges, their developing (or mature) ecotourism industry, and their location in an area of high biodiversity and/or significant natural attractions as cited in Erdem and Tetik (2013).

Ethiopia has tremendous potential as an Eco tourist destination. According to the Ethiopian Biodiversity Institute Report (2014), Ethiopia possesses an estimated number of 6,000 species of higher plants of which 10% are endemic, 284 species of wild mammals and 861 species of birds. Moreover, Ethiopia has 21 national parks, 20 controlled hunting areas, four biosphere reserves, 80 national priority forest areas, two wildlife sanctuaries, commercial ranches, botanical gardens, community conservation areas, and wildlife reserves which are home to these and other unexplored types of species (Young, 2012) cited in Kassegn(2013).

Of the 21 national parks, Bale Mountains National Park (BMNP) is one of the most important conservation areas in the Ethiopian Highlands, and it is one of the 34 International Biodiversity Hotspots which also qualifies for World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve Listing (BMNP management plan, 2007). Bale Mountains National Park due to its extraordinary natural tourism resources is making Bale Zone an ideal place for Eco tourists. In order to accommodate these tourists,

Author a: Debre Berhan University, Department of Tourism Management, Shoa, Ethiopia. e-mail: kassegnberhanu@gmail.com
Author b: Assistant Professor, Madda Walabu University, Department of Tourism Management, Bale, Ethiopia. e-mail: sewtes15@gmail.com
Eco lodges have begun to appear. According to Bale Zone culture and Tourism office (personal communications, November 2015), there are two lodges in the zone of which one is in the Dinsho Woreda and the remaining one is in Harenna.

There are a number of studies which are conducted on ecotourism both in Ethiopia in general and Bale in particular. Most of these studies are concentrated on challenges, opportunities, practices and prospects of Community Based Ecotourism Development (Gebayew Ambelu, 2011; Derara Ketema, 2013; Kassegn Berhanu, 2013; Zemenu Bires, 2014; Zemene Guadie, 2014; Wagnew Esthetie, 2012; Demeke. Moreover, Ashok (2013) also studied about local attitude towards environmental conservation and ecotourism in BMNP. However, none of these studies conducted an assessment to understand to what extent Eco lodges, which are found in Ethiopia in general and Bale zone in particular, are complying with the principles of ecotourism set by the International Ecotourism Society (IES). Hence, this study is expected to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth investigation in the study area.

II. Objective of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine the Compliance of Eco lodge Operators in Bale Zone towards International Ecotourism Guidelines.

III. Literature and Empirical Review

a) Concepts and Principles of Ecotourism

In the most general terms, ecotourism can be defined as tourism based upon nature, the environment, a ‘green approach’, ecology or other related fields (Meske 1996) cited in Ranjith (2009).

The International Ecotourism Society (IES) (2007) has defined ecotourism as ‘the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people’. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should adhere to the following principles: minimize impact; build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; provide direct financial benefits for conservation; provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people; raise sensitivity to host country’s political, environmental and social climate; and support international human rights and labor agreements.

As a concept, ecotourism is a conservation-led scheme. It has emerged as a result of increasing global concern for disappearing cultures and ecosystems and as a repudiation of inappropriate tourism development which can degrade a protected area and have unanticipated economic, social or environmental effects on the surrounding lands (Xie et al, 2007). Therefore, ecotourism aims to take small groups of people to natural or protected areas to study and enjoy the scenery, wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations found in these areas, with a minimum impact on the physical, social and cultural environments (Wearing and Neil, 1999).

b) Concept of Eco lodge

Eco lodge is “an industry label used to identify a nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism” (Ceballos-Lascurain, 2008: 197) cited in Erdem and Tetik (2013).

