



Policy Briefing

Enhancing Sustainable Tourism Development through Conservation of Cultural, Historical, and Natural Heritages in Southeastern Ethiopia

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Article Info	Executive Summary
Article History Received: 10 June 2025 Accepted: 28 July 2025	<p><i>This policy brief outlines the ongoing project aimed at enhancing sustainable tourism development in Bale, East Bale, and West Arsi zones of Southeastern Ethiopia. The project focuses on conserving cultural, historical, and natural heritages while fostering community engagement and economic growth. Since 2021, Madda Walabu University has been executing a project titled "Enhancing Sustainable Tourism Development through Conservation of Cultural, Historical, and Natural Heritages in Southeastern Ethiopia." This initiative targets the West Arsi, East Bale, and Bale zones, with a total budget of 5,292,791 Birr allocated over five years (2021-2026). The project aims to enhance a sustainable tourism economy while preserving the region's rich heritage. Key activities include assessing heritage site conditions, identifying potential tourist attractions, and documenting cultural and natural resources. The project has yielded a comprehensive inventory of 89 heritage sites, including notable UNESCO landmarks such as Bale Mountains National Park, Sof Omar Cave, and Dire Sheik Hussein Shrine. The policy relevance of this initiative lies in its potential to inform evidence-based tourism development strategies, particularly in underutilized yet heritage-rich rural areas. The findings highlight the urgent need for integrated policy frameworks that link conservation with tourism development, youth entrepreneurship, and equitable benefit-sharing. This policy brief recommends the formulation of localized tourism policies, improved coordination among stakeholders, recognition of undocumented heritage sites, and the creation of community-led tourism investment funds to ensure long-term sustainability and inclusive development outcomes.</i></p>
Keywords: Heritage conservation, sustainable tourism, policy implication, Bale, East Bale, and West Arsi Zones.	



1. Introduction

Ethiopia's tourism sector holds substantial potential for its sustainable development, particularly in regions endowed with rich cultural, historical, and natural heritage (Yasin, Gebbisa, & Bacs, 2024). The southeastern part of the country, comprising the Bale, East Bale, and West Arsi zones is a prime example, featuring diverse and unique ecosystems and associated floras and faunas, breathtaking landscapes, and unique cultural traditions that appeal to both domestic and international visitors. This region hosts several renowned heritage sites, including the UNESCO-listed Bale Mountains National Park, the spiritually revered Sof Omar Cave, and the historically significant Dire Sheik Hussein Shrine. These destinations not only illustrate the scenic and cultural richness of the area but also serve as living symbols of Ethiopia's multifaceted heritage (Aseres & Sira, 2020; Kefyalew, 2023).

Despite its vast potential, the tourism sector in Southeastern Ethiopia faces critical challenges that hinder sustainable growth (Tourism Minister, 2025). Chief among these is the inadequate preservation and management of cultural, historical, and natural heritage, which are essential for attracting tourists and fostering long-term development.

In addition, the fragmented identification, documentation, and marketing of these heritage sites pose further challenges for this distinctive region. Infrastructure remains underdeveloped, with poorly maintained roads to key heritage sites and poor standard accommodations that fail to meet basic expectations. These deficiencies hinder tourist access and diminish overall visitor satisfaction (Aseres & Sira, 2020). Moreover, community engagement in tourism planning and operations is limited, leading to missed opportunities for inclusive economic participation and stewardship. Ownership and governance ambiguities further complicate matters as heritage sites often fall under overlapping custodianship, which results in fragmented responsibilities and conflict among stakeholders (Kefyalew, 2023; Zewdu, 2024). Financial limitations, exacerbated by inflation, continue to restrict investments in essential conservation and development projects.



@Photo: Melka Wakena reservoir



@Wattled crane roost in shores Melka Wakaena reser-

These barriers contribute to the degradation of vital heritage sites, diminishing aesthetic and historical value, and the missed significant economic opportunities in a region already exposing to poverty. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of the transformative potential of sustainable tourism to contribute to poverty reduction, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation (UNWTO, 2022). Because, sustainable tourism development addresses the above challenges through enhanced heritage conservation, community-based tourism, provision of clear governance frameworks as well as applying innovative financing like in Jordan's Petra entry fee (UN Toursim, 2023; Gossling and Hall, 2022; Liu et al., 2024).

As a response to these challenges and ensuring sustainable tourism development in the region, Madda Walabu University has been implementing a five-year project (2021-2026) titled "Enhancing Sustainable Tourism Development through Conservation of Cultural, Historical, and Natural Heritages in Southeastern Ethiopia", with financial support from the government and other stakeholders.

This initiative seeks to showcase the major gaps facing the region in achieving sustainable development through building local capacity, improving infrastructure, strengthening heritage ownership and conservation, and empowering communities to actively participate in and benefit from the tourism value chain. Ultimately, it aims to transform the rich natural, cultural and historical treasures of Southeastern Ethiopia into sustainable tourism development that uphold community values and national priorities.

