

## **The Role of Special Libraries in Preserving Indigenous Ecological Knowledge: Implications for Tourism and Conservation in TANAPA**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the critical role of special libraries and archives in preserving Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) and its implications for biodiversity conservation and sustainable tourism in Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA). As TANAPA navigates challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and evolving tourism demands, integrating IEK offers a pathway toward more resilient and equitable management. However, this predominantly oral and localized knowledge is at risk of erosion. This research posits that special libraries can act as dynamic repositories and ethical intermediaries, facilitating the integration of IEK into conservation planning and visitor experiences through collaborative curation and digital preservation. Employing a qualitative multi-case study approach, the research focuses on libraries associated with TANAPA parks, using systematic review analysis. Expected outcomes highlight a dual impact: for conservation, archived IEK can inform adaptive management practices like traditional fire management; for tourism, ethically curated IEK can transform visitor interpretation into deeper cultural-ecological storytelling. The study concludes by proposing a "Living Libraries" framework that not only preserves knowledge but ensures its intergenerational transmission and practical application. This research argues that such knowledge infrastructure is a strategic imperative for achieving TANAPA's intertwined goals of conservation, sustainable tourism, and community engagement.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, special libraries, Tanzania National Parks, conservation, sustainable tourism, knowledge management, decolonizing archives.

### **Introduction**

The global conservation paradigm has shifted from exclusionary "fortress conservation" toward integrative models that recognize the linkages between biodiversity, cultural heritage, and social equity (Nian et al., 2025; Poomhiran & Entwistle, 2025). Within this context, protected area like Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) face a complex mandate to preserve ecological integrity, generate sustainable tourism revenue, and meaningfully engage local communities. Indigenous

Ecological Knowledge (IEK), the cumulative, place-based knowledge, practices, and beliefs held by local communities is increasingly acknowledged as a vital resource for addressing these challenges (Masenya, 2025). In Tanzania, this includes sophisticated pastoralist and agricultural knowledge of rangeland management, species behaviour and monitoring, and climate adaptation.

TANAPA is the mandated steward of globally iconic and biodiverse landscapes, including the Serengeti National Park and Mount Kilimanjaro National Park, which function as premier destinations and primary drivers of a tourism sector that is critical to Tanzania's national economy and foreign exchange earnings (Tanzania National Parks, 2024; World Bank, 2022). Local and indigenous communities hold sophisticated ecological knowledge (IEK) of the species, plants, and climate within these protected areas, knowledge that has co-evolved with and sustained the ecosystems for generations (Berkes, 2018; Tengö et al., 2017).

However, this knowledge is predominantly tacit, transmitted orally through narrative, ritual, and daily practice, making it highly localized, context-dependent, and vulnerable to rapid socio-economic changes, cultural assimilation, and generational shifts (Whyte, 2013; Bohensky & Maru, 2011). Consequently, valuable IEK is at risk of being lost, creating a systemic disconnect from formal, science-based management and planning. This gap weakens holistic ecosystem stewardship and reduces the socio-cultural richness of tourism. (Charles & Nawe, 2017; Masenya, 2025; Sterling et al., 2017). This disconnect not only represents a loss of cultural heritage but also undermines the resilience and adaptive capacity of conservation systems in the face of environmental change (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2013).

This study fills a crucial need at the intersection of cultural tourism, conservation, and knowledge management. While the value of IEK is recognised, mechanisms for its systematic preservation, ethical curation, and active integration remain underdeveloped. This study argues that special libraries, including archives, research collections, and information centres within museums, universities, and conservation agencies can bridge this gap. Conceptualised as dynamic "knowledge hubs," they can facilitate the respectful documentation and application of IEK. The central research questions are *How can special libraries be strategically leveraged to preserve indigenous ecological knowledge? and What are the implications for enhancing conservation outcomes and tourism experiences within TANAPA?* By answering the questions, the study seeks to offer a theoretical and practical framework for improving environmental knowledge management in crucial conservation environments.

