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Original Article

Community-Based Tourism Enterprises Performance and Community Attitudes Amidst Changing Demographics: Implications for Community Conservation Outcomes of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the influence of Community-Based Tourism Enterprises (CBTEs) performance on community attitudes towards community conservation outcomes like reduced illegal resource use, reduced poaching, protection of gorillas and collaborative wildlife management around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP). A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires, key informant interviews and Focus Group Discussions involving CBTE owners, CBTE members, Uganda Wildlife Authority Staff and local leaders. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple regression, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Results revealed that CBTEs positively influence community attitudes towards conservation, when communities receive tangible benefits such as income, employment, infrastructure development and social services, they are likely to support conservation efforts. Community involvement in decision-making and equitable benefit sharing were found to significantly enhance positive conservation attitudes, but unequal distribution of tourism benefits and persistent human-wildlife conflicts contributed to negative attitudes among residents. The study concludes that community conservation depends on the good performance of CBTEs through providing socio-economic and environmental benefits, which strengthens positive conservation attitudes. There is a need to strengthen CBTE performance through capacity building, access to conservation benefits, community participation and conservation education to achieve sustainable conservation outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Protected areas play a vital role in biodiversity conservation and ecosystem protection globally (Andersen, 2023). Among these, BINP in Uganda is internationally recognised for conserving the endangered mountain gorillas and other unique biodiversity resources (UWA, 2023; UNESCO & IUCN, 2023). BINP is a major tourism destination, particularly for gorilla trekking, generating substantial tourism revenue that contributes to national development and local livelihoods (UNWTO, 2023). Beyond ecological conservation, protected areas such as Bwindi are increasingly expected to support community development and foster positive relationships between conservation authorities and neighbouring communities.

Historically, conservation approaches in many developing countries emphasised strict protectionism, often limiting local communities' access to natural resources, resulting in human-wildlife conflicts, reduced livelihood opportunities, and negative attitudes toward protected areas (Kulunge et al., 2026; Oldekop et al., 2015). For the case of BINP, the gazettement of the forest into a national park was met with resistance from surrounding communities whose livelihoods depended heavily on forest resources, particularly the indigenous Batwa people (Ahebwa, 2012; Byaruhanga et al., 2012). These experiences highlighted the need for conservation strategies that not only focus on ecological protection but also address the socio-economic needs of local communities. Consequently, contemporary conservation approaches recognise that the long-term sustainability of protected areas depends on community support and participation (Odunga et al., 2024; IUCN, 2021).

Existing studies suggest that community attitudes toward conservation are strongly influenced by the benefits people derive from conservation-related initiatives (Mishra & Redda, 2026). Economic opportunities such as employment, income generation, and improved livelihoods have been found to encourage positive perceptions and support for conservation, while limited access to benefits may foster dissatisfaction and negative attitudes (Kulunge et al., 2026). As a result, integrated approaches that combine conservation objectives with local livelihood improvement have become central to modern conservation strategies (Abreu et al., 2024). One such approach is Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which promotes local participation in tourism activities while generating social and economic benefits that can enhance support for conservation efforts (Jin et al., 2024).

Community-Based Tourism Enterprises (CBTEs) were introduced around Bwindi in the early 1990s as a strategy for promoting conservation-friendly livelihoods, reducing conflicts between communities and park management (Byaruhanga et al., 2012). These enterprises include community-owned or community-managed tourism initiatives such as accommodation facilities, guiding services, handicrafts, and cultural tourism activities through which local people directly benefit from tourism (Jin et al., 2024). Through income generation, employment

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creation, and livelihood diversification, CBTEs were expected to reduce dependence on forest resources and strengthen positive community attitudes toward conservation (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2025). The benefits are intended to generate community conservation outcomes relating to reduced illegal resource use, reduced incidences of illegal hunting, reformation of poachers, habitat restoration, sustainable resource management, and enhanced education and awareness among community members.

Nevertheless, more than three decades after their establishment, the performance of CBTEs around Bwindi appears to have changed considerably. While some enterprises have expanded and improved community livelihoods, others have experienced declining performance due to management challenges, low output, changing tourism markets, limited community participation and changing demographic characteristics (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2021). These variations in performance may shape how communities perceive both tourism and conservation outcomes. Communities that experience meaningful income and other benefits from CBTEs are more likely to support conservation efforts, whereas dissatisfaction arising from declining enterprise performance or lack of benefits may weaken conservation support (Giampiccoli & Glassom, 2021). The socio-economic and demographic characteristics of communities surrounding Bwindi have evolved over time. Factors such as population growth, changing livelihood aspirations, increased levels of education, youth unemployment, migration, commercialisation of tourism, and greater exposure to modern technologies have transformed local expectations and patterns of participation in tourism activities. These changing dynamics may influence the performance of CBTEs, how communities perceive conservation enterprises and whether CBTEs still serve as effective instruments for promoting positive conservation attitudes. While earlier conservation models assumed that tourism benefits would naturally translate into conservation support, changing community realities may have altered this relationship.