2. Key summary of Results

The project results provide and establish a solid foundation for promoting policy development, investment, and community-driven conservation strategies in the Bale, East Bale, and West Arsi Zones.

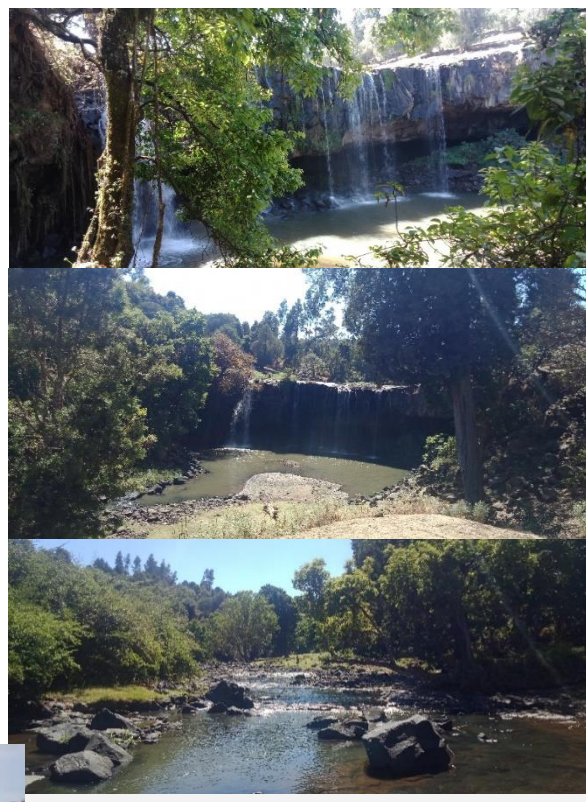
Key outcomes include:

1. Heritage Resource Identification, Documentation, and Conservation
 - ❖ A total of 89 heritage sites were identified and documented, including natural, cultural, and mixed heritage assets. These encompass globally significant landmarks, including UNESCO-recognized sites, and heritage assets of national and community-level importance.
 - ❖ Conservation efforts have emphasized community involvement, with rehabilitation schemes and

maintenance initiatives designed and implemented collaboratively with local stakeholders

2. Community Engagement and Capacity Building

- ❖ Local communities were actively engaged in heritage conservation and eco-tourism activities, fostering a sense of ownership and building resilience around tourism development. This engagement was facilitated through public consultations, work-



@Photo: Hebo waterfall and surroundings



@Photo: Wabe waterfall and surroundings

shops, and site-based interventions.

- ❖ With 6 rounds, over 250 tourism professionals, including local tour guides, destination managers, experts of culture and tourism, heritage documentations and archival, and marketing and promotion were received trained in the area of communication skills, tour development, heritage conservation and tour packaging, destination marketing, customer care, and sustainable site management. For all trainings, structured training manuals were developed.

3. Micro and small enterprises development and tourism value chain

- ✓ The project supported and promoted some MSE development within the tourism value chain by providing material and logistical support. Key interventions include equipping the Dinsho Cookers Association with food supplies and cooking equipment to enhance catering services for tourists, and supporting the Dodola Tour Guide Association with resources to strengthen community-led ecotourism operations.
- ❖ The project mapped diverse investment options for local MSEs, which align with principles of sustainable development and community empowerment. These include:
 - ✓ Ecotourism and Adventure Services: camping, hiking, wildlife tours, and glamping initiatives in BMNP, Adaba-Dodola, Haremma Forest, and Sof Omar.
 - ✓ Cultural and Heritage-Based Businesses: homestays, guided cultural experiences, and traditional food services to enrich visitor experience.
 - ✓ Agribusiness and Agro-tourism: beekeeping, coffee and herbal tourism in Delo Mena, Nensebo, and Haremma Buluk.
 - ✓ Specialized Services: guided waterfall treks, sustainable transport (horse rentals), souvenir production, and community museums.

4. Infrastructure and Facility Gaps Identified

- ❖ The project assessment revealed that there is critical infrastructure deficits at the majority of heritage sites, particularly in accessibility (e.g., roads), accommodations, and basic services such as sanitation. These limitations hinder the region's competitiveness as a tourist destination and restrict its capacity to generate income and jobs for the local community.
- ❖ Key heritage destinations such as Sof Omar Cave and the Shrine of Sheik Hussein require urgent investment in site management, drainage systems, fencing, and sanitation facilities.

Ultimately, prioritizing sustainable tourism development in Southeastern Ethiopia aligns with broader

goals of economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability, making it a critical focus for policymakers in the region.

3. Policy Implications

The evidence presented through the heritage mapping, community consultations, and project interventions offers strong justification for targeted policy reforms and investments to ensure sustainable tourism development in Southeastern Ethiopia. These policy implications are particularly relevant to regional planners, federal ministries, and donors focused on conservation, rural development, and cultural heritage.