The author of International Eco-lodge Guidelines, Mehta (2002) cited in Megan (2009), stated that Eco-lodge is “a low-impact, nature-based, financially sustainable accommodation that helps protect sensitive neighboring areas; involves and benefits local communities; offers tourists an interpretative and interactive participatory experience; provides a spiritual communion with nature and culture and is planned, designed, constructed, and operated in an environmentally and socially sensitive manner.”

c) The International Eco lodge Guidelines

According to The International Eco-lodge Guidelines, an eco-lodge should meet the following criteria, which are the key principles of eco-lodges (Bien, 2002: 140; Wood, 2002: 28; International Finance Corporation, 2004: 28; Mehta, 2007: 419; Dizdareviç, 2010: 27) as cited in Erdem and Tetik

✓ Conserve the surrounding environment, both natural and cultural.
✓ Have minimal impact on the natural surroundings during construction.
✓ Fit into its specific physical and cultural contexts through careful attention to form, landscaping and color, as well as the use of localized architecture.
✓ Use alternative, sustainable means of water acquisition and reduce water consumption.
✓ Provide careful handling and disposal of solid waste and sewage.
✓ Meet its energy needs through passive design and combines these with their modern counterparts for greater sustainability.
✓ Work together with the local community.
✓ Offer interpretative programs to educate both employees and tourists about the surroundings natural and cultural environments.
✓ Contribute to sustainable local development through research programs.

IV. Methodology

a) Description of the Study Area

Bale is one of the largest zones in Oromia National Regional State with an area of 66,032.52km², which is located in the south and southeastern part of Ethiopia, 430km from Addis Ababa (Bale Zone culture
and tourism office, 2013). Geographically, Bale Zone is located between 5°22’ N to 8°8’ N and 36°52’ E to 42°4’ E. Bale Mountains National Park (geographic location of 6°29’ to 7°10’N and 39°28’ to 39°57’E) is located in the Bale Zone of Oromia Regional State, 400 Km southeast of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It belongs to the Bale-Arsi massif, which forms the western section of the southeastern highlands (GMP, 2007). The park covers the largest area above 3000 meter above sea level in Africa. Tullu Dimtuu, altitude 4377 m a. s. l. is the highest peak in the Park and the second highest peak in Ethiopia. The boundary of the BMNP lies within five woredas such as west of Adaba, north of Dinsho, northeast of Goba, southeast of Delo-Mena-Angetu and south east of Harenna Buluk (GMP, 2007).

This research employed a case study research design, one of the five designs in qualitative research. Data were gathered via observation checklist, focus group discussion and semi structured face-to-face interview and analyzed accordingly.

The subjects of this study were Bale Zone, Dinsho, and Harenna woreda culture and tourism office staff, experts from Bale Mountains National Park, experts from the Ethiopian Biodiversity Institute Goba Branch, investment officers (questions regarding investment license in environment, land usage), and managers, owners and employees of the lodges. Both primary and secondary data were collected as the main sources of information. Observation, in depth interviews and focus group discussions were employed as a tool for primary data collection.

According to the Bale Zone culture and tourism office (2015), there are two Eco lodges located in the Bale Zone: one at the Dinsho site of BMNP and the other at the Harenna site of the park. Since the objective of the study was to assess the Compliance of Eco lodge Operators in Bale Zone towards International Ecotourism Guidelines, all lodges were considered as a target of the research. Hence, purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents as the study sample and a total of 39 respondents were selected for semi structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions based on their experience, responsibility and relevance for topic of the study.

Qualitative data obtained through face-to-face interviews, group discussions and observation were analyzed thematically based on IES’S International Eco lodge Guidelines. Moreover, paraphrasing and selective illustrative quotes were used as an approach to display all the qualitative data.

V. Results and Discussion

a) Eco lodges Compliances towards International Ecotourism Guidelines

The findings of this study indicate that Bale Mountains Lodge, Rock Valley Lodge and Dinsho Lodge are adhere to only some limited international ecotourism guidelines, which are the key principles of Eco lodges and explained as follows.

One of the first principles of the international ecotourism guidelines is that the eco lodge should fund conservation programs in the region where they operate. In line with this, there are some efforts that Dinsho Lodge devotes to conserve the surrounding environment and local culture. For example, they clean and maintain the lodge areas regularly; inform locals to bring cultural products and/or souvenirs to display and sell in the lodge; furnish the bedrooms with locally made materials (e.g., chairs, tables, clothes, shelves, etc…), which manifests the local culture, and they provide maps and folders for visitors to inform them about the park and the eco-lodge. Nevertheless, there is no regular program to give interpretative advice to visitors and locals to help them to understand the surrounding nature and culture.