Despite the continued presence of CBTEs around Bwindi, conservation challenges such as encroachment, illegal resource use, and poaching persist (Ssebagala, 2025). This raises important questions regarding whether Community-Based Tourism Enterprises' current performance remains relevant in influencing positive community attitudes toward conservation for the required conservation outcomes in the contemporary era amidst evolving socio-economic dynamics.

This study assesses how changing socio-economic and demographic dynamics influence the performance of CBTEs and their contribution to sustainability. Further, the study investigates whether CBTEs remain relevant under evolving demographic conditions and how these shifts shape local perceptions of conservation, their effectiveness in promoting positive attitudes and sustainable conservation outcomes. The findings are expected to contribute to ongoing debates on community-based tourism enterprises significance to sustainable conservation strategies in and around protected areas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was done in CBTEs and communities around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, which is widely recognised for its exceptional biodiversity and complex ecological system characterised by varied landscapes like dense tropical forests and rugged terrains (UWA, 2021). The park is home to the endangered mountain gorillas, about 459 individuals, representing more than half of the World's remaining population (IGCP, 2008) and a variety of other wildlife, including birds, mammals, butterflies, amphibians, frogs and reptiles. The outstanding ecological value and global significance of Bwindi earned it a UNESCO World Heritage Site status, reflecting its importance not only for Uganda but for global biodiversity conservation. It is located in South Western Uganda along the Albertine Rift and is recognised as one of the most biologically diverse forests in Africa, along the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo,

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and lies approximately between 1°00′–1°20′ South and 29°35′–29°50′ East.

The park is surrounded by one of the most densely populated rural landscapes in the districts of Kanungu, Rubanda and Kisoro of Uganda, with population density ranging from 100-300 persons per square kilometre higher (UBOS, 2024). The high population pressure on land and natural resources has significant implications for conservation as local communities depend heavily on the surrounding environment for their livelihoods through crop farming and livestock keeping (Twinamatsiko, 2015). The local communities around Bwindi are composed of Bantu ethnic groups, including the Bakiga, Bafumbira, alongside the indigenous Batwa who originally inhabited the forest (Blomley et al., 2010b). This group traditionally relied on forest resources for hunting, gathering wild fruits, firewood, and medicinal plants, but their eviction in 1991 disrupted their livelihood and cultural systems (Blomley et al., 2010a). This historical displacement has consequently had a negative influence on their attitudes and perceptions toward conservation. The local community affected by the 1991 gazettement of BINP have since adapted through subsistence agriculture and engaging in tourism-related activities. Gorilla tourism in Bwindi emerged as an alternative source of income, providing employment opportunities such as guiding, portering and involvement in CBTEs (Sandbrook et al., 2018). The BINP proximity population then was largely an adult population, but the current trends indicate a much higher youth population expected to have varying life aspirations.

Data Collection Methods

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, which improves the reliability and validity of the findings (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The study focused on 45 CBTEs operating within the four sectors of BINP, including Buhoma, Rushaga, Ruhija and Nkuringo, that were selected based on their proximity to the park (approx. 2km), and involvement in tourism enterprises like accommodation, tour guiding, craft selling and entertainment (drama groups). The study engaged a total sample of 318 respondents determined using the Yamane (1967) formula to ensure statistical representativeness. The respondents included CBTE employees, CBTE registered members, and other community members selected randomly. Information on demographics, CBTE characteristics, socio-economic performance, participation levels and how these factors influence community attitudes towards conservation were documented. Secondary data sources were also utilised, for instance CBTE records, financial reports, community conservation documents (meeting minutes, conservation action plans, CBTE registers, and MOUs (UWA, 2024) to complement primary data and provide contextual understanding of CBTE performance and its influence on attitudes to conservation and its outcomes.

To gain deeper insights into community perceptions, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions. Key informants included CBTE owners, managers, community leaders, district officials, UWA staff and NGO representatives who were selected purposively based on their expertise, roles and experience in tourism and conservation-related activities. These were individuals who were directly involved in CBTEs, conservation activities, and community leadership around BINP. Focus group discussions involving 21 participants were conducted, one FGD per sector until data saturation. The discussions were conducted using a guide with open-ended questions moderated by the researcher while the research assistant recorded key responses and observations. The study examined three key themes: 1) the socio-economic and environmental performance of CBTEs; 2) how these factors influence community attitudes towards conservation through support for wildlife protection, participation in conservation activities and awareness of environmental sustainability; and 3) how the socio-demographics influence community attitudes towards conservation. These discussions provided a platform for participants to

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share views, experiences and opinions regarding the performance of CBTEs and their influence on conservation attitudes around BINP.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 25 to generate descriptive and inferential statistics, which helped to establish how demographics affect CBTE performance and CBTE influence on attitudes towards conservation. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, perceptions and experiences. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative datasets provided a comprehensive understanding of how CBTEs influence Community attitudes toward conservation of Bwindi.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CBTEs' Performance and Its Influence on Community Attitudes Towards Conservation

The findings revealed that Community-Based Tourism Enterprises (CBTEs) around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park perform highly across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The positive performance was accompanied by favourable attitudes toward conservation, suggesting that CBTE performance contributes to shaping community support for conservation outcomes.

