



THE MAJOR CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN IMO STATE

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ABSTRACT: Ecotourism development in Imo State in particular and Nigeria in general has been on a very low ebb despite the abundant ecotourism resources in the area. Many researchers have investigated into the challenges of ecotourism development in Nigeria and proffered solutions to the challenges, yet, nothing has changed in this regard, hence one wonders whether those identified challenges and solutions are the really the issues. It therefore, becomes very imperative to research into the real challenges of sustainable ecotourism development in the state and thereby proffering real solutions in order to achieve sustainable ecotourism development in the state. Data were collected with structured questionnaire administered to 360 respondents from the selected households. Percentages, mean scores and chi-square were employed for data analysis. Findings showed that males dominated in the research (70.5%), Farmers (47.66%), married (57.89%) and holders of First School Leaving Certificate (30.04%). The challenges of sustainable ecotourism include lack government attention ($\chi=2.85$), lack of infrastructure (3.04), lack of awareness (3.11) and lack of promotion (2.99) while lack of identification, prioritization and mapping potential resources are seen as major challenges of sustainable ecotourism development ($P < 0.01$; $X^2 = 3395.226$). It was recommended that for sustainable ecotourism development in the state, there is the need for the employment of geographic information techniques in the identification, prioritization and mapping potential ecotourism resources hence, the employment of geographic information systems experts by the local governments and tourism ministries.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, Imo State, Major Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism as a sub-sector of tourism is an economic sector which depends for its very existence on quality natural environment as much as it equally does on the specific culture and society of the local inhabitants (Komla & Veirier, 2012). It is one of the world's largest growing industries with no sign of slowing done in the nearest future (Tijiani, 2007). Tourism industry generates over \$7.22 trillion of world's revenue annually and creates over 13.2% of world's employment out of which over 60 percent comes from ecotourism (World Tourism Organization, 2012). Ecotourism is the principal export of many countries, for example, it was tourism that enabled Botswana to cease to be a Less Developed Country (LDC) back in 1994 (Anim & Ewa, 2012). Other

countries whose economies have substantially benefitted from ecotourism include; Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nepal, Kenya, Madagascar among others. Therefore, the role of ecotourism as a major tool for socio-economic development, judging from its immense revenue base is intriguingly challenging all over the world.

Despite the enormous natural historical and cultural resources Imo State is endowed with, in terms of ecotourism revenue, Imo State is rated as one of the lowest in Nigeria based on travel and tourism competitiveness index (Baniya, 2008). The theory of ecotourism growth reveals that those living in pristine environment have ecotourism virtues as a marketable asset which can attract people from different parts of the world who can visit and spend their money therein (Ijeomah & Herbert, 2012). It is on the basis of consistent payment that ecotourism can bring about material and non-material benefits such as; economic empowerment, value addition to local assets, creation of formal and informal employment and markets, educational and environmental awareness. Others include cultural exchange, attraction of government attention, infrastructural development and pride to both local culture and surrounding natural enticement to tourism host communities (Ijeomah, 2007).

The desired sustained increase in the level of economic benefits derived from ecotourism in a particular area depends largely among other factors, the level of development in tourism destinations which is at a very low ebb in state and identification of potential ecotourism resources. If the major specific development challenges in the sector are not identified and addressed, ecotourism development in the state can hardly be improved and sustained. Several efforts have been made by tourism institutions in Nigeria to tackle the problems of tourism development but some of the specific challenges for sustainable ecotourism development are not yet clear (Ijeomah, 2012), hence understanding the major challenges of sustainable ecotourism development in the state become very imperative in achieving the much needed advancement and sustainability in ecotourism development in Imo State.

Statement of the Problem and Objectives

Many researchers have conducted studies on the challenges of sustainable ecotourism development in Nigeria and proffered solutions to the challenges, but despite these, ecotourism development in Imo State like-wise other states in Nigeria has remained underdeveloped. Hence one wonders if the identified



problems and solutions are really the issues hindering ecotourism development in the state. It is on this on this background that this study was carried out to investigate the major challenges of challenges of sustainable ecotourism development in Imo state. However, the study has the following objectives:

- i) Ascertain if proper identification, prioritization and mapping of ecotourism resources are the major challenges of sustainable ecotourism development in Imo State.
- ii) Investigate into other problems of ecotourism development in the state
- iii) Examine the ways of achieving sustainable ecotourism development in the study area.

