

# THE ECO-TOURISM POTENTIAL OF ILU ABABOR ZONE, ETHIOPIA

## A SCOPING STUDY SUMMARY





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**Area coverage:** 10,920 km<sup>2</sup>  
**Altitude:** 559 - 2531 metres above sea level  
**Livelihoods:** predominantly mixed crop-livestock farming  
**Climax vegetation:** tropical montane rainforest  
**Mean annual rainfall:** 2000mm  
**Temperature:** varies between 16°C - 24°C annually  
**Topography:** diverse topographic features which consist of undulating terrain, rugged mountains, and deep gorges dissected by the Gaba and Dogi rivers, rolling plains, and rounded hills



## INTRODUCTION

### CONTEXT

Tourism is the largest and fastest-growing economic sector across the globe. The sector is a powerful catalyst for economic development in many countries, making an enormous contribution to GDP, livelihood diversification, employment opportunities, generation of foreign revenues, and viable economic development options. Deriving such benefits from tourism necessitates the protection and conservation of the social, cultural, and environmental resources upon which tourism depends.

In recent years, eco-tourism has emerged as a powerful driver for sustainable economic development. By generating economic opportunities while simultaneously preserving natural and cultural values, it provides opportunity to transition to a green economy. Eco-tourism has received much attention across the globe for its demonstrated ability to deliver sustainable, long-term socio-economic benefits.

### BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ECO-TOURISM

Best practice eco-tourism is nature-friendly, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, and economically beneficial to the local community while offering a satisfying experience to tourists.

Assessing eco-tourism potential and suitability using The Five 'A's (5As), is a common practice. These are; Attraction, Accessibility, Activities, Accommodation, and Amenities (facilities that enhance tourist services and comforts).

### ECO-TOURISM IN ETHIOPIA AND ILU ABABOR ZONE

Ethiopia is one of several sub-Saharan African countries with immense potential for eco-tourism development. The country is endowed with stunning landscapes, national parks, protected wildlife sanctuaries and reserves.

Straddling the very heart of the country,

Oromia Region is blessed with an abundance of natural tourism resources. Its natural beauty encompasses magnificent waterfalls, dramatic landscape scenery, natural moist tropical forests, river gorges and various water bodies.

Ilu Ababor Zone is a zone of Oromia Regional State with a vast array of cultural, historical, and natural resources. A land of lush vegetation and dramatic waterfalls, with a biosphere reserve and a rich cultural history, the zone has promising potential for the development of eco-tourism.

Despite the abundance of prospective attractions, the eco-tourism potential in the zone has yet to be assessed. Recognising this, Farm Africa, in collaboration with Mattu University, Oromia Tourist Commission and other partner organisations in the area, has initiated a project to investigate opportunities, challenges, and prospects of eco-tourism development in the Ilu Ababor Zone. This scoping project is imperative for the establishment of community-based eco-tourism in the area, which will drive green economy, improve the livelihoods of the local community, and sustain natural resource management in the zone.

This publication provides a summary of key findings. The extensive full report is available digitally from [ethinfo@farmafrica.org](mailto:ethinfo@farmafrica.org).

**A land of lush vegetation and dramatic waterfalls, with a biosphere reserve and a rich cultural history.**





## ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

### POTENTIAL SITES FOR ECO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Resources in Ilu Ababor Zone with the potential to attract domestic and international visitors fall under three categories:

- natural
- cultural
- historical

The zone's abundant natural resources have potential to attract visitors from all over the world and could be developed into various tourist experiences in the area. Promising natural sites include Yayo Forest, Geba Forest, Sayi Forest, Abayi Forest, Didu Forest, Gerba Dima Forest, Nono Forest, Dibacha Forest, Sor Waterfall, Geni Waterfall, Elke Waterfall, Qaber Gene Waterfall, Guracha Waterfall and Cave, Gumar Cave and Waterfall, Dibo Waterfall, Babura Waterfall, Tinjo Waterfall and Cave, Guracho Hill and Cave, Hana Cave, Aba Iyase Cave, Goppo Cave and Aba Siya Cave.