The high economic performance of CBTEs (Mean = 4.04) indicated that tourism enterprises generated important livelihood opportunities through employment, business development, market access, and income generation (Table 1). Respondents reported that they have earned income, acquired assets and accessed markets for their local products. These benefits strengthen community appreciation of conservation of BINP, as one respondent in a Focus Group Discussion stated that "Before joining this enterprise, I didn't know anything about the value of the forest, but now I understand that our enterprise depends on the forest, and it has really opened my eyes" (FGD-2024/2025*)*. The finding supports the argument that economic incentives derived from tourism can encourage local communities to view protected areas as valuable assets rather than barriers to development (Spenceley & Ahebwa, 2021). Tangible economic incentives are key drivers of positive conservation attitudes, and conservation initiatives that focus on improving community livelihoods gain community support (Brooks et al., 2013; Oldekop et al., 2015). Tourism-related income reduces illegal resource access in the park and enhances local attitudes to support conservation initiatives (UNWTO, 2024).

Correlation analysis was done to establish the predictive power and magnitude of influence of each Economic CBTE performance on attitudes and which enterprise category influenced more attitudes towards conservation. Economic performance dimension showed a strong positive relationship with affective feelings toward conservation ($r = .449$, $p < .01$), indicating that tangible economic benefits enhance community attitudes in CBTEs. Accommodation, art and craft enterprises recorded the highest mean scores (M=4.07 and M=4.06) respectively, showing that these categories of successful tourism enterprises foster positive emotional attachment to conservation. Respondents from Enterprises confirmed that they engage in CBTE enterprises to earn income that helps them to survive. Porters report every morning to the Tourism Information Centre to get an opportunity to escort guests for gorilla trekking by carrying bags or carrying tourists who become weak during the trekking period. For example, one of the porters in Rushaga stated that "working as a porter has improved my family's income and has made me appreciate the importance of protecting the forest because our survival depends on the forest" Interview 2024/2025. This fosters a positive attitude because members realise that the existence of the protected area sustains their livelihood. Porter groups participate in patrols, managing problem animals and putting out wildfires in the forest, hence supporting conservation efforts. This finding aligns with research highlighting the role of economic incentives in fostering positive community attitudes and engagement in conservation efforts (Koricha & Adem, 2024; Mmbaga et al., 2024).

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The strong social performance of CBTEs (Mean = 4.21) demonstrates their contribution to skills development, cultural preservation, social inclusion, and working jointly with local communities, government agencies, and conservation organisations in planning and implementation of CBTEs. Such benefits are important because they foster community empowerment and participation, which are key determinants of positive conservation attitudes. The attitude of feelings and values indicated a strong emotional attachment to conservation with a mean score of (4.00). Community members expressed pride in contributing to conservation and recognised the role of the protected area in shaping community identity. Further, members revealed that social gatherings improve their mental health and help to solve their social challenges. Community-based tourism enhances social cohesion and fosters positive conservation attitudes (Lemunge et al., 2025; Odunga et al., 2024). Also, emotional connections such as pride and identity are critical drivers of conservation behaviour (Dawson et al., 2021). For instance, community members feel proud that their area is home to endangered mountain gorillas, they view Bwindi forest as part of their cultural heritage and identity, symbolising their history and traditions. This encourages them to support its protection and restoration.

Social performance demonstrated moderate positive correlations across all attitude dimensions ($r = .321–.377$, $p < .01$) (Table 3), indicating that socially successful CBTEs contribute to fostering positive attitudes towards conservation. The category of CBTEs that positively influenced conservation intentions and actions were mostly conservation and empowerment-based enterprises (M=4.04) and tour guiding enterprises (M=4.05). Other categories performed as follows: Accommodation, Mean = (3.74), Art and Craft, Mean= (3.77). This result shows that members involved in these enterprises are more willing to engage in conservation-related activities; thus, CBTEs not only shape attitudes but encourage behavioural commitment to conservation. Through interviews, respondents confirmed that they participate in skills training, planning and management of enterprises, attend awareness meetings and receive support for community projects. These practices promote empowerment, social cooperation and local involvement, fostering development of favourable attitudes towards conservation. Findings further revealed that limited participation in CBTEs negatively affected community attitudes, with one participant noting, “We are never involved in planning and decision-making as far as this enterprise is concerned, this makes us less motivated” (Interview, 2024/2025). This happens when influential individuals in a CBTE dominate leadership positions and control access to tourism opportunities for other members, causing dissatisfaction. When community members feel marginalised by their leaders, they are less likely to develop positive attitudes toward conservation. The finding resonates with studies showing that community participation in a conservation initiative enterprise enhances empowerment, trust, and commitment to conservation, hence positive attitudes, whereas limited involvement can reduce local support for conservation programs (Alam & Nayak, 2025; Koricha & Adem, 2024).