## **Theoretical Framework and Case Study Integration**

### ***Knowledge Management Theory and "Living Libraries"***

The study is grounded in Knowledge Management Theory (KMT), with specific emphasis on the famous SECI model (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization) developed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). The theory presents a core framework for studying the dynamic interplay and conversion between explicit (codified, transmissible) information and tacit (personal, experiential) knowledge.

The majority of indigenous and local ecological knowledge (IEK) is tacit, ingrained in oral traditions, cultural practices, and lived experience (Polanyi, 1966; Berkes, 2018). Specialised "Living Libraries," such as the one conceptualized here, are theorised to operationalise, most critically, the Combination phase by systematically organizing discrete pieces of explicit knowledge (e.g., individual interviews, maps, photographs) into new, integrated, and accessible knowledge systems like participatory digital archives (Dalkir, 2017). The "Living Library" is an organisation that actively and iteratively supports the entire cycle of knowledge generation, sharing, refining, and practical application.

However, the institutional environment must be carefully considered while evaluating the viability of putting this KM-centric paradigm into practice. A pertinent study of knowledge management practices in Tanzanian universities found an alarmingly low explicit awareness of formal KM frameworks and a pronounced lack of structured knowledge-sharing mechanisms (Charles & Nawe, 2017). A fundamental obstacle to sustained implementation is highlighted by this study, which indicates a substantial gap between the theoretical potential of advanced knowledge management systems and the present institutional realities and capacity in situations like Tanzania.

The Usambara Knowledge Project (UKP), a collaborative partnership between a U.S. university library (Indiana University) and Tanzanian community stakeholders, serves as the critical analytical case study. It pragmatically exemplifies the SECI model in action: Externalization (tacit to explicit) is achieved through methods like oral history interviews and recurrent photography, translating lived experience into documented assets (Yakura,

2002). Combination (explicit to explicit) is realised through the meticulous curation, metadata tagging, and thematic organisation of these assets into a searchable digital archive. Internalization (explicit to tacit) is facilitated by making the archive accessible for community education and use, allowing documented knowledge to be reabsorbed into practice and understanding (Hislop et al., 2018).

Thus, the UKP provides a tangible, operational benchmark for KM praxis in an IEK context. Simultaneously, its structure particularly its reliance on a foreign institutional steward inevitably raises pressing questions about long-term digital sustainability, genuine local ownership, and equitable governance. These themes are productively analysed through a political ecology lens, which scrutinises the power dynamics and socio-political constraints inherent in such cross-cultural knowledge partnerships (Robbins, 2011; Sillitoe, 2006).

### ***Political Ecology and Decolonizing Archival Praxis***

The UKP's methodological approach is critically informed by political ecology, a theoretical framework that scrutinises the power imbalances and political economies embedded within environmental knowledge production (Robbins, 2011). The project consciously counters traditional colonial archival practices, which have historically alienated indigenous communities from their own cultural and ecological records by extracting knowledge without consent or ongoing stewardship (Trouillot, 1995; Stoler, 2009). By prioritising community co-curation through participatory workshops that position elders as primary knowledge authorities and actively involve local scholars as recorders and producers, the UKP fundamentally reframes the library's role from that of a neutral or extractive owner to an ethical steward and accountable intermediary (Furner, 2022; Hennessy et al., 2019). This aligns directly with broader decolonial calls to transform the management of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), advocating for collaborative, rights-based models that recognise and uphold community sovereignty, data governance, and epistemic authority (Masenya, 2025; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; Chilisa, 2019).

### ***Generating Experiential Tourism Value Through Narrative***

The UKP archive enables a pivotal shift from passive sightseeing to deep narrative engagement, a core tenet of modern experiential and heritage tourism (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). By systematically curating the multi-layered "story of place" interweaving ecological, historical, and socio-cultural narratives, the library provides the essential raw material for transforming standard

tourist interpretation into immersive, meaningful experiences (Moscardo, 2020). This process aligns with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework from environmental psychology, where curated, authentic narratives act as the critical stimulus (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). These narratives can profoundly influence a visitor's internal cognitive and affective state (Organism), fostering stronger place attachment, environmental empathy, and a sense of ethical responsibility (Ramkissoon et al., 2013). This altered state, in turn, drives desirable behavioural Responses, including a reinforced conservation ethic, increased support for community-based tourism initiatives, and greater willingness to pay for sustainability (Li et al., 2025; Knobloch et al., 2017).