Theoretical Framework

There are three major schools of thought associated with the challenges of ecotourism development in Nigeria. The first is the “impoverishment school” which is of the opinion that the major challenge of sustainable ecotourism development is the increase in number of poor people, that is small holders are the principal challenge of sustainable ecotourism development in Nigeria (Mfion, Ikutoye, & Ukatu, 2011). Out of poverty, animals are killed and vegetation/ forests are destroyed indiscriminately, water bodies are polluted, even the tourism destination where developed are vandalized and looted among others. These pose a very big challenge to sustainable ecotourism development and make it difficult to appreciate the ecotourism potentials of Nigeria. The “infrastructural group” happens to be the second school of thought. They believe that the challenges of unsustainable ecotourism development in Nigeria is as a result of inadequate infrastructure. In most tourism sites in Nigeria, there are challenges of inadequate facilities, lack of maintenance, inadequate funding and seasonal inaccessibility (Ijeoma & Oruh, 2012). Ogunjimi (2010) also corroborated this assertion in his experience to Kainji Lake National Park. Infrastructural deficit is a major challenge to sustainable ecotourism development because infrastructure is one of the major life-wires of ecotourism development (Asonye, 2015).

However, there is a third school named the “dearth of ecotourism products” They believe that the challenges of sustainable ecotourism development in Nigeria are caused by lack of adequate information and data on the existence of such attractions. (Mfion, Ikutoye & Ukatu, 2011). Elumuno (2012) opined that one of the major reasons why Nigerian tourism seems to be less developed and less competitive is the lack of spelt out improved and accessible tourism

products like maps. Tourism maps in Nigeria are not easily available and where available, lack comprehension, accuracy and up-to-date geo-referencing (Olabintun & Ajirofutu, 2013). Matheson and Wall (2012) provided an integrated insight into the strategies viable for effective management of wide range of Nigeria tourism resources especially ecotourism and identified the implications for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals of Nigeria. Solutions proffered by their studies include, promotion of the domestication of ecotourism products, identification, prioritization and mapping of potential tourism resources to guide tourism developers and tourists. Alamu and Agbeja (2011) attempted to provide a linkage between deforestation and ecotourism development and improvement in south west Nigeria. They identified poverty as 42% of the agents of deforestation. Ogunwale (2015) analyzed the current status of ecotourisms in the Nigerian economy and its capacity for the diversification of the economy. The study found that poverty, lack of awareness of the existence of ecotourism resources by tourists and developers are important variables that affect the sustainable development of ecotourism in the country.

Hussaini (2014) identified economic activities that affect ecotourism development in Bauchi State. The study found that the dependence on federal allocation, use of land for food production, and grazing animals as some of the challenges of ecotourism development. He suggested that pursuance of self sustenance and less dependence on federal allocation including sensitization campaign for the general public on the existence of the economic booster "ecotourism" as part of the solution to the problem. Ijeomah and Okoli (2016) assessed the challenges of ecotourism in selected destination in Nigeria. They found out that the challenges of ecotourism development in the various destination are similar. On the whole they identified inadequate facilities, lack of maintenance, inadequate funding, absence of tourism location and destination facilities (maps) and poor management as some of the factors militating against ecotourism development in Nigeria. They advocated the development of adequate tourism facilities and infrastructure, including adequate funding and maintenance of existing ones.

Conceptual Clarifications

The concept of ecotourism is intimately related to the concept of "sustainable tourism and environmentally sustainable development" "The concept of sustainable tourism focuses on all forms of activities, management and



development of tourism that preserve natural, economic and social integrity in order to ensure sustainable development of the sector (Dowing, 1995). It was one of the responses of the tourism industry to Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism industry, published by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and World Tourism Organization (WTO) in 1995 (Honey, 1995; WTTC-WTO, 1995). Generally, the basic concept of ecotourism incorporates these three main elements of;

- i) Sustainable economic profitability,
- ii) Sustainable management of resources,
- iii) Environmental education activities.

Other minor elements are; a limited number of tourists or tour operators, protection and increase of the benefits to nature and local people and local participation (Buckey, 1990). These elements are normally included in sustainability components. Nevertheless, many authors have raised some minor elements to the same level of those three major elements in order to stress and focus on them for specific purposes. Although other responsible forms of tourism follow this concept, many of them are not ecotourism. Most of the literatures claim that ecotourism lies on the opposite side of mass tourism and is more sustainable than mass tourism. While most of mass tourism practices are unsustainable, a small part of ecotourism can be accused of being unsustainable, as illustrated by Butler (Weaver, 2010). Ecotourism should in all cases aim to achieve sustainable development. Ecotourism is based on principles, guidelines and standards and as a growing industry needs to have a regulatory system of certification. It should be integrated with conservation and development concept in a holistic manner, that means all the components must be linked, compromised and balanced to each other (pradhammapitaaka, 2000).

