

Enhancing Eco-Tourism Development in Rural Cross River State: An Empirical Analysis of Infrastructure and Local Business Initiatives.**Dr Michael Obun Etan.**

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Abstract

This study examined the Enhancing Eco-Tourism Development in Rural Cross River State: An Empirical Analysis of Infrastructure and Local Business Initiatives. Two research questions directed this study. The study adopted a descriptive research design. The population of this study comprised 47,483 tourism workers and tourism business owners in the study area. The sample for the study comprised 1,040 respondents in the study area which multi-stage sampling approach was adopted. Data were collected using a questionnaire titled "Socio Economic Factors and Ecotourism Development in Rural Communities Questionnaire" (SEFEDRCQ). The instrument was validated by three research experts from Educational Foundation department of the University of Calabar. The reliability of the instrument was determined with Cronbach Alpha reliability method which gave reliability coefficient which ranged from .83 to .89. The data collected were analyzed using Simple Linear Regression and Multiple Linear Regression tested from .05 level of significance and the result reveals that there is a significance influence of provision of infrastructural facilities, local business development, and cultural activities on ecotourism development in rural communities. Based on the result of the study it was concluded that, provision of infrastructural facilities, local business development, and cultural activities should be properly managed to promote ecotourism development. It was recommended among others that, policymakers and stakeholders should develop regulations that support community-based tourism initiatives and ensure that local communities benefit from ecotourism.

Keywords: Eco-Tourism, Development, Rural, Infrastructure, Local Business Initiatives.**Introduction**

Ecotourism is a form of nature-oriented tourism intended to contribute to the conservation of the natural environment, generally defined as being minimally impactful, and including providing both contributions to conservation and environmental education. Generally, ecotourism deals with interaction with living parts of natural environments, in contrast to geotourism, which is associated with geology. In contrast to nature tourism and sustainable tourism in general, ecotourism also usually intended to foster a greater appreciation in tourists of natural habitats and threats they experience, as well as local culture (Buckley, 2019). Eco-tourism promotes income generation. Communities located near major attraction sites, such as; national parks, reserves, archaeological and historic sites should have the opportunity to participate in ecotourism activities. These communities can provide hotels (accommodation), restaurants, shops, transportation and tour services; they can also be employed in management and operational activities. One important way to involve communities and gain their support in tourism is through local job creation. However, employment in ecotourism has been observed as mostly unskilled and semiskilled and

often with low quality and low remuneration (Ofre, *et al*, 2017).

UNWTO (2020) revealed that, today the majority of people in the developed world and increasing numbers in developing countries are tourists, at some time in their lives. Tourism is no longer the prerogative of a few but an accepted and accustomed, even expected, part of the lifestyle of a large and growing number of people. Tourism is of major economic and social significance because about 270 million tourists spend \$92 billion (US) annually in places outside their own countries. This is one of the largest items in the world's foreign trade. The world growth in visitor arrivals rate of approximately 6 percent per annum, tourism is also one of the fastest growing economic activities. It is the most important export industry and earner of foreign exchange in many countries. Looking at benefits and relevance of tourism, it could be in terms of its economic significance, where receipts from international tourism can provide a valuable source of earnings for both development as well as developing countries. Visitors spending generate income for both public and private sectors, besides effecting wages and employment opportunities.

The concept of ecotourism strives to harmonize and reconcile issues of intergenerational equity, and the goals of economic growth, environmental protection and social justice. It recognizes the need for fairness between local individuals and groups, and between hosts and guest today ecotourism is an important engine of economic growth and job creation of most nation of the world. However, in Plateau State a lot more are of vital natural and man-made capital stock (tourist attractions) bestowed upon the state that are required for the development of any viable tourism product such as scenic; tours; cultural tourism; mountain climbing, biking and treks; ecotourism, religious or spiritual tourism, sports/recreation tourism and among others (Ayodele, 2022). According to (Ajake *et al*, 2020), ecotourism has been one of the measures used globally to boost the socio-economic development of Nigerian society like the Cross-River State. Many researchers have argued that ecotourism in recent times has been confirmed as catalyst for sustainable social, economic and environmental development of urban and rural communities around the world. This implies that ecotourism destinations have the capacity to improve the socio-economic drivers of any society. The availability of Agbokim waterfalls, Kwafalls, Becheve Nature Reserve, Ikom monoliths, Drill monkey Ranch, Cross River National Park, Afi Mountain Sanctuary and Obudu Cattle Ranch as ecotourism destinations in Cross River State should have been at the forefront of socio-economic progress in Nigeria (Nyong, *et al*. 2018). According to (Nchor, *et al*, 2018), ecotourism is a strategic tourism model designed to minimize negative impacts on the environment and showcase local cultures while actively contributing to the economic and social wellbeing of host communities and all the stakeholders in a given geographical region. According to (Tosun, 2016), ecotourism is sustainable when its development and operation include participation of local populace, protection of the total environment, fair economic returns for the industry and its host community, as well as a mutual respect and gratification to all nature. Ecotourism, natural resources, cultural heritage, rural lifestyle and an integrated tourism is a type of local economic activities. (Zapata, *et al*, 2018) posited that, ecotourism is an agent of change" therefore it has the potentials of developing the socioeconomic aspect of community dwellers and can also improve their livelihood condition if properly harnessed. At the same time, ecotourism produces direct economic benefit for the local community if it is to elicit their continued support, benefits that compliment rather than overwhelm traditional practices and sources of income. However, such economic benefits and material wealth obtained by the local community may themselves lead to cultural changes in their way of life.

