



## ABSTRACT

The study is aimed identifying the prospects, strengths and weakness of ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development in Edo State. A case study approach using qualitative methods was carried out to collect data through semi structured interviews, observations and use of questionnaires as well review of some relevant

# IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM MANAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN OVIA SOUTH WEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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## Introduction

Tourism is a global industry with a bearing on the lives of millions of people. Its potential as a tool for development is enormous. With a growing interest to spend leisure time in nature and increasing awareness of environmentalism, ecotourism has become one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry (United Nations, 2001). Compared with mass or old tourism, ecotourism is touted as providing better sectoral linkages, reducing leakage of benefits out of the country, creating local employment, and fostering sustainable development (Belsky, 1999; Khan, 1997). Thus, it has been popularly promoted as a means of reconciling wildlife conservation with economic development, particularly in developing countries (Campbell, 2002). Ecotourism is characterized by its natural attractions, wildlife and wilderness



habitats. Many countries favor ecotourism as a form of economic development as it is perceived as a low impact form of tourism. Ecotourism operations are generally small-scale, so are relatively easy set up. Carefully planned and operated ecotourism sites, especially if it is village-based and includes local participation, is able to provide direct benefits that might offset pressure from other less sustainable activities that make use of natural and cultural resources. Duffy (2002) suggested that the development of ecotourism is also a response to criticism of the socially and economically divisive effects of mass tourism.

literature. The findings of this research illustrated that ecotourism has impacted to local livelihoods and other environmental, economic, social and cultural factors in both positive and negative ways. It was observed that ecotourism is becoming a promising programme in the host community as well as surrounding communities. Excitement of local people is major supporting factor for the ecotourism development leading toward village development. Ecotourism is apparently performing well in term of education of the local people about their surrounding environment. Nevertheless, there are many problems that have not been solved, such as accessibility, optimization of the market tools, and lack of human resources. This research also revealed that the stakeholders involved in the ecotourism project are able to offer a variety of strategies for resolving problems that have arisen along the way. Results from this study identified some main points and issues that need to be addressed in order to maintain and enhance ecotourism in Okomu National Park, these include the promotion of economic and political empowerment of the local population, the development of strict external and internal regulations, the adoption of a community-based ecotourism approach among others. Further recommendations and strategic counter measures of sustainable development through ecotourism have also been put forward, followed by additional recommendations for further studies.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Management, Sustainable, Development, Park



The notion of sustainability and its relevance within development studies has come into focus since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 1992. The concept of sustainability seeks to find balance between the use of natural resources and the development of the human world and modern civilization. Evolving from this idea, ecotourism has been introduced as a way of bringing the concept of sustainability into tourism within local communities.

Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the sustainable tourism industry, which focuses on wildlife conservation, environmental protection, poverty alleviation and economic development. Hector Ceballos Lascurain coined the term, "Ecotourism" in 1983 to describe the nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed area with an emphasis on education.

There is no such universally accepted definition of ecotourism. It is differentiated from nature-based tourism as it helps in sustainable rural development and makes biodiversity conservation economically viable for local communities. Ecotourism is one of the preferred tools for conservation and community development in many rural areas. Its effectiveness depends in its potential to provide local economic benefits by maintaining ecological resource integrity through low-impact and non-consumptive use of local resources.

Ecotourism is an alternative form of tourism which embraces tourism in the biophysical environment in natural areas. It incorporates ecologically sustainable activities, conservation supporting measures and involvement of local communities. It neoliberalises nature and focuses on capitalist development, community development, poverty alleviation, wildlife conservation and environmental protection. Traditional economic bases like agriculture, livestock and huntino are not compatible with protected territories so change in traditional economic activities can be done by shifting cultural attitudes towards ecotourism enhancement.