Beyond this, the lodge does not allocate budgets that should be used for conservation of wildlife resources such as training for local communities towards resource protection and rehabilitation of forests and habitats as well as research activities about wildlife conservations, ecosystem rehabilitations and sustainable utilization of natural resources. The Bale Mountains Lodge also does not contribute to sustainable local development through direct research fund programs. However, the lodge provides accommodation, internet facilities and transportation facility support for researchers who visit through the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority. In the interviews with the manager and staff as well as from personal observations, it was found that there were some efforts made to reflect the cultural and natural environments in and around Bale Mountains National Park. For instance, the rooms of Bale Mountains Lodge were named after endemic animals of Bale Mountain National Park; for example, one room was named the Bale monkey room, one was the Mountain Nyala room, and another was the jackal room. This is a good practice which can help visitors to learn about the endemic mammals in the area. Also of importance for the local community, the construction of the lodge and its furniture, such as chairs and tables, were mostly from local materials of thatch, bamboo, other wooden materials, stone and mud.

Compared with the Rara Avis Lodge in Costa Rica (South and Central America), the efforts of the lodges in Bale Mountains National Park were substandard. For instance, the Rara Avis lodge sponsors a butterfly-breeding project for export to northern hemisphere zoos; cultivates tree seedlings for reforestations; and supports a range of research and education projects.

The second international eco lodge and/or ecotourism guideline is providing competitive local
employment and employ locals in all aspects of business operations. Concerning this guideline, the Bale Mountain Lodge employed locals in all aspects of the operation. There were 28 full time employees in the lodge. According to the interview with the lodge manager, 27 of the employees were from the nearby villages of Rira and Goba; however, the owners were from the United Kingdom.

A similarity amongst the three lodges was that they all offered job opportunities and employed locals from their communities. For instance, Dinsho lodge has seven employees of which six are locals and one is from Addis Ababa. During peak period, the lodge also employs up to four additional people from the local community as freelancers or part-time workers. More importantly, the lodge purchases food and beverage ingredients from the local areas of Dinsho, Robe and Goba. They only import furniture and some beverages that cannot be found in local areas. The Dinsho lodge also uses its conference hall for various events such as Tourism day celebrations and other related ceremonies. In addition, the lodge provides internship opportunities for tourism and hospitality students. In this regard, the two lodges comply with the second international ecotourism guidelines.

However, analyzing it from the ownership perspectives, Bale Mountains Lodge is owned by English citizens whereas Dinsho lodge has seven employees of which six are locals and one is from Addis Ababa. During peak period, the lodge also employs up to four additional people from the local community as freelancers or part-time workers. More importantly, the lodge purchases food and beverage ingredients from the local areas of Dinsho, Robe and Goba. They only import furniture and some beverages that cannot be found in local areas. The Dinsho lodge also uses its conference hall for various events such as Tourism day celebrations and other related ceremonies. In addition, the lodge provides internship opportunities for tourism and hospitality students. In this regard, the two lodges comply with the second international ecotourism guidelines.

The third international ecotourism principle is to provide training: Give managers, staff and contract employees’ access to programs that will upgrade their ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings. Focus group discussions, and key informant interviews revealed that all eco-lodges gave short term trainings and advice on the job (in lodges) but they did not give opportunities for employees to upgrade their education. However, they (Bale Mountains Lodge and Dinsho Lodge) offered trainings related to issues such as customer care, complaint handling procedures and effective communication (language) with customers and IT trainings (specific to Bale Mountains lodge). However, they did not offer training to their employees that would improve their ability to communicate with and manage clients about sensitive natural and cultural topics.

The fourth international ecotourism principle is to prepare the travelers visiting sensitive environments and cultures to minimize their negative impacts before departure. According to the interview with the assistant manager of the Bale Mountains Lodge, the efforts to prepare the guests about sensitive environments and cultures of the area before departure are minimal. However, introductory awareness work is provided to the guests after they arrive to the lodge. The lodge offers guests leaflets with information regarding what to do and not to do in the park.