The similarities or differences of the definitions depend on the overall concept of tourism development, the perspective of the definers and the purpose of its application. The United Nations Environment program (UNEP) considers ecotourism to be of special interest to UNEP because of its relationship with conservation, sustainability and biological diversity. According to Anomasiri (2004) ecotourism contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, contributing to their well-being, interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors, lends itself better

to independent travelers as well as to organized tours for small size groups. In the light of this suggestion and in comparing all the definitions and concept of ecotourism, the elements could be defined as; Nature based, education and sustainable development which include economic and /or socio-cultural issues (Diamantus & Ladkin, 1999). One other concept important to ecotourism is the concept of sustainable economic development. Nelson quoted in Enger and Smith (2004) identified the characteristics that define sustainability to include renewability, substitution, interdependence, adaptability and institutional commitment. Stan, Alan and Rene (2011) defined economic development as that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

Sustainable ecotourism development is therefore, that which meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of ecotourism resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life system (WTO, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Imo State which State is located between latitudes $4^{\circ}45'N$ and $7^{\circ}15'N$, and longitudes $6^{\circ}50'E$ and $7^{\circ}25'E$. It has a total population of 4.8 million people (National Population Commission, 2010) with a total land area of about 5136.052km^2 and an average population density of 760 people/ km^2 . It is bordered by Abia State on the East, by the River Niger and Delta State on the west, by Anambra State to the north and Rivers State to the south. For years now, tourism development, ecotourism has been on a very slow pace despite the abundant ecotourism resources the state is endowed with, including the facilities that can support ecotourism development such as the hospitality industry. All the households in Imo State from 18 years and above and staff of the Ministry of Tourism constituted the target population of the study. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select respondents. The first stage involved the delineation of the study into the 3 geo-political zones which is Orlu, Okigwe and Owerri zones. The second stage was the purposive selection of 3 local governments from each of the 3 senatorial zones and third involved the selection of 2 communities each from each of the 3 local governments and 2 villages from each of the communities. Finally, was the selection of 10 respondents from each of the villages, giving a



total sample size of 360 respondents, while 6 respondents were interviewed from the Ministry of Tourism.

Three hundred and forty two respondents correctly filled the questionnaire used for the study. The instrument for data collection was structured questionnaire. Information in the questionnaire were analyzed using a 4 -point Likert scale type of which Strongly Agree=4, Agree=3, Disagree=2 and Strongly Disagree=1. The mean was calculated thus $4+3+2+1 = 10/4 = 2.50$. In decision rule, any variable with mean score of 2.50 and above were considered constraining factors whereas, variables less than 2.50 were not considered. Analysis of the hypothesis was based on descriptive statistics, which involved the use of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and by the use of chi-square to test the relationship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic /social economic characteristic of the study area.

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	241	70.5
	Female	101	29.5
	Total	342	100.00
Age structure	18-30	37	10.81
	31-45	98	26.65
	46-60	131	38.30
	>60	76	22.22
	Total	342	100.00
Marital status	Single	125	36.54
	Married	198	57.89
	Widow	19	5.55
	Total	342	100.00
Educational status	F.S.L.C	105	30.70
	W.A.S.C	89	26.02
	OND/NCE	63	18.42
	B.SC/HND	563	16.08
	PG	18	5.26
	Total	342	100.00
Religion	Christianity	326	95.32
	Islam	4	1.17
	Others	12	3.51
	Total	342	100.00
OCCUPATION	Student	18	5.26

	Farming	163	47.66
	Civil service	70	20.47
	Business	65	19.01
	Others	26	7.60
	Total	342	100.00
Income	₦20,000 or less	123	35.97
	₦ 21,000-50,000	116	35.80
	₦ 51, 000-100,000	54	15.79
	₦ 101,000-200,000	34	9.94
	₦ 201,000 and above	15	4.39
	Total	342	100.00

Source: Researchers Compilation (2019)

