

Exploding volcano may open maiden 'Geopark'

Tanzania is creating the first ever Geopark in the Sub-Sahara African region and this maiden geology-based tourism and scientific site is likely to open with real-life fireworks from the anticipated 'Lengai' volcano likely to soon hit the skies.



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The Ngorongoro-Lengai Geopark, earmarked to cover an area of 12,000 square kilometres of rocky hills, lengthy underground caves, lake basins, hominid discovery sites and the active Ol Doinyo Lengai volcano, will be the second geopark concept on the continent after the one in Morocco, but the Northern Tanzania one will be the first south of the Sahara.

"We are working to expand the country's tourism potential by introducing attractions based on land formations, geology, history, and geographical features, all being packaged under the single entity of Ngorongoro-Lengai Geopark," explained Nickson Nyange, the Public Relations Officer of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority.

'Mountain of God' to be a highlight of the maiden geopark

The NCAA is the conservation institution behind the project. The hot and puffing active volcano and Tanzania's third highest peak, Ol Doinyo Lengai Mountain, will be one of the highlights for the maiden Geopark because there are reports that the so-called 'Mountain of God' shows signs of eruptions emanating from seismic sensors planted around it.

The volcano, located 150 kilometres from Arusha City and surrounded by important paleoanthropological sites, has been experiencing eruptions that are usually confined to its summit though the lava flow can extend to several miles downhill.



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Impending volcanic activities

Dr Sarah Stamps, a geophysicist at Virginia Tech, recently led a team of local and international researchers to predict the next major eruption. They installed five positioning sensors around Ol Doinyo Lengai, and these apparently are sending

back signals for impending volcanic activities.

The academics are reporting that the mountain may erupt in a few weeks' time and therefore necessary steps need to be taken. However, residents at Enkaresero Village, located at the foot of Lengai, say it is too early to vacate. "We have lived here for ages," said Mzee Mepukoli Ole Melita, and when the volcano is ripe people here, including our livestock, can tell!"

Protection and use of geological heritage

The first ever sub-Saharan Geopark project was initiated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), while the European Union (EU) is funding the project, according to engineer Joshua Mwankunda, the acting manager for the NCAA Cultural Heritage Department.

EU has already floated 1.8m euros, equivalent to 4.3 billion/- as initial funding towards the proposed Geopark.

Antonym to National Parks, Geoparks are supposed to be a unified geographical area which addresses the protection and the use of geological heritage in a sustainable way, while also promoting social and economic well-being of the people residing within the earmarked location for the park.

A special meeting of officials to lay down plans for the maiden Geopark was held in Arusha over the weekend, involving district commissioners, council chairpersons, executive directors and tourism officers, as well as administrative secretaries from Longido, Monduli, Karatu and Ngorongoro Districts.

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