Environmental performance was also rated highly (Mean = 4.19), reflecting respondents' recognition of CBTE contributions to conservation awareness, sustainable resource use, waste management, and leaving degraded areas to regenerate. The behavioural component of attitudes indicated strong willingness to engage in conservation activities (Mean=3.67). This was confirmed through high membership in wildlife clubs and Associations that account for over 60% of all the CBTEs in Bwindi. Respondents indicated a willingness to participate in conservation activities, report illegal activities, attend conservation meetings, and engage in conservation projects. For instance, a community member noted that “When I see people engaging in illegal activities, I report them because protecting the forest is our responsibility since it benefits all of us” Interview, 2024/2025. Such

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behaviours translate into improved conservation knowledge and awareness by reducing illegal resource use, strengthening monitoring systems, and enhancing community involvement in protected area management. Environmental education and awareness are important drivers of pro-conservation attitudes because they increase understanding of ecological values and the benefits derived from ecosystem services (Oldekop et al., 2015; UNEP, 2024; IUCN, 2024). Environmental performance exhibited the strongest relationships with the attitude dimensions of knowledge and beliefs ($r = .496$, $p < .01$) and behavioural intentions ($r = .394$, $p < .01$). This result implies that when CBTEs actively promote conservation through activities like environmental education, tree planting, waste management and habitat restoration, community members develop positive attitudes about natural resource protection. CBTEs in collaboration with UWA and NGOs in Bwindi educate communities about the value of the environment. The community is aware of the socio-economic and environmental importance of the Bwindi conservation area and is in support of the conservation efforts demonstrated through reporting illegal activities, stopping forest fires and managing problem animals. For example, a CBTE member in an interview noted: *"*After receiving environmental awareness training in this enterprise, I now understand the importance of protecting the park, and I actively support conservation because my livelihood depends on it" Interview, 2024/2025. This aligns with studies demonstrating that successful environmental performance can foster stronger conservation attitudes and behaviours (Brooks et al, 2013; Sutresna et al., 2019).

Strong behavioural engagement towards conservation among communities was reflected in willingness to participate by attending conservation meetings, reporting illegal activities, volunteering, taking part in habitat restoration and the presence of reformed poachers, thus contributing positively to conservation outcomes. The high levels of willingness to engage in conservation activities imply that communities possess strong motivational foundations for co-management and long-term stewardship. When communities voluntarily attend park-community meetings, it demonstrates trust in dialogue platforms and strengthens communication channels essential for conflict resolution, joint planning, and accountability. One UWA staff member observed that;

> *"Many community members who benefit from tourism and conservation programmes through employment, CBTEs and other community projects now actively report illegal activities, attend conservation meetings, and encourage others to protect the forest because they understand that their livelihoods depend on it" Key Informant Interview, 2024/ 2025).*

This testimony reinforces the finding that participation in CBTEs and conservation-related initiatives can foster positive behavioural intentions and actions that support the long-term conservation of biodiversity around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Similar patterns have been reported in Bwindi where community engagement and participation in CBTEs have led to behavioural change towards supporting conservation (Ahebwa, 2012; Tumusiime et al., 2018; Twinamatsiko et al., 2014). Global evidence also supports these observations, showing that behavioural intentions and actions strengthen when communities participate in monitoring and evaluation, gain recognition for conservation contributions and benefit from conservation-derived income (Brooks et al., 2013; Oldekop et al., 2015).

Despite the generally positive findings, perceptions of fairness and benefit sharing received only moderate ratings (Mean = 3.01). Respondents expressed concerns regarding the equitable distribution of tourism and conservation benefits from CBTEs (M=2.8) and equal opportunities among community members (M=2.75). This is where the economic and non-economic benefits generated by the enterprises are distributed unevenly among CBTEs. For instance, when employment opportunities in community

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lodges or cultural centres, tour guiding are concentrated among a small group of CBTE members while others receive limited or no opportunities. This is a result of elite capture where a few literate individuals in a CBTE take leadership positions and take advantage of the illiterate members. This was reported in Association-based CBTEs where few individuals run and benefit from CBTEs while other participants remain passive. Even when there is an opportunity for funding, leaders never share it with all the members equally, they only hear about it when it is too late. One association-based enterprise member expressed frustration with the perceived concentration of benefits among a small group of leaders, explaining how this undermines both trust in the enterprise and willingness to support conservation. The participant stated:

> *"For years, the same few leaders have controlled the enterprise and decided who gets jobs, training and other opportunities. Some of us who are just members are rarely considered or consulted. It is difficult for me to remain committed to conservation when benefits are enjoyed by a small group while the rest of us are left out" FGD, 2024/2025.*

This illustrates how exclusion in access to CBTE benefits can weaken members' trust in enterprise governance, leading to declining motivation and attitude to participate in conservation activities. Such complaints cause disillusionment and reduced compliance with conservation regulations. When benefits are distributed unevenly, and conservation costs are not compensated, community support for conservation may decline, potentially leading to conflicts and reduced participation in conservation activities (Dawson et al., 2024). Failure to address these issues contributes to negative conservation attitudes (Matseketsa et al., 2018). The results show a strong disagreement that communities can conserve without realising benefits, suggesting that conservation is linked to benefits (Duffy & Massé, 2021; Waylen et al., 2010).

