

IUCN SSC PSG ARRC Task Force comments on the Nomad ecotourism project in Mahale Mountains National Park

April 16th 2021

GENERAL COMMENTS

Thank you for requesting feedback from the IUCN SSC PSG ARRC Task Force on the Nomad ecotourism project in Mahale Mountains National Park (MMNP). In general, Nomad appears to possess a good reputation with trained guides bringing tourists to see chimpanzees in MMNP, abiding by the 'TANAPA chimpanzees viewing guidelines'. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to ensure that best practice tourism viewing regulations are enforced at all times and that they are followed by all tourism companies offering chimpanzee viewing experiences in MMNP. This in turn places a significant pressure on the M-chimpanzee community (c.60 chimpanzees), which is the only community at MMNP used for research, tourism, and other activities, such as for filming documentaries.

We have provided more specific comments below on the current activities of Nomad and chimpanzee tourism practices in MMNP. Our comments apply only if the tourism activities are not expanded. Given that only one chimpanzee community is habituated to human presence and is already under high pressure, we would advise strongly against any expansion of chimpanzee tourism activities at MMNP. Until another chimpanzee community is fully habituated, instead of increasing the number of tourists, we would recommend to TANAPA to increase the chimpanzee viewing fee. Few people are discouraged by high prices, but great ape populations are too small and fragile to withstand increased pressure from uncontrolled tourism. If the price would be increased, even a lower number of visitors would still translate in higher revenue for governing authorities, and reduced pressure on the chimpanzees.

Given that Nomad brings the majority of tourists to MMNP, we feel it is their duty to lead by example and ensure all tourism companies are operating following the same best practice standards. We have provided some options below for Nomad to consider.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

- **Impacts of tourism activities on chimpanzees:**

It is agreed by all panel members that tourism activities have impacts on chimpanzees, although these impacts are difficult to quantify, and have never been specifically studied at Mahale. For example, the main cause of death in chimpanzees at Mahale is disease¹ (see also scientific articles attached). However, systematic health monitoring is not conducted at MMNP which makes it difficult to know the origin of disease outbreaks and if they have been caused by humans, including tourists. At other sites where testing is done systematically, diseases have been shown to have been transmitted by humans in certain instances.

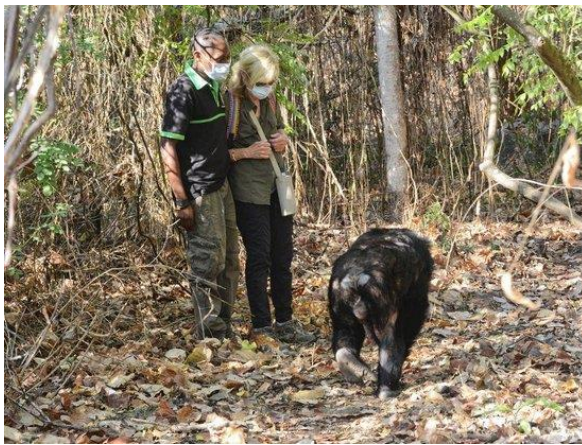
¹ Nakamura *et al.* 2015. Mahale Chimpanzees: 50 years of research. Cambridge University Press.

In addition, the presence of tourists may cause physiological stress for chimpanzees and may alter their normal activity budget by, for example, decreasing their feeding time and increase their moving time because of the disturbance from tourists. Chimpanzees possess a fission-fusion social system, splitting into smaller parties during certain time of the day or year. When a group of six tourists (plus the trackers, TANAPA guide, and Nomad guide) is following a party of two chimpanzees, this can cause more stress to chimpanzees than if they were in a larger party outnumbering the size of the tourist group. Anecdotal records from Mahale have shown that the presence of tourists lead to change in chimpanzee behavior, e.g. some chimpanzees not joining chimpanzee parties followed by tourists.

The MMNP Management Plan 2006-2016 indicated that a study on the impacts of tourism activities on chimpanzees would be conducted to help inform mitigation and better frame tourism activities and guidelines in MMNP. However, to our knowledge, this has never been completed but would still be needed.