When we examined the compliance of this principle at the Dinsho Lodge, according to the manager, the lodge has a branch office at Addis Ababa that is responsible for booking reservations of visitors and also informing them about what to do and not to do concerning the environment, wildlife and ecosystem in order to minimize negative impacts on the park.

In line with their websites, we came across only websites of Dinsho Lodge and Bale Mountains lodge. The information presented in their websites was room rates, direction to the lodge, medical advice, weather, tourism resources in Bale Mountains National Park. However, they failed to incorporate issues related with code of conduct for visitors when visiting the park. What we read, an impressive message, in Bale Mountains Lodge is ‘We aim to bring the beauty of Ethiopia to a wider audience whilst promoting sound conservation principles’, which is very important quote if we implement in practice.

The fifth international ecotourism principle is that lodges shall fit into specific physical and cultural contexts through careful attention to form, landscaping and color, as well as the use of localized architecture. In line with this principle, Bale Mountains Lodge is more or less consistent with cultural contexts given that there are local artifacts inside the lodge and the structure of the lodge incorporates local materials (i.e., thatch, bamboo, and other wooden materials) and the shape resembles the local house designs.
However, Dinsho Lodge does not comply with the fifth principle. The original lodge was built in the 1970s with the purpose of raising sheep; therefore, efforts were not investigated or made to mitigate the impacts of its construction on the natural environment. Then after, it was changed to an office for the park. Now it is adopted to lodge starting from September 2006 E.C. It has been changed to lodge since 2014 G.C. Even though the lodge used most of the inputs from modern materials (cement, glass, can) during construction, they tried to display local handcrafts inside the lodge, chairs, clothes, and beds are also made from local materials, and they used local materials called bamboo to make dust bin.

As seen in the picture, the lodge looks like a modern house although it is recommended that Eco lodges should be constructed from locally available materials as much as possible.

Both Dinsho and Bale Mountain Eco lodges were built in the core areas of the park where abundant biodiversity resources are found, which violates the principles of eco-lodge. This is because if many visitors are using the lodges, they may disrupt the wildlife, nature and habitat.
Picture 3: Furniture and decorations inside Bale Mountain Lodge which are produced from local inputs

The above pictures depict how Bale Mountain Lodge uses local inputs or raw materials such as bamboo, other woods, stone, and mud to construct the lodge and its furniture. It also displays local handcrafts and uses locally produced towels and bed sheets, which is consistent with the fifth principle of international ecotourism. (Source of pictures, researchers, 2016).

Below are some pictures in Disho Lodge.

Picture 4: A signpost indicating the direction of Dinsho Lodge and Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Program offices
As seen in the picture, it is made from rope and wooden materials.

**Picture 5:** Tables, chairs, and materials used for making coffee inside Dinsho Lodge

When we evaluate these materials from eco-lodge principles, some parts of the tables and dishes are made from glass and other materials, which are not from the local culture, hence it contradicts with Eco-lodge principles which declares that as much as possible the materials should be made from local inputs and should depict the local living culture. However, some parts of the materials are made from locally produced inputs.

**Picture 6:** Sample Bedroom which is Cultural and Consistent with Eco-Lodge Principles

Such activity can also create job alternatives for locals. Imagine if all hotels and tourism establishments used such products, then there would be more jobs for locals so that locals could benefit from the tourism activities which resulted in poverty mitigation.

**Picture 7:** A Dust bin made from Locally Source Materials Like Rope and Bamboos
As seen in the picture, they collect various materials, such as plastic products, that can be recycled or reused which is inconsistent with the principle which says eco-lodges should recycle, reduce and reuse resources so as to reduce waste and pollutions to the surrounding environment, nature, wildlife and ecosystems.

The sixth international ecotourism guideline is lodges shall use alternative, sustainable means of water acquisition and reduce water consumption. Interview and focus group discussion results indicate that the Bale Mountain Lodge acquires water from the nearby river by employing slow sand filtration system. According to the interview with the assistant manager, the lodge uses 0.4% of the water resources of the river and the daily water consumption of the lodge is 10,000 liter.

However, the source of water for Dinsho lodge is out of the lodge/park. They use pipeline water. They do not recycle, or reuse water and there is also no efforts made to use rainwater. The sauna bath of Dinsho lodge uses wood as source of energy.