Perceived fairness in benefit sharing is a critical determinant of community attitudes towards conservation because when community members receive equitable income, employment, and livelihood opportunities, they are more willing to support conservation initiatives. Around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, studies have consistently shown that only direct, tangible, and fairly distributed benefits foster positive attitudes towards protected area management (Tumusiime et al., 2018), while unequal distribution of tourism revenues and employment opportunities generates resentment and weakens conservation support (Ahebwa et al., 2012). The low ratings for fairness in benefit sharing observed in this study therefore suggest that inequities remain a persistent challenge despite long-standing CBTE interventions. Similar findings have been reported in Queen Elizabeth National Park and Murchison Falls National Park, where perceived inequalities undermined trust and participation (Katswera et al., 2022a; Travers, 2021). Evidence from Kenya and Tanzania demonstrates that equitable benefit distribution is more influential than the volume of benefits received in shaping conservation support (Groom & Harris, 2020; Kegamba et al., 2023). Globally, transparent and equitable benefit-sharing enhances community cooperation, whereas elite capture and inequitable participation reduce trust, stewardship, and long-term commitment to conservation (Oldekop et al., 2015; Scheidel et al., 2018; Woodhouse et al., 2022). The findings are consistent with Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that individuals evaluate relationships by comparing the benefits they receive with the costs they incur (John, 1992). In the context of CBTEs, community members are more likely to support conservation when they perceive that tourism provides fair and meaningful economic and social benefits.

The findings demonstrate that strong CBTE performance is associated with positive community attitudes toward conservation, which in turn contribute to improved conservation outcomes. Through economic empowerment, social inclusion, environmental awareness, and

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community participation, CBTEs appear to strengthen local stewardship of natural resources and encourage behaviours that support biodiversity conservation. Around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, such outcomes are particularly important because conservation success depends heavily on community cooperation in reducing illegal activities, protecting habitats, and supporting the long-term conservation of mountain gorillas and other biodiversity resources (UWA, 2024; UNESCO & IUCN, 2023). On the other hand, poor performance of CBTEs is likely to undermine positive community attitudes toward both the enterprise and conservation (Nunkoo et al., 2023). When CBTEs fail to provide meaningful livelihood benefits, equitable governance, or contribute to environmental stewardship, CBTE members may lose trust in CBTE leadership and withdraw participation in enterprise and conservation activities (Ashley & Roe, 2002). A case in point is the Change a Life enterprise in Ruhija, which collapsed due to poor performance. Members abandoned the enterprise due to a lack of benefits associated with the enterprise, which created negative attitudes towards the enterprise (Ahebwa, 2012; Tumusiime et al., 2018).

Table 1: CBTEs' Performance and Its Influence on Community Attitudes Towards Conservation

Item	**Indicators**	**Composite mean**	**Interpretation**
CBTE performance	Economic Performance	4.04	High
	Social Performance	4.21	Very High
	Environmental Performance	4.19	Very High
Attitudes	Knowledge and Beliefs	3.97	High
	Affective feelings and values	4	High
	Behavioural Intentions and Actions	3.67	High
	Perceptions of Fairness and Benefit Sharing	3.01	Moderate

	Correlation between attitudes and CBTE performance		
Attitude Indicator	*Performance Indicator*	*Correlation*	*P-value*
Knowledge and Beliefs	Economic Performance	0.146	0.014*
	Social Performance	0.321	<0 .001***
	Environmental Performance	0.496	<0 .001***
Affective Feelings	Economic Performance	0.449	<0 .001***
	Social Performance	0.378	<0 .001***
	Environmental Performance	0.375	<0 .001***
Behavioral Intentions	Economic Performance	-0.01	0.869
	Social Performance	0.367	<0 .001***
	Environmental Performance	0.393	<0 .001***
Perceived Fairness	Economic Performance	0.034	0.567
	Social Performance	0.349	<0 .001***
	Environmental Performance	0.377	<0 .001***

Source: *Primary data, 2024/2025*

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Influence of demographic Characteristics on attitudes

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of demographic characteristics of respondents on community attitudes to conservation (Table 2). The results showed that demographic characteristics significantly influenced attitudes relating to knowledge and beliefs ($p = 0.039$), feelings and values ($p = 0.016$), intentions and actions ($P=0.032$) but however, demographics did not significantly influence perceptions of fairness and benefit sharing ($p = 0.131$). The findings suggest that demographic factors play an important role in shaping conservation attitudes.