Gender

Gender and age are important demographic variables and the primary basis of demographic classification. Table 1 above (gender) shows the distribution of interviewed respondents by gender at the time of survey. There is the preponderance of males over females. Thus approximately 70.5% of the respondents are males while 29.5% are females. The dominance of male stems from the fact that males are the leaders of household and could not be there while female attend to issues like this. Hence there were more male than female to participate in the survey. This is in line with the findings of other researchers on demographic and socio-economic characteristic of the study area (Nwaonu, 2016; Nzekwe 2004). In terms of age structure of the respondents, there are more people between the ages of 46-60 (38.30%) followed by those between ages 31-45(25.65%) and those above 60 ranked fourth while those aged between 18-30 are the least. The frequencies and percentage distribution are as shown in Table 1 (age). As a matter of fact, the age range 31-60 are more economically active in every society and can partake more in viable business ventures like ecotourism. The studies of Okoro et al., (2014) indicated similar age composition of 30-60 in a related work. This was also corroborated by the research conducted by Jurowski et al., (2007). Their research established that this age group are very supportive in tourism development. This might not be unconnected with the interest of this age group in exploring business opportunities that would enhance their standard of living.

Table 1 further shows the percentage distribution of respondents by marital status. The predominance of married people as respondents may not be



unconnected with the fact that marriage is one of the primary indicators of being a responsible person in the society and that makes them partake in opportunities that will improve their family life and well being and hence their willingness to take part in tourism activities. Table 1 also indicates that over two third of the respondents are married, less than 3 in 10 are single while less than in 10 are widowed

The respondent's religion indicates that Christians constitute a large percentage (95.32) of the survey, this is because the study area is predominantly dominated by Christians, followed by other religions (3.512) while Islamic religion is the least. Lankford (2004) and Juroiowski et al (2007) in their research established that religious has no influence in tourism development. The result of the educational status as show in table 1 above indicates that about 30.70% of the respondents have First School Leaving Certificate (FLSC) and 26.02% possess West African School Certificate (WASC), 18.42% had either Ordinary National Diploma (OND) or National Certificate of Education (NCE). The remaining 16.08% and 5.26% obtained Higher National Diploma (HND) or Bachelor's degree (B.SC /A/ED) and above Bachelor's degree respectively. This implies that majority of the respondents are literates since they can read and write and are likely to adopt innovation in tourism development all things being equal, considering that education is an important factor influencing the adoption of innovation (Abalu and Igwe, 2005; Ike, 2008). Another implication of this result is that the respondents are likely to be engaged in paid job or set up and manage own business if ecotourism investment is established in their locality, since education enhances ones opportunity in such ventures.

From the Table 1 on occupation, almost half of the respondents (47.66%) are farmers, 26.02% are civil servants while 19.01% have business as their occupation. Students constitutes 5.26% of the respondent's occupation while 2.05% engage in other forms of occupation. This result is in agreement with the finding of Ayoola (2008), Nwaiwu (2009) and Ukoha (2003) who reported farming as the major occupation of the people of Imo State in their research. This implies that the people will have little or no money for leisure due to the subsistence nature of their type of agriculture which has led to poor standard of living in the state especially the rural are

The average monthly income of respondents in the study area shows that a higher percentage lives on a monthly income between the range of N20,000-50,000 while fewer percentage lives on N200,000.00 and above. This was corroborated by Howard (2004) in his study. This defines the concerns of social cost of tourism pursuit and also the possible economic cost in term of opportunity to invest in tourism related businesses. Income is also considered as one of the most fundamental parameters of embarking on tourism adventure and hence exchange of resources will enhance tourism development.

Perceived Challenges of Ecotourism Development in Imo State

Data in Table 2 shows the perceived challenges of ecotourism development in Imo State

Table 2: Mean Distribution of Challenges of Ecotourism Development as Perceived by Respondents

S/N	VARIABLES	SA (4)	A (3)	DA (2)	SDA (1)	TOTAL (10)	MEAN 2.5	REMARK
A	lack of infrastructure	139 (40.6)	110 (35.5)	62 (18.1)	31 (9.1)	342	3.04	Accept
B	lack of attention from government	126 (36.8)	116 (33.9)	63 (18.4)	37 (10.8)	342	2.85	Accept
C	lack of awareness	164 (48.6)	91 (26.6)	49 (14.3)	30 (8.8)	342	3.11	Accept
D	lack of promotion	103 (30.1)	105 (48.2)	44 (12.9)	30 (8.8)	342	2.99	Accept
E	lack of co-operation between government and community	4.5 (13.2)	74 (21.6)	88 (25.7)	135 (39.5)	342	2.07	Reject
	Total	577	556	306	271	1710	2.81	Accept