As cultural and historical tourism resources, the Sambe Battlefield, Gore Former British Consulate, Ababor Palace, and Oda Dogi are fascinating sites worthy of consideration. Cultural attractions include traditional food and dressing styles, cultural performances, Ireecha thanksgiving festivals and the Gada system, a traditional system of governance

practiced by the Oromia people.

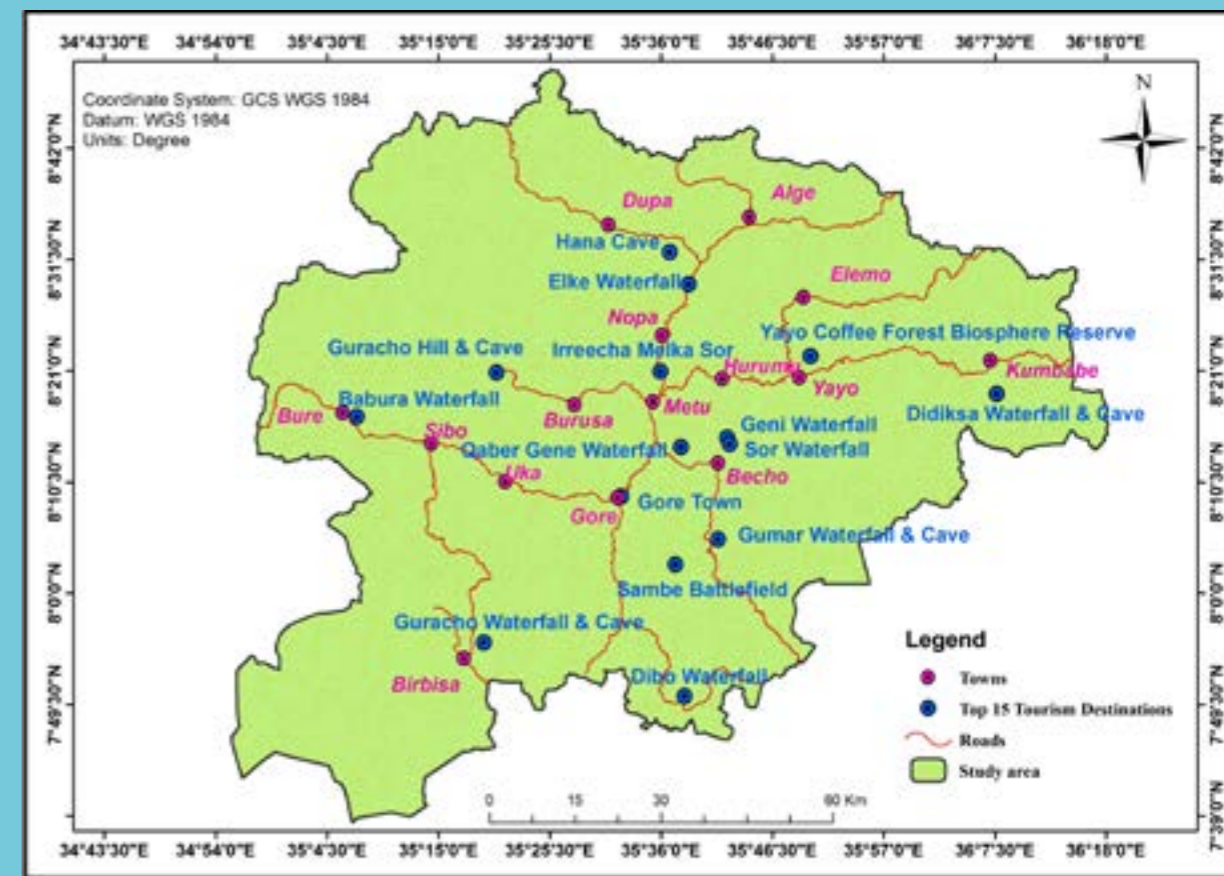
All of these sites offer attractive prospects for eco-tourism development and their suitability was assessed in this scoping study.