Demographic characteristics significantly influenced respondents' knowledge and beliefs towards conservation. For instance, income ($\beta = 0.148$) had the strongest positive influence, followed by age ($\beta = 0.091$) and gender ($\beta = 0.064$). This suggests that individuals with higher incomes and older age groups possess more positive knowledge and beliefs regarding conservation. Exposure to economic benefits and life experience enhance understanding and appreciation of conservation. Through interviews, individuals who reported having acquired land and other assets by participating in CBTEs demonstrated positive attitudes and support for conservation. Communities with better livelihood conditions and greater access to conservation benefits exhibit more positive conservation attitudes around protected areas (Lyakurwa & Chepkwony, 2025). Similarly, Koricha & Adem (2024) found that individuals who benefited from conservation and tourism initiatives demonstrated greater understanding and appreciation of biodiversity conservation.

Also, older respondents demonstrated better understanding of conservation benefits, implying that younger CBTE members may not possess the same level of appreciation for long-term ecological and livelihood benefits derived from conservation. This presents a significant challenge for the sustainability of CBTEs, calling for prioritisation of youth engagement through conservation education, environmental awareness campaigns, mentorship and meaningful participation in governance and decision-making. Equipping young people with conservation knowledge cultivates positive conservation attitudes and ensures continuity of community-led conservation efforts across generations. This finding suggests that conservation education and awareness programs around Bwindi should particularly target younger and lower-income groups whose knowledge and beliefs may be less developed.

Demographic characteristics significantly influenced feelings and values toward conservation. Position in the enterprise had the strongest positive effect ($\beta = 0.162$), while marital status had the strongest negative effect ($\beta = -0.159$). Positive feelings relating to pride, responsibility and appreciation of the value of conservation were evident from qualitative findings. One community leader stated that he was 'proud to participate in conservation because it protects wildlife, supports tourism and improves community livelihoods" (Community Leader, personal communication, June, 2024). This indicates that individuals occupying leadership or managerial positions in Community-Based Tourism Enterprises (CBTEs) hold more positive feelings and values toward conservation. Participation in tourism and conservation governance strengthens positive attitudes towards protected areas (Obradovi, 2023). The findings imply that conservation managers should strengthen community participation in tourism enterprises and conservation decision-making processes as a means of fostering positive conservation values.

The findings revealed that demographic characteristics significantly influenced respondents' intentions and actions toward conservation, with income emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.194$), followed by gender ($\beta = 0.099$). Interview results demonstrated willingness to conserve, and members showed that they support efforts to protect wildlife by reporting illegal activities that threaten conservation. For instance, one

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community member noted, “I report illegal activities to conservation authorities because protecting wildlife and the forest is important for our community's future” (Community member, personal communication, July 2024). This indicates willingness to actively support conservation efforts in Bwindi. Conservation behaviour is shaped by socio-economic conditions and the perceived benefits derived from conservation initiatives (Wale et al., 2025). Communities are more likely to engage in conservation activities when they experience tangible benefits such as employment opportunities, income generation, and improved livelihoods (Koricha & Adem, 2024).

Although some demographic variables showed associations with perceptions of fairness and benefit sharing, the overall model was not statistically significant ($p = 0.131$). The result suggests that perceptions regarding fairness and benefit sharing, Community members tend to view benefit-sharing arrangements in a similar way irrespective of their demographic backgrounds. This suggests that perceptions of fairness are relatively shaped more by institutional factors such as transparency, participation in decision-making, and governance arrangements. Consequently, efforts to enhance community support for conservation should focus on strengthening equitable and transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms that are accessible to all community members. Research around protected areas has further demonstrated that transparent and equitable benefit-sharing systems are critical for maintaining local support for conservation regardless of age, gender, or income status (Lyakurwa et al., 2025). This highlights the importance of strengthening accountability and transparency in benefit-sharing arrangements rather than targeting specific demographic groups.

Technology has also influenced CBTE members’ attitudes towards conservation around BINP by improving access to conservation information, expanding tourism markets and facilitating communication among stakeholders (Krittayaruangroj et al., 2023; Namutebi and Nakimbugwe, 2023). The increased use of smartphones, social media and online booking platforms has enabled CBTEs in Buhoma, Ruhija, Rushaga and Nkuringo to market community walks, cultural performances, handicrafts and homestays to both local and international tourists, creating opportunities for income generation. When members experience tangible livelihood benefits from digitally promoted enterprises, they are likely to perceive conservation positively. However, technology can also negatively influence conservation attitudes through spreading misinformation regarding financial misappropriation and favouritism tendencies in CBTE benefit sharing, leading to mistrust and reduced community support for conservation (Crespo and Cruz, 2023). Technology can strengthen conservation attitudes, but its positive influence depends on accurate information dissemination and digital literacy.

Demographic characteristics influence how communities understand, value, and participate in conservation. Since positive attitudes are essential for achieving conservation objectives such as biodiversity protection, community participation, and sustainable resource management, conservation interventions around Bwindi should adopt demographic-sensitive approaches like targeted awareness programs for younger and lower-income groups, strengthen community participation in CBTE management and conservation decision-making, and maintain transparent and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms to sustain community support for conservation.