The perceived potential of Ecotourism as an effective tool for sustainable development is the main reason why developing countries are now embracing it and including it in their economic development and conservation strategies. Ecotourism, as an alternative tourism, Involves



visiting natural areas in order to learn, to study, or to carry out activities environmentally friendly, that is, a tourism based on the nature experience, which enables the economic and social development of local communities. It focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora, fauna and their habitats, as well as cultural artifacts from the locality. A symbiotic and complex relationship between the environment and tourist activities is possible when this philosophy can be translated into appropriate policy, careful planning and tactful practicum. Carefully planned and operated ecotourism sites, if it is village-based and includes local participation, is able to provide direct benefits :hat might offset pressure from other less sustainable activities that make use of natural and cultural resources. Ecotourism, natural resources, cultural heritage, rural lifestyle and an integrated tourism is a type of local economic activities. Therefore, ecotourism in natural and cultural areas was carried out with a number of elements in their natural landscape and cultural landscape (water, vista, topography, vegetation, clean air), as well as in the variety of recreational activities suitable for all kinds of environments. Therefore, ecotourism and its cultural assets and raw materials to create, as well as directing people to travel is an attractive force.

Ecotourism helps in community development by providing the alternate source of livelihood to local community which is more sustainable. Its aim is to conserve resources, especially biological diversity, and maintain sustainable use of resources, which can bring ecological experience to travelers, conserve the ecological environment and gain economic benefit. However, achieving the aims in ecotourism depends on whether they are environmentally and ecologically sustainable and economically applicable. Ecotourism helps involving local community for the conservation of the ecology and biodiversity of the area that biodiversity in return provides the economic incentives to the local community. Eco-tourism contributes to conservation of biodiversity; sustains the well-being of local people: involves responsible action on the part of tourist and the tourism industry; promotes small and medium tourism enterprises; requires lowest possible consumption of natural resources; stresses local participation, ownership, and business opportunities,



particularly for rural people; and above all includes the learning experiences.

In order for ecotourism to encourage patterns of sustainability, which can benefit local communities, protect the environment, and be economically viable, it must be comprehensive and elaborate.

The second concept that has been which is used as an outline of the discussion in this study is sustainable development. Over the years the word sustainable is perceived as promoting an environmental focus into policies and practices, whilst also considering social and economic benefits for local communities. The World Commission of Environment and Development

(WCED), introduced the idea of sustainable development in 1987. WCED released a report titled, Our Common Future, often referred to as the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). According to this report, sustainable development is that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Okomu forest reserve was the least disturbed of all the rainforest in the State.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Location**

Okomu National Park is located in Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State west of the River Niger in South-South Nigeria. It lies between latitude  $6^{\circ} 15'$  and  $6^{\circ} 25'$ , and East longitudes  $5^{\circ} 9'$  and  $5^{\circ} 23'$ . It is bounded in the west by Okomu River and in the North, East and South by a series of straight cut lines.





Figure 1: Nigeria showing Okomu National Park, Edo State

Source: NNPS, 2016

### **Climate and Vegetation**

Mean annual rainfall is about 2,100mm per year with most of it falling between February and -November, and the highest in June, July, and September. The driest period is December and January. The mean monthly temperature is 30.2°C and Relative Humidity is about 65% during the afternoons throughout the year.

The vegetation is typical Guinea-Congo lowland rainforest and is characterized by mosaic of swamp-forest, high forest, secondary forest and open scrub. Okomu National Park is probably the best example of the mature secondary forest in south/south Nigeria.

### **Geology and Soil**

The soil lies in the geophysical region known as the western coastlands characterized by sedimentary rock of the Eocene Epoch. Okomu soils are acidic sandy loams derived from deep loose deltaic and coastal sediments sometimes referred to as the "Benin Sand".