### PRIORITY SITES FOR ECO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The study identified and prioritised potential eco-tourism destinations of Ilu Ababor Zone on the basis of defined criteria. The criteria used to prioritise attraction sites were scenic attraction of the destinations or environmental features; accessibility of the destinations (easy access to attractions); variety of leisure and recreation offered (potential tourist experiences or activities of the attraction site), as well as promising investment opportunities of the destination sites. These criteria were agreed taking guidance from The Five 'A's (Attraction, Accessibility, Activities, Accommodation and Amenities), existing literature and in consultation with tourism and culture office experts at district and zonal levels.

Over 30 potential destinations site were evaluated according to this criteria and details of each can be found in the full report. Out of these 30, 15 potential tourism resource destinations have been identified for priority consideration (see opposite). Of these top 15 destinations, seven major sites are described below in detail.

Locations of 'priority consideration' sites in the study area



### PRIORITY SITES FOR CONSIDERATION

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sor Waterfall</li> <li>2. Yayo Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve</li> <li>3. Geni Waterfall</li> <li>4. Sambe Battlefield</li> <li>5. Guracho Hill and Cave</li> <li>6. Gore Town</li> <li>7. Guracho Waterfall and Cave</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Elke Waterfall</li> <li>9. Didiksa Waterfall and Cave</li> <li>10. Gumar Waterfall and Cave</li> <li>11. Irreecha Melka Sor</li> <li>12. Hana Cave</li> <li>13. Qaber Gene Waterfall</li> <li>14. Dibo Waterfall</li> <li>15. Babura Waterfall</li> </ol> |
|---|---|



**Yayo Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve**

The Yayo Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve (YCFBR) is located in Ilu Ababor and Buno Bedele zones and stretches over six districts (ie Doreni, Yayo, Bilo-Nopa, Algie-Sachi, Hurumu, Chora).

The reserve has three management zones: core, buffer and transitional. It is an internationally recognised biodiversity hotspot area and one of the last remnant montane rainforest habitats containing wild arabica coffee in the world.

There are over 450 plants, 50 mammals, 30 birds, and 20 amphibian species found in all habitat types within the forest, and it was designated in 2010 as a UNESCO biosphere reserve to conserve coffee genetic resources and the overall biodiversity of the forest.

Owing to its rich biodiversity, ecological importance, and cultural and historical sites, the YCFBR offers powerful potential for eco-tourism development in the area. Oda Dogi (Bake Aba Alanga), Aba Siya Cave

and numerous waterfalls can all be visited in this area.