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Table 2: The Influence of Demographic Characteristics on Attitudes

Attitudes towards conservation	Age	Gender	Education	Income	Marital status	Position	P-value
Knowledge and beliefs	0.136	0.069	-0.069	0.143	-0.092	-0.012	**0.039**
Feelings and values	-0.011	0.057	-0.045	0.001	-0.148	0.146	**0.016**
Intentions and actions	-0.29	0.123	-0.032	-0.089	0.001	0.059	**0.032**
Fairness and Benefit sharing	-0.28	0.075	0.009	-0.087	-0.02	0.068	**0.131**

Source: *Primary Data 2024/2025*

Attitudes as Predictors of Community Conservation Outcomes

The multiple regression model examined the extent to which four attitude indicators (knowledge and beliefs, affective feelings, behavioural intentions and perceptions of fairness in benefit sharing) predicted the overall community conservation outcomes (Table 3). The model demonstrates that the attitude indicators collectively provide a strong explanation of variations in conservation outcomes.

Knowledge and beliefs had a statistically significant positive influence on conservation outcomes (β=0.2262, p< .001). This indicates that as community members' understanding of conservation principles, ecological values and benefits of wildlife increases, their contribution to conservation outcomes improves. For the case of Bwindi, communities demonstrate a high level of conservation behaviour by picking up and disposing of all kinds of litter, recycling plastics, planting trees and using energy-saving methods for cooking. The significance of knowledge and beliefs implies that CBTEs in Bwindi have successfully promoted conservation awareness, which is translating into conservation actions at the community level. The results align with those of Groom and Harris (2020), which show that conservation knowledge strengthens compliance with conservation rules, fosters stewardship and enhances local support for protected areas.

Further, the regression results show that affective feelings (emotional attachment) alone do not independently predict conservation behaviour, they work indirectly through other dimensions rather than exerting direct influence (Hussain et al., 2021). In the CBTE context, this result means that while communities feel proud of the park and value its existence, this alone cannot yield strong behavioural outcomes. Emotional attachment must be complemented by training, incentives and fair benefits so as to contribute to conservation outcomes. Conservation strategies should go beyond awareness creation and fostering positive perceptions of protected areas (Zhang et al., 2020). UWA needs to strengthen programs that translate positive attitudes into tangible conservation actions, for example, continuous conservation education, skills training, community participation, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms and support for viable livelihood opportunities (Kegamba et al., 2023). Conservation programs should integrate environmental education with livelihood support, community empowerment, participatory governance and fair distribution of benefits. This approach fosters sustained community commitment to conservation and reduces resource-use conflicts. Similar patterns are observed in conservation psychology literature where emotional attachment enhances motivation but does not necessarily lead to behaviour without enabling conditions (Bennett et al., 2017).

Behavioural intentions emerged as the strongest predictor of conservation outcomes (β=0.2507, p< .001). This means that respondents who expressed clear intentions to engage in conservation activities (participating in patrols, reporting illegal activities, adopting conservation-friendly practices) were more likely to demonstrate actual conservation engagement. The finding is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which suggests that intentions are the most proximal predictors of behaviour. Other empirical studies in community conservation contexts similarly show that when community members express strong intentions, they are more likely to participate in stewardship activities if not obstructed by institutional and economic conditions (Richards et al., 2024). The strength of behavioural intentions in this study highlights the

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need to create supportive structures to ensure that the intentions translate into sustained conservation actions.

Perceived fairness in benefit sharing also significantly predicts conservation outcomes. This is because communities that view benefit-sharing arrangements as fair are more likely to support conservation rules and participate in CBTE activities. This finding underscores the critical importance of equitable benefit-sharing schemes in maintaining community motivation for conservation. This resonates with local, national and global evidence showing that fair and transparent distribution of benefits builds trust, reduces conflict and enhances long-term stewardship of protected areas (Snyman et al., 2023). When benefits are perceived as unfair or captured by a few, community cooperation declines, ultimately undermining conservation objectives.

The results suggest that conservation success within CBTE frameworks depends not only on positive attitudes but also on empowering communities with knowledge, cultivating clear behavioural intentions and ensuring fair and transparent CBTE benefit-sharing arrangements.