### **Topographical and Drainage**

The topography of the park is gentle, ranging from 30m and 60m above sea level; several areas have no noticeable slope. The area is well drained by the Okomu River and a few of its tributaries. There are many areas where the water table rises above ground level to form treeless fresh water pools and marches, some of which dry up in the dry season. The Okomu River flows across the length of the park as well as the Arakhuan stream which provide visitors opportunity to engage in water sports such as fishing, boating/canoeing and other water related activities.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research methodology based on interpretive epistemology was adopted in this research. This method offers the opportunity to understand people's thoughts and beliefs about their surrounding and



to better understand their reactions toward its circumstances (Henn et al, 2006). This method was therefore adopted as it suitable in gathering relevant data from random .2mpling of Okomu national park staff, communities around the park, and tourists that visited the park.

### **Population and Sample**

The population adopted for this research comprised of workers and tourists at Okomu National Park and members of the host community where the Park is located. 250 respondents were ranndomly selected involving 50 tourists, 150 members of host community and 50 members of staff Okomu National Park.

Research Instrument questionnaires were developed and administered to the park staff, villagers and tourists respectively. The questionnaire comprises of questions that relate to the subject matter of exploring the socio-economic prospects sustainable tourism development at Okomu national

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The data collected from the administered questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and presented in tables. Analysis was carried out with the aid of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software. The hypotheses were analysed with the help of chi-square ( $X^2$ ) statistics. A p-value of 0.05 was considered statistically significant. The chi-square ( $X^2$ ) is a significant test, which makes use of data in the form of observed frequencies. It is a measure of differences between the observed and the expected frequencies, the chi-square ( $X^2$ ) computation takes the form of equation.

Where;  $X^2$  Chi-square, O =Observed frequency, E= Expected frequency

The expected frequency E is calculated as:  $E = \frac{\text{Row total} \times \text{column total}}{\text{Grand Total}}$

### **Results and Discussion**

Results of the study describe the descriptive data obtained from respondents to elaborate on the characteristics of the respondents are useful to give an overview of the state of the respondents.



### Descriptive Analysis

The majority of respondents were male (56.8%). The majority of respondents aged 46-70 years was 38%. This means that the tourists are adult people with experience and their respondents are imperative. 65.6% of the respondents are married and 34.4% are unmarried. Characteristics of respondents by educational qualification grouped into four strata. The majority of respondents were from the first stratum, the respondents who have post-graduate degree were 61.4%, and only 8% of the respondents are uneducated.

### Tourism at Okomu National Park

**Table 1: Medium through which Tourist heard about Okomu National Park**

Medium	Frequency	Percentage
Internet	7	14
TV/Radio program	4	8
Travel Agency	0	0
School	29	58
Other/Family	2	5
Brochure	8	16
Total	50	100

Source: Survey data, 2018

Majority of the sample tourists (58%) heard about the Okomu National Park from School. None of the tourist heard about the pack through a travel agency.

**Table 2: Tourists' Area of Interest at the Park**

Option	Frequency	Percentage %
Game Viewing/Nature	32	64
Trail	13	26
Tree House	5	10



<b>Suspended Bridge</b>		
Total	50	100

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table 2: shows different areas of interest to the tourist in the park. 64% are interested in visiting game viewing/nature trail, 26% are interested in tree house, and 10% the suspended bridge.

**Table 3: Prospects of sustainable tourism at Okomu National Park**

S/N	Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Tourists visits the park regularly	44 (88)	6 (12)
2	International tourists visit to the park	50 (100)	0 (0)
3	Tourists interact with the local people around the park	48 (96)	2 (4)
4	Villagers trade their craft, food, or other goods within the park	50 (100)	0 (0)

Source: Survey data, 2018

Table 3: shows the prospects of sustainable tourism at Okomu National park. 88% of the park staff agreed that tourists do visit the park regularly, all the staff agreed that international tourists do visit the park and that members of the host community trade their craft, food, or other goods within the park. 96% agreed that tourists interact with the local people.

