

This paper is concerned with discerning the efficacy of park branding in influencing tourist choice behaviour and understanding behavioural differences of visitors as a basis for explaining their choice and behavioural intentions. Kenya's Vision 2030 clearly emphasized that a yield-focused branding strategy in Kenyan premium parks, complemented by the expansion in underutilized parks would improve Tourism GDP from Kshs 8 bn in 2006 to Kshs 11 bn - accounting to over 56% of Tourism GDP (GoK 2008). Up to now, 18 parks and reserves have been branded in Kenya and expectations are that such market-based initiatives would improve the image of Kenyan parks. Current trends however indicate that underutilized branded parks such as Hell's Gate National Park have witnessed a 38.3% decline in visitation from 2005-2009 from 38,900 to 24,000 in 2005 visitors in 2009 (KWS 2008; Euromonitor International 2010). In contrast, premium parks such as the L. Nakuru National Park have witnessed impressive results since 2005, with an annual visitation growth rate of 12% from 2005-2009 (KWS 2010). Such contradictions in visitation patterns between branded premium parks and underutilized parks warranted this study in investigating choice behaviour of visitors to branded parks in Kenya. The World Bank report on tourism development in Kenya further raises ideal concerns over the uncompetitiveness of Kenya's traditional tourism product offerings and the need to reposition the country's market image as a premier safari destination (World Bank, 2010). The study reviews literature on the role of destination branding, both the idealism and realism views as well as the Essentialism vs. Naturalism views. It provides benchmarks studies globally as a means of assessing the efficacy of park branding globally. A detailed conceptual review of the role of place and destination brands is reviewed. The study was undertaken by way of a Survey of local and international travellers visiting a clustered sample of branded national parks in Kenya. Interviews were conducted to assess the roles of destination brands in influencing their choices.