The seventh international ecotourism guideline is that eco-lodges shall provide careful handling and disposal of solid waste and sewerage.

The results from researchers’ observations, interviews and focus group discussions revealed that both Dinsho and Bale Mountain Lodges have good initiatives and practices towards proper solid waste disposal and sewerages treatment system.

At Bale Mountain Lodge, easily decomposable solid wastes are collected and burnt in one place and the sewage wastes are treated in a separate treatment chamber which is prepared for this purpose. According to the interview with the manager of the lodge, non-biodegradable solid wastes such as plastic and glass bottles are taken to Addis Ababa for recycling and polluted sewerage wastes from shower and toilet are discharged using underground tubes into two big tanker where they are treated.

At Dinsho Lodge, solid wastes are stored in a hole located close to the lodge before they are burnt. However, warthogs pick plastic materials from the hole and pollute the nearby environment and the lodge do not reuse or recycle waste materials like paper or plastics to generate energy or to produce other materials. While they burn waste materials, the gas emitted from the hole is released to the environment since the hole is not underground. However, in lodges, the smoke is release to the environment that may pollute the surrounding wildlife habitat and nature.

Picture 8: A Place where the Dinsho Ecolodge Collects Dust Materials
Picture 9: A container used to burn solid waste materials

In line with this principle, according to the interview with culture and tourism office experts, as well as park experts, the Bale Mountain Lodge had undertaken an environmental impact assessment and during its construction, the impacts to the surrounding wildlife, nature, and habitat was minimal since it was constructed as much as possible according to ecology principles. However, there was no environmental impact assessment before the construction of the Dinsho Lodge, and there were negative impacts to the surrounding environment and wildlife.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

a) Conclusions

This study revealed that the two lodges in Bale Mountains National Park were complying with only some of the international ecotourism principles. They employed locals, purchased food, beverages, traditional clothes and crafts from the local area, and to some extent they removed waste properly. Regarding use of localized architecture, only the Bale Mountain Lodge fulfilled the international ecotourism principles since it had been constructed after an environmental impact assessment was carried out. It used local inputs and the shape resembles local architecture. The remaining lodge did not meet this standard. Regarding the use of energy from sustainable sources, only Bale Mountain lodge generated energy from hydroelectric and solar energy.

The findings also indicated that the two lodges (both Dinsho and Bale Mountains) were located in the core area of the park where the variety and abundance of wildlife is high. The study also revealed that the two lodges did not sponsor funds for conservation programs in the park nor did they contribute to sustainable local development through research programs and capacity
building trainings to local communities so as to conserve and promote sustainable use of natural resources.

To sum up, if lodges do not follow the international principles and sound practices of ecotourism, there may be negative consequences on wildlife, nature and habitat as well as on socio-cultural fabrics in the surrounding areas. In addition to these, as Erdem and Tetik in 2013, indicated, community benefits may also be minimum if lodges do not promote stakeholder participation, including the employment and training of local people, local ownership, purchase of food, crafts and other supplies from local vendors, or the opportunity for local people to use or learn about their facilities and natural resources.

b) Recommendations

The following recommendations are forwarded based on the major findings of the study with respect to eco lodge operators’ compliance towards international ecotourism guidelines.

- Before constructions of tourism and hospitality establishments in protected areas such as parks, environmental impact assessment should be conducted and Eco lodges should not be constructed on core areas of the protected areas.
- Eco-lodges should be devoted to generating sustainable local development through research and provision of capacity building trainings to local communities about awareness of potential natural and cultural tourism resources, conservation of such resources and sustainable utilization of natural resources.
- The design of lodges should reflect local architectural styles, and use local building materials.
- Eco-lodges should adopt new technologies so as to conserve energies and reduce waste and provide visitors with pre departure information.
- Eco-lodges should also have their own museums and cultural centers including libraries.
- Ministry of Culture and Tourism and any other concerned bodies should develop standards for Eco lodges.
- Last but not least, lodges shall follow the international principles and sound practices of ecotourism, in order not create negative consequences on wildlife, nature and habitat as well as on socio-cultural and economic fabrics in the surrounding areas.

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