- **Minimization measures:**
 - **Improve enforcement of chimpanzee viewing guidelines:** at the moment, these guidelines are checked by each TANAPA guide joining a tourist group, however these guides are not always appropriately trained given that they move between different National Parks, most not offering chimpanzee viewing experiences. It would be preferable to assign a few permanent TANAPA guides to MMNP and for them to receive additional training to enforce the specific chimpanzee viewing guidelines.
 - **Ensure the maximum numbers of tourist permits issued per day is not breached:** according to the MMNP Management Plan, a maximum of 18 visitors per day, in 3 groups of 6, can visit chimpanzees. However, it appears that this is not always respected, therefore Nomad should verify with TANAPA the number of permits that have already be given on a particular day, and if the 18 permits have already been issued that day, Nomad should not pay for any more permits.
 - **Adjust the number of people visiting a chimpanzee party according to its size:** The MMNP Management Plan allows 6 people to be with the chimpanzees at one time; however, this is not always respected as each company has their own guides, their own trackers, and accompanied by one guide from TANAPA. This adds up to a large group of people, and we would suggest that Nomad only visit chimpanzee parties that are at least the same size as the visitor group. In case this rule cannot be respected during certain periods of the year when chimpanzees are more spread out in smaller parties, then the viewing time of one hour could be shortened, or the distance between tourists and chimpanzees increased to reduce the disturbances at these times. We would also suggest that as a minimum, it should be forbidden for a visitor group to be with a single chimpanzee on its own, or an adult female with an infant.
 - **Try to stay as much as possible on the trail system:** we would encourage Nomad to make their tourist groups stay on the trail system as much as possible. This not only offers a better viewing experience for tourists as the trails are open with increased visibility, but also reduce impacts to the vegetation as much, and does not scare the chimpanzees when they are moving. The trackers could continue to follow the chimpanzees when going off the trail system and contact the tourist group once the chimpanzees are back on the trail system. We recommend that Nomad makes binoculars available to its clients, and show them how to use them properly, so they can observe chimpanzees from a safe distance.

- **Manage tourist expectations:** by posting pictures showing tourists in close proximity to chimpanzees, and including text such as 'A fully grown chimpanzee, when he brushes pass your leg, is quite an impressive creature' on Nomad's website, Nomad is promoting a close encounter with chimpanzees, raising tourist expectations. Tourists will want the same experience in close proximity to chimpanzees, and will not abide by the rules as much if they see the rules are not reinforced. We know sometimes it is difficult to get away from a chimpanzee if he comes in close contact to a tourist naturally, but these instances should be the exception not the rule. We would ask Nomad to change the wordings on their website and remove pictures on which chimpanzees are too close to humans, found on Nomad's Instagram account and on Tripadvisor (see examples below; many similar images and video clips can be found on social media):



- **Disease prevention:** As diseases are the main cause of death for chimpanzees at Mahale and tourists may transmit diseases to chimpanzees, it is imperative that Nomad (and ideally all tourist companies) follow IUCN best practice guidelines, and especially additional guidance provided by IUCN during the Covid-19 pandemic (document attached). Here are some additional points:
 - Nomad guides should seek to receive the most up to date training for viewing chimpanzees, and for relaying this information to tourists. Additional training materials will be available shortly through IUCN SSC PSG SGA.
 - Tourists can be directed to www.protectgreatapesfromdisease.com website (not running yet, will inform you once it is online) for up-to-date information. On this website tourists can better understand the risk of disease transmission from humans to apes, and can take a pledge.
 - Nomad could display posters on disease prevention at its camp and the park's headquarter (this material can be freely downloaded and adapted MMNP).
 - Site-specific videos (approx. 2-3mins) have been developed for other countries at other tourist sites, which can be played to tourists on ipads at tourism camps. Nomad could fund the development of tailor-made for

MMNP, in collaboration with local experts and government officials, which explain what the guidelines are and how tourists need to behave when viewing chimpanzees. The cost of producing such videos is c. \$2,000.

- We recommend that Nomad works with TANAPA to ensure that all tourism companies in MMNP are following the IUCN advisory for visiting great apes during the COVID-19 pandemic (document attached).

- **Compensation:**

Knowing that tourism activities can have negative impacts on chimpanzees, and that Nomad brings the majority of tourists that visit MMNP, we recommend that Nomad supports additional conservation activities to ensure the well-being and long-term survival of chimpanzees in MMNP. The number one threat to chimpanzees in Mahale is disease, followed by loss and fragmentation of their habitat east of Mahale. We therefore suggest options for Nomad to reduce these threats, but these options should first be discussed with relevant stakeholders.

- **Help fund a study to better understand and monitor impacts of tourists on the M-chimpanzee community:** this was proposed in the MMNP Management Plan, but not completed. Nomad could support financially this study in partnership with TANAPA and the chimpanzee researchers at MMNP, through the financing of a Tanzanian PhD position on this topic for example.
- **Support actions from the Tanzanian National Chimpanzee Action Plan (NCAP):** Nomad could support financially actions from the NCAP, specifically related to disease mitigation and habitat restoration for example.
- **Fund a Chimpanzee Tourism Officer Position:** In order to better control the implementation of the TANAPA's chimpanzee viewing guidelines, Nomad could fund a permanent position for a Chimpanzee Tourism Officer who would work with all tourism companies in MMNP to ensure that the guidelines are respected, and that the maximum numbers of tourists allowed per day and per group are not breached.
- **Nominate a few permanent TANAPA guides to be stationed in MMNP:** Nomad could discuss with TANAPA the possibility that a few selected TANAPA guides would be permanently assigned to MMNP and that they would receive additional training to follow international best practice for visiting chimpanzees.

We would be happy to follow-up with you if you have any questions.