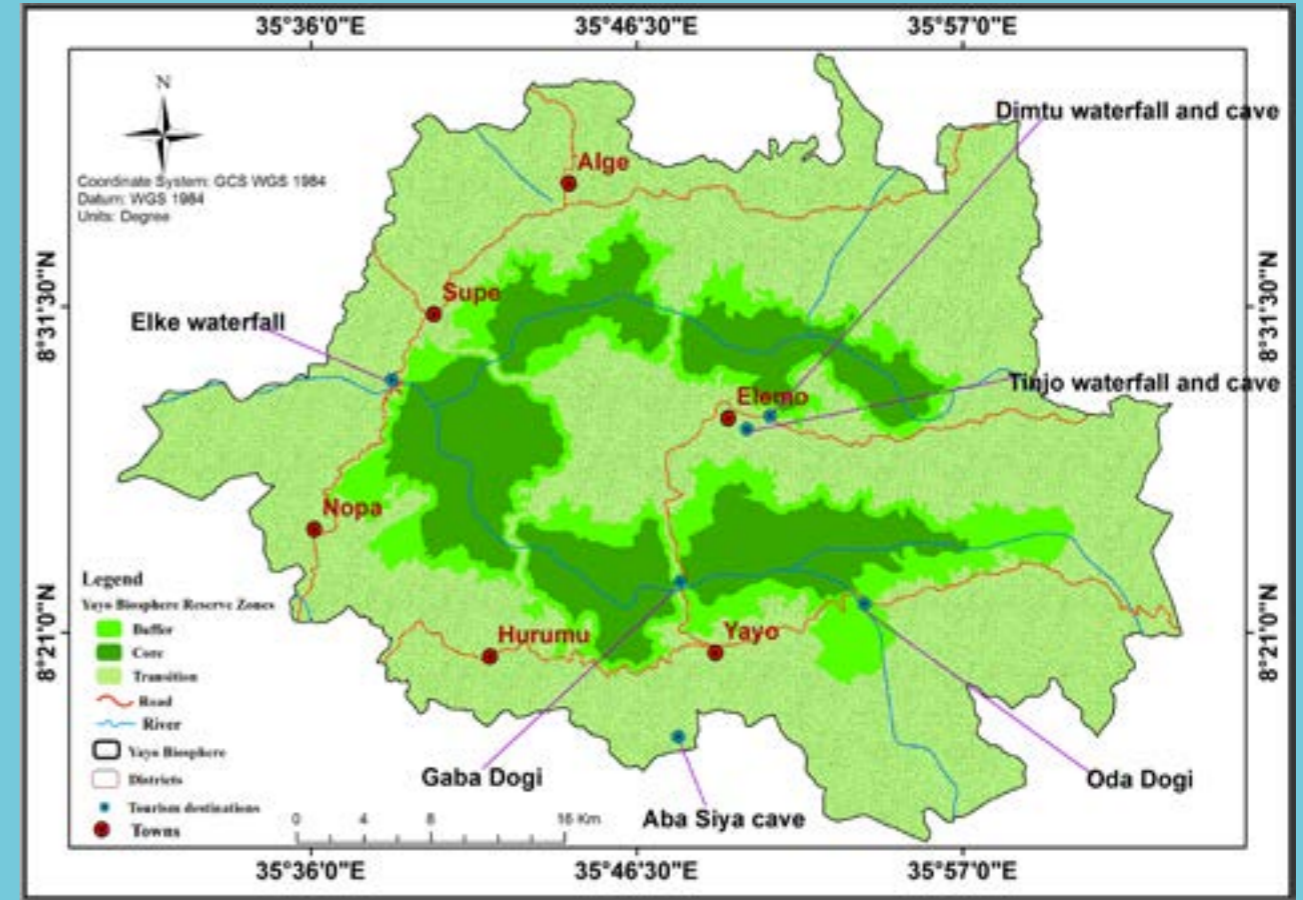
➤ **Potential tourist activities:** wildlife and bird watching, forest exploring, educational tours, scientific studies, grand views, and visiting cultural and historical places like the Oda Dogi site.

➤ **Investment opportunities:** eco-lodge, camping facilities, guest house, hotels, transportation services, swimming pools, riverside resort and recreation.

➤ **Tourist service options:** tour-guiding, sale of cultural foods, coffee, fruits, and honey.

➤ **Tourist amenities:** amenities like toilets, safe drinking water, electric supply, and internet services are not currently available in the area.

➤ **Accessibility of the area:** the destination site is easily accessible for visitors due to its proximity to the main road.



The Yayo Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve has an abundance of appealing tourism destinations within easy proximity of access roads and towns.

source: developed by researchers from Ethio-GIS data 2007



A biodiversity hotspot area and one of the last remnant montane rainforest habitats containing wild arabica coffee in the world.



### Sor Waterfall

Sor is a magnificent and delightful waterfall in Oromia and one of Ethiopia's top-ranking waterfalls located in Tubi Kebele, Bacho district of Ilu Ababor Zone, about 627km from Addis Ababa. It has an estimated 50 metre drop and is 78 metres wide, forming four beautiful chambers that merge into a full cascade during the rainy seasons. The spray creates a rainbow effect, adding to the natural scenic view of the lush green attraction and leaving a memorable impression. It is surrounded by natural forest which is inhabited by a range of wildlife and bird species.

➤ **Potential tourist activities:** waterfall view, swimming, hiking, wildlife and bird watching, canopy walking, wedding entertainment, photo safari, forest exploration, horse riding, trekking, and unforgettable scenery.

➤ **Investment opportunities:** eco-lodge, hotel, guest house, riverside resort, transportation services, swimming pools, trekking and hiking facilities, and tourist village with resort recreations.

➤ **Tourist service options:** handicraft selling, tour guiding, supplying local agro-products (eg honey, coffee, milk), and accommodation services (cafeteria, restaurants, grocery, bars).

➤ **Tourist amenities:** tourist amenities like internet services, public toilets, tourist information centres, fitness centres, swimming pools, emergency services, electric supply, playgrounds, safe drinking water, cultural show halls, and walking trails are currently non-existent in the area.