Source: Researcher's compilation 2019

Even though Imo State has tremendous potential for sustainable ecotourism development that can provide the much needed employment and sustainable economic development in the area, the various factors in Table 2 have contributed to hindering its sustainable development. The data gathered from the survey and interview with staff of Ministry of Tourism are similar. Therefore, according to the respondents, the remarkable problem hindering ecotourism development are as stated in Table 2 above. These factors are also evident in the findings of many research conducted all over the nation relating to problems of tourism development (Okoro, 2014; Asonye, 2017).



In summary, the overall average of 2.81 shows that the respondents agreed that the factors mentioned is hindering sustainable ecotourism development in the state. In other words, they perceived poor ecotourism development as the consequences of these factors in the study area. The effect of these factors will continue to hinder sustainable ecotourism development if nothing is done to check them.

Ways of Achieving Sustainable Ecotourism Development in Imo State by Respondents

Entries in Table 3 shows the perceived distribution of respondents on the ways of achieving sustainable ecotourism development in Imo State.

Table 3: Mean Distribution of Respondents Based on the Perceived Ways of Achieving Sustainable Ecotourism Development in Imo State

S/N	SOLUTIONS	SA (4)	A (3)	DA (2)	SDA (1)	Total (1.0)	Mean 2.5	Remark
A	Provision of infrastructure	122 (35.8)	81 (23.7)	78 (22.8)	61 (17.83)	342	2.77	Accept
B	Attention from government	173 (50.58)	93 (27.19)	44 (12.87)	32 (9.36)	342	2.85	Accept
C	Creation awareness	61	54	98	129	343	2.14	Reject
D	Promoting co-operation between government and community	38 (11.11)	49 (14.33)	86 (25.15)	169 (49.42)	34	1.87	Reject
E	Promotional activities	97 (28.36)	84 (24.56)	87 (25.45)	74 (21.64)	34	2.60	Accept

Source: Researcher's compilation (2019)

Table 3 contains information on the ways of achieving sustainable ecotourism development in the study area. These were also rated on the 4-point Likert scale of strongly agreed, agree, strongly disagreed and disagree. Among the ways of attaining sustainable development in ecotourism include provision of infrastructure (2.77), the most viable solution here is government attention (3.19) while promotional activities has (2.60). The respondents did not see creation of awareness and cooperation between government and host communities as part of the ways of achieving sustainable development in the state. Although most researchers viewed awareness creation as a major solution towards achieving sustainable ecotourism development in their studies (Ijeoma, 2014; Ibeagi, 2013; Ogunwale, 2015). This seems to be biased but authentic and reliable, since the respondents did not see it as major way of

attaining sustainable ecotourism development in the study area. Lack of cooperation between government and host communities was not acknowledged as a way forward as corroborated by Okoro (2014). This is because people are yearning for developmental projects in their communities.

Test of hypothesis

Ho: There is no significant relationship between identification, prioritization and mapping of ecotourism resources and sustainable ecotourism development in Imo State.

A chi-square test of the association between respondents perceived impact of identification, prioritization and mapping of ecotourism resources showed significant relationship ($P < 0.01$; $\chi^2 = 3395.226$). This implies that identification, prioritization and mapping of ecotourism resources in the state is an important factor towards achieving sustainable ecotourism development in Imo State.

Conclusion

Development of adequate tourism facilities and infrastructure are very essential for sustainable development of ecotourism in Imo State. This can only be achieved through proper funding, planning, implementation and adequate maintenance and monitoring by the management agencies. The local communities must be well guided on the potential menace of ecotourism on community behavior and how to curb such possible menace through stakeholder's collaboration and planning. However, sustainable development in ecotourism in Imo State can hardly be consolidated without identifying and prioritizing potential ecotourism resources and creating adequate awareness on the existing and potential ecotourism resources in state. This is because the key determinant of where tourists/developers visit is their knowledge of the existence of such attractions. In order to achieve this feat, there is the need to apply the techniques of Geographic Information System (GIS) which play important role in natural resources planning and management hence, GIS experts should be engaged by the local governments and tourism ministries in the state to assist in this regard. These alone cannot work in isolation therefore, there is the need to involve other identified solutions if sustainability is to be achieved in ecotourism development.



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