Consequently, the library's curation directly adds unique, non-replicable cultural value to a destination, moving beyond scenic beauty to offer competitive differentiation in the tourism market (Richards, 2018). This supports a more sustainable tourism model that actively disperses economic and social benefits to knowledge-holding communities and encourages long-term pro-conservation behaviour among visitors, creating a virtuous cycle of value and preservation (Nian et al., 2025; Stronza et al., 2019).

Seemingly, UKP demonstrates the integration of these three theoretical domains. Its knowledge management processes are conducted through a decolonial praxis, producing authentic narratives that enrich tourism. For TANAPA, this suggests that a park-affiliated knowledge centre could similarly co-create "Living Library" collections with adjacent communities, informing ecological management, ranger training, visitor exhibits, and community-led heritage tours.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a systematic review methodology, guided by the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021), to synthesize existing literature on special libraries, IEK preservation, and its applications in tourism and conservation. A comprehensive search was conducted across databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Library & Information Science Source) using keywords: "special libraries," "traditional ecological knowledge," "preservation," "tourism," "conservation," and "Tanzania." The process involved identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and data extraction. A total of 50 studies were analyzed through qualitative thematic synthesis and for meeting inclusion criteria, which included English publications and knowledge management (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Data on theoretical frameworks, methods, case contexts, and outcomes were coded and organised thematically, guided by the tripartite theoretical framework.

This approach ensured a robust evidence base, mapped global models, and identified specific gaps relevant to TANAPA, setting an agenda for future primary research (Snyder, 2019).

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Findings**

#### ***Persistent Systemic Disconnect & Historical Bias***

A entrenched scientific bias continues to marginalise IEK within formal conservation frameworks, systematically excluding it from protected area planning and management protocols. This exclusion is perpetuated by institutional norms that often privilege Western scientific paradigms while dismissing IEK as anecdotal or non-empirical, leading to conservation strategies that are culturally discordant and locally unsupported.

#### ***A Proven Model for Integration: The "Living Library"***

In stark contrast to the prevailing institutional gap, the Usambara Knowledge Project functions as an effective operational model. It successfully manifests the combination phase of the SECI knowledge management model by creating a participatory digital archive, a "Living Library." This platform facilitates the conversion of tacit, experiential IEK into explicit, shareable formats while maintaining community ownership and context. This model highlights a viable technical and social process for integration, underscoring the feasibility of such approaches even in contexts like Tanzania, where formal institutional knowledge management awareness remains generally low.

#### ***Converging Economic Imperative: The Market for Authenticity***

Parallel to this operational model, a significant shift in tourism valuation is creating a powerful economic imperative for IEK integration. Modern tourist demand increasingly prioritises relational and socio-cultural values, seeking authentic, narrative-driven experiences over conventional sightseeing. This trend generates a direct and growing market for IEK-enriched tourism products, positioning IEK not merely as a cultural asset but as a core economic resource. This market force aligns with and can potentially incentivise the adoption of participatory knowledge models like the Living Library, suggesting a convergence of ethical, ecological, and economic interest

Indeed, the findings revealed a critical juncture; while historical biases sustain systemic barriers, functional models for IEK integration exist and are increasingly validated by emerging market demands. This creates a tangible opportunity to leverage economic channels to advance more inclusive, effective, and socially just conservation practices.

## **Discussion**

The findings strongly support the proposition that "Living Libraries" can act as critical bridging institutions, linking IEK preservation directly to the applied domains of conservation management and tourism development, thereby creating a mutually reinforcing cycle (Tengö et al., 2017; Sterling et al., 2017). This is validated by the UKP's practical application of the SECI model, which demonstrates a mechanism to systematize tacit, oral IEK into an explicit, formal management asset (Daly et al., 2002; Conte, 2021; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), offering the Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) a strategic and operational pathway to bridge its identified institutional knowledge management gap (Charles & Nawe, 2017). Beyond this operational utility, the UKP's collaborative methodology represents a politically significant decolonizing praxis, actively addressing entrenched power imbalances by positioning local communities as co-creators and primary knowledge authorities rather than passive subjects (Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2019).