**Table 4: Economic Welfare of Villages are regars Okomu National Park**

S/N	Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Hindrance of farming and hunting by the park	109 (72.7)	94 (62.7)
2			



3	Presence of buffer zone in the park where villagers can hunt or harvest tree products.	13(8.7)
4	Allowance or compensation to villagers by park management or government. Patronage of local crafts or goods by tourists from villagers	112 (74.7)

Source: survey data, 2018

Table 4 shows the Economic welfare villagers as regards Okomu National Park. 72.7% opinions say that there is hindrance of farming and hunting by the park, 62.7% lamented the presence of buffer zone in the park where villagers can hunt or harvest tree products. 8.7% agreed that the park management or government gives allowance or compensation to the members of the host community and 74.7% believe there is patronage of local crafts or goods by tourist from villagers (members of the host community).

**Table 5: Management Strategies to improve tourism at Okomu National Park**

S/N	Item	Response	Percentage
1	Reconstruction of	29	57
2	the suspended	4	8
3	bridge in the park	32	64
4	Construction of another tree house	42	84
5	Provision of recreational facilities at Arakhuan camp of the park	16 12	32 24



Adequate funding  
by government  
Maintenance of  
access road to the  
park

Source: Survey data, 2018

On strategies to improve tourism at the park (table 7), 54% of the staff recommend reconstruction of the suspended bridge in the park, a few (7.3%) recommend construction of another tree house, 64% suggested provision of recreational facilities at Arakhuan camp of the park, 84.7% adequate funding by the government, 32% local and international advertisement, 24% maintenance of access road to the park.

**Table 6: Does Ecotourism create employment?**

Opinion	Response	Percentage
<b>Agree</b>	70	28
<b>Strongly agree</b>	115	46
<b>Disagree</b>	38	15.2
<b>Strongly</b>	27	10/8
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey data, 2018

On the opinion of the respondents on whether ecotourism creates employment (table 6), 70 (28%) respondents agreed that ecotourism creates employment and 115 (46%) strongly agreed. A few respondents (15.2%) disagreed that ecotourism creates employment and 10.8% strongly disagreed.

**Table 7: Chi-square test of ecotourism and sustainable development**

S/N	Categorical variable	Mean	Chi-square	P-value
1	Ecotourism	3.58	5.3	0.002
2	Sustainable development	3.80		



**Plate 1: Damaged suspended bridge at Okomu National Park**



**Plate 2: Arakhuan Stream**



**Plate 3: A view of Okomu Rainforest**



## **Conclusion**

Nigeria's mono-economy dependence on crude oil has proven unsustainable in recent times. This legitimates the call for the renewal and promotion of the tourism sector which will serve as an alternative. The figures showing tourism earnings and the number of tourists; visits at Okomu National Park may not be robust but it is indicative that much can be achieved if the critical issues plaguing the park development were to be addressed with much efficacy.

Sustainability is not complete if the environment is not protected in the process. On this note, Ecotourism at Okomu national park need to be seen other than a business pursuit that will produce massive economic proceeds but also it need to be considered as a practice that promote observation of nature and environmental protection (Stefanica & Vlavian). Through the influx of tourists to behold the natural wonders of a locality such as Okomu national park. the people should be made to appreciate the importance of their natural heritage as the features attracting visitors, and in so doing the conservation syndrome could be sown amongst local folks.

The impact of tourism is multi-dimensional. Just as tourism affects the economy and the environment- likewise it affects the society. The social life of people and their interactions with ne another is essential in sustainable tourism development. The kindness of locals towards purists and vice versa forms a positive perception on a destination by tourists and also influences villagers' interest on tourism. Thus far not so much patronage or benefit has been solved by Okomu park management and villagers from tourism. The reason for this could be credited to the low tourists turnout recorded by the park year in year out. There are different purposes that could make a tourist visit a national park of which education is just one of many. It therefore rather alarming that nearly all tourists encountered during field survey were researchers and/or tourists who visited the park for the major reason of education or research. education is a profound and a legitimate reason to visit a national park, but if Okomu park aim to achieve a sustainable stride in tourism, a whole new facet of tourist which include those going on



vacations and holidays need to be wooed to the park by offers of holiday packages.

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