Table 3: Attitudes as predictors of Community Conservation Outcomes

COMMUNITY CONSERVATION OUTCOMES	Mean±SD
Reduced community dependence on BINP	4.09±0.72
Reformation of poachers	4.05±0.84
Reduced illegal removal of resources	4.17±0.73
Habitat restoration	3.92±0.84
Reduced incidences of illegal hunting	4.27±0.73
Support for community conservation initiatives	4.05±0.85
Improved and sustainable livelihoods	4.09±0.75
Community involvement in decision making	4.04±0.80
Enhanced visitor experiences	3.99±0.77
Enhanced education and awareness	4.20±0.75
Sustainable Resource management	4.12±0.77

Multiple Regression

Attitude indicator	Estimate	Std. error	statistic	P-value
(Intercept)	1.169	0.2707	4.3191	0
Knowledge and beliefs	0.2262	0.0634	3.5681	0.0004
Affective feelings and values	0.0524	0.0533	0.9829	0.3265
Behavioural intentions	0.2507	0.0559	4.4821	0
Perceptions and fairness in benefit sharing	0.2003	0.0505	3.9669	0.0001

Influence of CBTE Performance on Conservation Outcomes

The contribution of CBTE performance on community conservation outcomes was determined using Multiple linear regression analysis (ANOVA F-test). The results (Table 4) indicate that the overall regression model was statistically significant ($F = 20.394$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that CBTE performance explains a significant portion of the variation in community conservation outcomes. The finding suggests that CBTE activities collectively contribute to conservation success in Bwindi, with social and environmental dimensions having stronger effects compared to the economic dimension. However, the residual variation shows that other institutional and environmental factors contribute to conservation outcomes other than CBTE

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performance. The results show that CBTEs are a conservation tool, well-performing CBTEs can act as effective instruments for conservation (Giampiccoli & Glassom, 2021). Through Key Informant interviews, it was found that CBTEs have made a great contribution to conservation success in Bwindi. One staff member from the Uganda Wildlife Authority noted:

> *"From my experience, the enterprises have contributed to conservation. Local people earn income through handicraft sales and employment in accommodation facilities, while also gaining skills and other social benefits. I have observed reduced illegal activities and stronger community support for conservation through reporting fires and illegal entry into the park, managing problem animals, and environmental stewardship"* (UWA staff member, personal communication, 2025).

When CBTEs deliver tangible benefits such as economic returns and social inclusion, they create incentives for communities to protect natural resources rather than exploit them. When CBTEs are well managed and integrated with local conservation goals, they are recognised as effective tools for promoting biodiversity conservation while supporting community development (Watiema et al., 2024).

The result aligns with the conservation incentive theory, which suggests that communities are more likely to engage in resource protection when conservation provides direct socio-economic benefits (Börner & Biber-freudenberger, 2024). CBTEs are a valid conservation strategy, and strengthening their performance can enhance conservation outcomes, but their effectiveness depends on complementary governance, social and environmental support systems.

Table 4: CBTE Performance and Community Conservation Outcomes

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	16.818	4	4.204	20.394	0.000
Residual (Error)	57.108	277	0.206	–	–
Total	**73.925**	**281**	–	–	–

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community-Based Tourism Enterprises continue to play an important role in linking community livelihoods with conservation by providing socio-economic and environmental benefits to local communities. Well-performing CBTEs, especially Art-craft and accommodation, were associated with positive conservation knowledge and beliefs, favourable feelings and values toward conservation, indicating that successful enterprises strengthen community support for conservation by creating tangible livelihood benefits while increasing awareness of the value of natural resources. Economic benefits emerged as the strongest driver of positive conservation attitudes, highlighting the role of livelihood improvement in motivating conservation support.

The study further revealed that community attitudes are important predictors of community conservation outcomes, but positive attitudes alone were found to be insufficient in sustaining long-term conservation behaviour. They were associated with greater willingness to participate in conservation activities, support conservation enterprises, report illegal activities and contribute to biodiversity protection. The findings demonstrate that conservation success depends not only on ecological interventions but also on how communities perceive, value and benefit from conservation efforts. CBTEs are likely to remain effective in promoting positive community attitudes and conservation outcomes as long as they continue to demonstrate strong economic, social, environmental and behavioural performance, with economic performance exerting the greatest influence. CBTE management should prioritise strategies that strengthen the economic performance of CBTEs like product diversification, digital marketing, applying for grants and improving product

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quality, to enhance the profitability of CBTEs so as to contribute to conservation outcomes of Bwindi.

The findings also indicated that elite capture in CBTEs negatively influenced attitudes where CBTE revenues, employment opportunities and leadership positions were concentrated among a few influential individuals. This creates perceptions of unfairness, exclusion and unequal distribution of benefits, weakening trust in CBTE governance and reducing willingness to participate in conservation activities. The CBTE management committees need to strengthen transparent and inclusive governance mechanisms through democratic leadership, fixed leadership terms, regular independent audits and equitable benefit-sharing frameworks that facilitate inclusive participation. Participatory approaches increase local ownership, empower communities and improve attitudes toward conservation initiatives.

The study established that CBTEs were more highly valued by adults than by younger people, suggesting that existing CBTE approaches may not adequately resonate with a rapidly changing population. Considering Uganda's youthful demographic profile and increasing influence of technology, there is a need to re-design CBTE strategies to engage younger generations through innovative technology-enabled approaches while maintaining inclusive participation across all demographic groups.

Strengthening these aspects will enhance community support for conservation and contribute to more sustainable conservation outcomes around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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