- ❖ Strengthening community engagement in heritage conservation and tourism governance emerges as both a feasible and impactful strategy. Given that 71 out of the 89 identified heritage sites are under community ownership, yet remain largely unprotected or unsupported, enhancing community roles in site management is vital. When communities are meaningfully involved in decision-making and benefit-sharing, the likelihood of sustained conservation success increases. This can be achieved through low-cost but high-return investments in training, cooperatives, and women's leadership. The project's work with local groups like the Dinsho Cookers and Dodola Tour Guide Association shows that these models are both acceptable and effective.
- ❖ Addressing the infrastructure deficits at key heritage and pilgrimage sites is critical. Sites like Sof Omar Cave and the Shrine of Sheik Hussein are experiencing high footfall without corresponding investment in access roads, sanitation, drainage, or signage. Without basic services, visitor experiences deteriorate, reducing tourism's economic potential and exacerbating environmental degradation. Strategic infrastructure development aligned with regional tourism plans will enhance site accessibility and safety, improve competitiveness, and create new market opportunities for MSEs. Such investments are widely supported by local communities and are highly cost-effective in unlocking broader tourism value chains.
- ❖ Resolving issues of heritage ownership and legal ambiguity is essential for long-term planning and

responsible management. Currently, overlapping custodianship and unclear land tenure prevent formal registration and structured management of many heritage sites. Establishing a clear legal framework to define heritage site ownership and custodial roles will improve inter-agency coordination, encourage investment, and legitimize benefit-sharing agreements. This reform aligns with Oromia's draft regional heritage proclamation and supports national land tenure security policies. While the legal reform process may be moderately time-consuming, it is both cost-effective and politically feasible, especially if designed inclusively with customary and religious leaders.

- ❖ Scaling up sustainable tourism practices and MSE development is another area of strong potential. Many communities already operate informal enterprises related to food services, guiding, horse rental, crafts, and forest products (e.g., coffee, honey, herbal plants). These enterprises are environmentally aligned and culturally authentic, yet lack support to grow. Targeted investments in training, small grants, equipment, and linkages to tourism circuits can rapidly scale these businesses, creating decent jobs while reducing pressure on fragile ecosystems. The policy relevance of this intervention is high, as it addresses youth unemployment, gender equity, and rural poverty in tourism corridors. Moreover, its cost-effectiveness and social acceptability are well demonstrated by the early success of supported groups in Dodola, Dinsho, and Delo Mena.
- ❖ Enacting and operationalizing a regional proclamation for heritage conservation is a necessary institutional step. Currently, there is no comprehensive legal tool that protects heritage sites at the regional level, especially those managed by communities. The draft Oromia proclamation offers a timely opportunity to legally designate and safeguard cultural and natural sites, formalize benefit-sharing rules, and provide a foundation for tourism licensing, enforcement, and investment. Once approved by the Oromia Regional Council, it can institutionalize participatory site management and attract greater support from national and international conservation partners. The cost of implementation is relatively low, while the long-term

benefits in institutional coordination, investor confidence, and heritage protection are substantial.

Moreover, these policy options offer a transformative pathway for the Bale, East Bale, and West Arsi Zones. Their combined implementation will not only conserve Ethiopia's cultural and ecological treasures but also create inclusive economic opportunities and strengthen local governance, thereby contributing directly to national goals and global commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

4. Policy Options

1. **Strengthen Community Engagement:** Strengthen Community Engagement: Developing comprehensive training programs to empower and enhance local communities to actively participate in heritage conservation and tourism operations through heritage documentation, eco-tourism guiding, and entrepreneurial activities.
2. **Improve Infrastructure:** Investing in critical tourism infrastructure is crucial to enhance visitor experiences, safety, and accessibility. It facilitates easier travel for tourists by reducing barriers to visitation and boosting local economies.
3. **Establish Clear Ownership and Governance Guidelines:** resolving a ownership and governance issues through Ccreating legal frameworks that define heritage site ownership and management roles, fostering collaboration among stakeholders thereby reduce conflicts.
4. **Promote Sustainable Practices:** Encouraging eco-friendly and culturally sensitive tourism initiatives is critical in ensuring long-term sustainability.

5. Policy Recommendations

1. **Prioritize Community-Based Initiatives:** scale-up MSE support local artisans and small enterprises through targeted funding and training.
2. **Enhance Marketing Strategies:** Develop a comprehensive marketing plan to promote the region's heritage and tourism offerings.
3. **Implement Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks:** Establish methods for assessing the effectiveness of tourism initiatives and conservation efforts, allowing for adaptive management.

4. Enact regional proclamation to protect heritages of the region.

6. Conclusions

The southeastern part of Ethiopia is endowed with diverse and unique natural, cultural and historical heritages. But, sustainable tourism development is far from reaching due to a number of challenges in the region. To achieve sustainable tourism development in South-eastern Ethiopia, it is essential to address existing challenges through collaborative efforts involving local communities, government agencies, and private stakeholders. Specifically, by implementing the recommended policies, the region's cultural heritage and economic vitality can be enhanced.

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