➤ **Accessibility of the area:** although the area has no asphalted roads, it is easily accessible for visitors as it is situated close to the zonal town.

### Geni Waterfall

The Geni Waterfall poses a very attractive natural tourist attraction site located in Chabere Kebele, Hurumu district of Ilu Ababor Zone, about 597km from Addis Ababa. It pours over the lip of a broad chasm forming two beautiful chambers

that merge into a full cascade during the rainy seasons. It is bounded by dense forest which is inhabited by a range of wildlife and bird species.

➤ **Potential tourist activities:** forest and waterfall views, riverside recreations, photo safari, canopy walking, and sightseeing.

➤ **Investment opportunities:** guest house, motel, eco-lodge, transportation services, swimming pools, riverside resort, and recreation.

➤ **Tourist service options:** sale of cultural food and local agro-products (eg honey, coffee, fruits), handicraft selling, guiding as well as various accommodation services.

➤ **Tourist amenities:** amenities such as safe drinking water, public toilets, swimming pools, electric supply, playgrounds, and internet services, which are crucial requirements, do not yet exist in the area. The area also lacks accommodation services for visitors.

➤ **Accessibility of the area:** the destination site is easily accessible for visitors despite lacking asphalted roads.

### Sambe Battlefield

The Sambe Battlefield is located in Inosambe Kebele of Alle district 34.5km from Mettu town and surrounded by an attractive natural landscape that amazes visitors. The site marks the place where white fascist Italy was defeated in southwestern Ethiopia. Like Adwa in the north, the Sambe Battlefield has remarkable historical value for those that live in the southwestern part of the country.

➤ **Potential tourist activities:** visiting the cultural and historical heritage of the area, educational tours, natural scenery and scientific studies, horse/pony trekking.

➤ **Investment opportunities:** culture-oriented lodge, historical museum exhibit, guest house, hotel/motel with cultural touches, camping facilities, and resort recreations.

➤ **Tourist service options:** accom-odation services, selling of handicrafts, selling of



Sor Waterfall

cultural food and local agro-forest products, guiding, hiring of horses/ponies.

➤ **Tourist amenities:** amenities like toilets, safe drinking water, electric supply, and internet services are not yet available in the area.

➤ **Accessibility of the area:** the destination site is easily accessible to visitors though it lacks an asphalted road.

### Guracho Hill and Cave

Guracho Hill and Cave are located in Baroyi Gabisa Kebele of Mettu district, 42km west of Mettu town. Guracho Hill served as a place of Irreecha Tullu (an Oromo thanksgiving festival celebrated on hilly areas), and together the hill and cave offer spectacular landscape scenery that could be developed into a sight-seeing destination. The cave has a straight passage that enables visitors easy routes through the cave, which is estimated to be 1km long. The site is bounded by a natural forest that is home to diverse wild animals and bird species.

➤ **Potential tourist activities:** wildlife and bird watching, spectacular natural scenery, educational tours and scientific studies.

➤ **Investment opportunities:** eco-lodge, guest house, hotel, establishing a national park at the site, camping facilities, transportation, and recreation facilities.

➤ **Tourist service options:** tour guiding, selling of cultural foods and agroforest products (coffee, fruits, and honey), provision of accommodation services.

➤ **Tourist amenities:** amenities like toilets, safe drinking water, electric supply, and internet services are not currently available in the area.

➤ **Accessibility of the area:** the destination site is easily accessible to visitors though it lacks asphalted roads.



### Elke Waterfall

Elke Waterfall is found in Wayu kebele of Alge Sachi district, 27km from Mettu town. It is a waterfall of great beauty cascading within the forest landscape and falling from the mountain top in three branching streams. The site is surrounded by dense forest which is home to many wild animals and bird species. Experiencing the clear waters rushing over the rocky mountain face while immersed in the green canopy of the forest provides one of the most memorable and therapeutic experiences an eco-tourist could hope for.

➤ **Potential tourist activities:** sightseeing, forest and waterfall views, canopy walking, wildlife and bird watching,

forest exploration, trekking, hiking, and educational tours.