Adopting such a model is therefore an ethical and political imperative for TANAPA, signaling a fundamental shift away from historically extractive and marginalising conservation paradigms toward a recognition of communities as legitimate partners and knowledge holders (Agrawal, 1995; West, 2005). Furthermore, this integration meets a critical market demand within the rapidly growing sector of experiential and cultural tourism, where visitors increasingly seek relational and socio-cultural values embedded in authentic, place-based narratives (Martín-López et al., 2019; Weiler & Smith, 2009). A "Living Library" directly supplies this invaluable, authentic content, enabling TANAPA to co-develop unique interpretive materials, strategically differentiate its park offerings in a competitive market, and crucially, design mechanisms to channel tangible economic and social benefits back to the knowledge-holding communities, fostering a virtuous cycle of valuation and preservation (Li et al., 2025; Nian et al., 2025; Stronza et al., 2019).

The public history envisaged under the UKP rejects narrow academic interpretation. The UKP encourages exhibits that provide insight into daily life, sustainable agriculture, introduced

species, natural disaster, famine, colonialism, and changing ecosystems (UK National Parks, 2025). The information should supplement the expanding scientific understanding of East Africa's natural history with the locals' feeling of place (Magoc, 2014). For example, in Georgia, university partnerships are central to digital archiving projects, which collaboratively work to sustain archives and address gaps in the representation of communities, cultural groups, and historical narratives (Spratt et al., 2023). These initiatives are often embedded in university curricula, where students first visit archives to identify omissions in the metanarrative and then conduct oral history projects to fill those gaps (Kehoe & Miyaoka, 2020). The scholarly outputs are public-facing digital compositions, such as new archival collections, blogs, and Wikipedia entries (Parsons et al., 2022; Squibb et al., 2023). This model is reflected in Tucker, Georgia, where there is a local desire to build a stronger, innovative partnership among the area's university, school system, historical society, and public library to collect the historical artifacts and narratives that define the community's past, present, and future (Panther et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the analysis identifies several pressing research gaps, chief among them a partnership inconsistency: the UKP's reliance on a foreign university for stewardship raises fundamental concerns regarding long-term local ownership, sustainable digital access, and substantive decolonization (Daly et al., 2002; Smith, 2020). This paradox necessitates future investigation into equitable governance and capacity-building models for truly Tanzanian-led archival systems (Masenya, 2025). Furthermore, research must move beyond the technical "Combination" of the SECI model to examine the essential social-organisational processes, including participatory design of classification systems (Liu et al., 2021), democratic access protocols, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms (Norton, 2022) that underpin an archive's legitimacy and sustainability. Finally, addressing the awareness-application gap requires studies on how archived IEK can actively inform TANAPA's adaptive conservation management (e.g., fire regimes, species monitoring) (Méndez et al., 2023) and be effectively translated into marketable tourist experiences (Li et al., 2025; Nian et al., 2025) to realise tangible ecological and community benefits.

## **Conclusion**

This research establishes that special libraries, reconceptualised as "Living Libraries," can serve as dynamic, ethical hubs that bridge preservation, conservation, and tourism. They offer a structured methodology to transform tacit IEK into a co-created, systematised resource, addressing gaps in formal KM practice. This model facilitates a decolonising shift by positioning

communities as knowledge authorities, challenging historical marginalisation. For TANAPA, adopting this framework represents a strategic evolution toward managing ecosystems through a fusion of knowledge systems. The resulting preserved knowledge can power sustainable tourism development by providing authentic narratives for unique visitor experiences, creating a virtuous cycle of conservation funding and community benefit. Investing in the "Living Library" model is thus a foundational strategy for building more resilient, equitable, and compelling protected areas. Future research should prioritize pilot projects within TANAPA to test the model's application and address the identified gaps in sovereignty, process, and practical integration.

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