➤ **Investment opportunities:** hotel and motel, trekking and hiking facilities, eco-lodge, camping facilities, swimming pools, riverside resort and recreation.

➤ **Tourist service options:** tour guiding, selling of handcrafts, cultural foods and agroforest products (eg honey, coffee, fruits), as well as different accommodation services.

➤ **Tourist amenities:** decisive amenities that could lengthen visitors' stays in the area like a clubhouse, toilets, fitness centre, emergency services, safe drinking water, electric supply, and internet

### Elke Waterfall

services are not currently available in the area.

➤ **Accessibility of the area:** the destination site is easily accessible to visitors though it lacks asphalted roads.

### Irreecha Melka Sor

The Oromo people celebrate Irreecha to thank Waaqa (God) for the blessings and mercies they have received throughout the previous year. The Irreecha festival (thanksgiving ceremony) is celebrated every year to mark the end of the dark and rainy season, and to welcome the

new season of plentiful harvests. This auspicious thanksgiving ceremony is celebrated in different areas every year: at the bank of a river in the case of Irreecha Melka and on a hilltop in the case of Irreecha Tulu.

Irreecha Melka Sor is one of the oldest ritual sites in the Ilu Ababor Zone, with the local community celebrating Irreecha Melka here on the Sor riverbank in November, travelling from the town on foot. The historical site is situated at a 4km distance from Mettu town on the eastern shore of the river.

## GEOSPATIAL ASSESSMENT

GIS and remote sensing play an important role in identifying promising locations for eco-tourism development. In this study, nine geographic factors were considered to further assess site suitability in Ilu Ababor Zone. These were:

1. land use/land cover
2. elevation
3. slope
4. temperature
5. rainfall
6. proximity to natural sites
7. proximity to cultural sites
8. distance from roads
9. distance from towns

Each factor was mapped and analysed based on its suitability rating using geo-spatial techniques. The factor maps were then overlaid to produce an ecotourism site suitability map containing four suitability classes (highly suitable, moderately suitable, less suitable and not suitable). The analysis result revealed that the top 15 tourism destinations all lie in highly and moderately suitable areas as follows:

### Highly suitable

The central and northern parts of the zone, in general, are highly suitable for eco-tourism owing to natural, cultural and historical attraction endowments. Sites located in this area include: Sor Waterfall, Yayo Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve, Geni Waterfall, Elke Waterfall, Sambe Battlefield, Gore town, , Irreecha Melka Sor, and Qaber Gene Waterfall.

### Moderately suitable

The south and western parts of the zone are moderately suitable for eco-tourism development. Identified priority sites located in this area include: Gumar Waterfall and Cave, Gurracho Waterfall and Cave, Dibo Waterfall, Didigsa Waterfall and Cave, Gurracho Hill and Cave, Babura Waterfall, and Hana Cave.



# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

## CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The study revealed strong foundations for the development of a thriving eco-tourism economy in the area, including:

- › an enabling policy environment with existing eco-tourism support policies
- › local enthusiasm for eco-tourism
- › the presence of higher education institutions in the area
- › the presence of various conservation organisations in the area (eg Farm Africa, Ethio Wetland, Care Ethiopia)
- › Mettu-Gore airport construction
- › presence of different cultural attractions and historical places with hospitable local communities
- › political and social stability in the zone and its surrounding area

Despite its many valuable attractions and growth potential, there are constraints hindering the development of eco-tourism activities in the area, including:

- › inadequate infrastructure and tourist facilities
- › inadequate promotion for the sites
- › poor co-operation among stakeholders
- › awareness problems and lack of adequate skilled labour in eco-tourism
- › budget constraints
- › lack of an eco-tourism plan and strategy for the area
- › lack of government attention and other stakeholders' participation
- › unsustainable and improper use of natural resources

Overcoming these challenges would provide an opportunity to drive green economic development in the zone, using eco-tourism

as a livelihood diversification strategy that sustains the area's natural resources and cultural values.

## PROSPECTS FOR LIVELIHOOD AND CONSERVATION

The development of eco-tourism would make vital contributions to the study area as follows:

### Creation of local job opportunities

Eco-tourism sites provide local employment opportunities. According to information obtained from Ilu Ababor Zone Job Creation and Skill Development Office, there are currently about 105,070 unemployed young people in the zone (65,895 males and 39,175 females).

Eco-tourism development would play a decisive role in overcoming the challenges of youth unemployment by creating job opportunities in activities such as tour guides, travel agents, scouts, tour operators, renting horses and selling handicrafts. For instance, field observation revealed that the development of the Mettu Penitentiary artificial lake as an ecolodge recreational site has created job opportunities for 300 people.

### Income generation and livelihood diversification

Eco-tourism development contributes to livelihood diversification options by increasing the market for local products (eg locally produced artefacts, cultural clothes and materials), thereby sustaining traditional customs and practices. The local community can also provide various

tourist services such as accommodation and provision of cultural food and locally produced agro-products (honey, coffee, butter, poultry and milk products), which in turn generate extra income and diversify their livelihoods.

### Biodiversity conservation

South-western Ethiopia, in general, and Ilu Ababor Zone, in particular, is well known for its natural resource endowments and is a biodiversity hotspot. The development of eco-tourism will lessen environmental resource degradation problems such as deforestation, overuse of natural resources and agricultural expansion by diversifying the sustainable livelihood options available to local communities.

### Cultural and historical heritage preservation

Eco-tourism is crucial for both the preservation and management of cultural and historical heritage in addition to the conservation of natural heritage.

### Advancement of environmental education

The ethos of eco-tourism is responsible travel to undisturbed natural areas with the aim of environmental education about the overall importance of the destination visited.

### Opportunities for infrastructure expansion

Eco-tourism development offers a chance to improve infrastructure such as roads, health facilities, electricity, water supply, shops and retail services.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are forwarded for development of sustainable ecotourism in the study area:

- National and regional governments should give due attention to expanding infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water services, telecommunications, bank services, hotels, motels and ecolodges around eco-tourism potential areas to ensure there are adequate tourist facilities.
- Effective promotion and marketing should be undertaken for the eco-tourism potential sites via media programmes, social media, websites, brochures, flyers, guidebooks and setting and establishing school conservation clubs and workshops.
- Involvement of local communities and other stakeholders is essential for sustainable eco-tourism development in the area. Awareness raising and skills development amongst stakeholders can be undertaken with Mattu University.
- There should be collaboration between government bodies and other stakeholders. The participation of local communities, the private sector, and other stakeholders should be encouraged to strengthen the provision and development of accommodation and recreational services to tourists.
- Making contacts and maintaining communication with significant tour and travel agents like Visit Oromia, Ethiopian Tour Operators Association (ETOA), National Tour Operation (NTO), and Four Winds Travel and Tour Agent will help to attract both domestic and foreign tourists.
- Human resources should receive particular focus from qualified experts in the relevant fields to manage the eco-tourism industry and improve visitor flows in the study area.
- The government at federal, regional, zonal and district level should emphasise developing, managing and marketing the top prioritised potential tourism sites to attract local and international tourists.
- Local communities, including women and youths, should be equipped with the skills to engage in tourism activities by being organised into cooperatives and small and medium enterprises which receive entrepreneurial development training in tourism/eco-tourism, and cultural/natural heritage conservation.
- Community-oriented projects like community-based eco-tourism associations, community-based lodges, tour guides and restaurants should be designed.
- Establishing a national park in the zone, especially in areas such as Gurracho Hill and Cave, could attract domestic and international visitors.

- The conservation of biodiversity and cultural and historical heritage should be given priority while developing tourism/ecotourism in the zone.
- The private sector and communities at tourist destinations should be encouraged to get involved in the provision of traditional food, beverages, and transport services that offer new experiences to tourists.
- Empowering communities to participate in decision-making at all levels of tourism development is essential.

**Empowering communities to participate in decision-making at all levels of tourism development is essential.**





**Front cover:** Sor Waterfall is one of many easily accessible sites that would require only soft interventions to facilitate community based eco-tourism in Ilu Ababor Zone, Ethiopia.

## For more information

To learn more about any of the findings presented in this summary report, or to request a copy of the report in full, please contact our Ethiopian team directly using the contact details below.

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