The International Ecotourism Society (2015) noted that, globally, rural communities are embracing ecotourism as a key strategy for economic growth and poverty alleviation. Ecotourism focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora, fauna and socioeconomic activities as well as cultural artifacts of the locality. It defines ecotourism as a responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and sustains the wellbeing of the local people. Bansal and Kumar (2015), further described ecotourism as an environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present; that promotes conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people thereby raising environmental consciousness. Maharaj *et al*. (2018) stated that, ecotourism has emerged as a vital tool for promoting environmental conservation and sustainable development in rural communities. By generating revenue from tourism activities, local communities can reinvest in

conservation programs and sustainable land-use practices. Ecotourism also provides an incentive for local communities to conserve natural resources, as they directly benefit from preserving the environment. Aremu, (2021) observed that, Cross River State, located in southeastern Nigeria is endowed with rich natural and cultural resources, making it an ideal destination for ecotourism. This implies that the state's ecotourism development is focused on sustainable tourism practices that conserve the environment, promote cultural heritage, and benefit local communities. The ecotourism protected areas in Cross River State offer a range of ecotourism activities, including hiking, wildlife viewing, and cultural tours are managed to ensure the conservation of natural and cultural resources while benefiting local communities. Ecotourism holds immense potential for Cross River State as a viable economic alternative and a strategy to protect its globally significant rainforests. It is a promising sustainable development initiative that would positively impact rural villages, the state government, and the flora and fauna of Cross River State. The state is a one top place for eco-tourism, from the south, central and northern parts of the state, ecological tourism resources abound. For instance, at the Obudu Cattle Ranch, there is a large forest reserve with a walkway known as "Canopy Walk Way" and other varieties of resources to promote eco-tourism for the state and the locality. The existence of this ecological zone has promoted the development of ecological tourism base travel that has provided several socio-economic benefits to the government and the people in the area.

Eneji, *et al.* (2017) posited that, most communities are blessed with forests; others with water bodies, while others are blessed with serene environment and archaeological sites good enough for tourist attractions, these resources if properly harnessed and exploited can contribute to the socioeconomic development of the rural livelihoods of such communities and bring about their infrastructural development. According to Kolawole, *et al.* (2016), the demand for tourism and quest to diversifying various economies has aggravated the momentum of the development paradigm in various destinations. Areas with high-value natural resources, like oceans, lakes, waterfalls, mountains, unique flora and fauna, and great scenic beauty attract tourists and new residents (in-migrants) who seek emotional and spiritual connections with nature. Because these people value nature, selected natural environments are preserved, protected, and kept from further ecological decline.

According to (Eshun, *et al.*, 2017) every society is endowed with one form of natural resources of the other to be exploited for the betterment of the lives of the people of that community the benefit of ecotourism is its potential to contribute to conservation and development, thereby improving the socioeconomic status and livelihoods of the tourism host communities. Amalu *et al.* (2020) found out that in ecotourism development, most local communities' members can be self-employed through the provision of some of these services or employed by established tourism agencies as traders, transporters, tour guides, hotel/ accommodation staff, security staff, food/beverages, artifacts and cultural shops attendants among others. Ecotourism provides alternate source of livelihoods and are all avenues where local can be gainfully employed and can make their living out of this (Aniah, *et al.* 2019).

The major underlying assumption of ecotourism is that visitors can provide the necessary economic incentives to achieve local conservation and development. In theory, ecotourism generates revenue that can be used to protect and conserve biodiversity and the natural resources that draws visitors to a particular site. It is also regarded as a mode of eco-development, which represents practical and effective means of attaining social and economic improvement for all countries (Egbe *et al.* 2019). World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimated that travel and tourism generated 203 million jobs over 8% of all jobs worldwide in 2000, rising to over 207 million in 2001, 210 in 2008 and about 218 in 2013. The awareness of the social, economic, environmental, cultural and ecological benefits of ecotourism development to the general wellbeing of people should naturally reduce the level of unsustainable forest practices among communities especially where protected areas are established in Nigeria. As noted by the World Trade Organization (WTO, 2014) in Eneji, *et al.* 2016), tourism and hospitality industry is one of Africa's greatest but most under invested assets, with market worth \$50billion, but has \$203.7-billion of untapped potential which represents four times its current level. The Organization's forecast for international tourist arrivals to Africa indicates that "there will be 77.3 million visitors in 2020. This represents an annual growth rate of 5.5% over the decade, which is above the global growth rate of 4.1%. Consequently, if this projection

and forecast is to be feasible a proactive measure will need to be put in place to develop, beautify, preserve and conserve the natural environment to make the tourist destinations remain attractive.

The socioeconomic impacts of ecotourism development on rural communities in Cross River State are multifaceted and far-reaching. However, despite the potential benefits of ecotourism, several issues have been identified that hinder the effectiveness of ecotourism development in promoting socio-economic development in rural communities. These issues include: low-income generation, unemployment, inadequate infrastructural facilities, loss of biodiversity, limited access to markets and tourists and lack of capacity and expertise in ecotourism development and management. Cross River State is a world class tourism State with numerous conventional tourism and ecotourism destinations that attract significant influx of national and international tourists. The extent of socioeconomic impacts should naturally enhance the ecotourism development of rural communities in the State. Given the observed poor standard of living of the people, occasioned by negative ecotourism development factors, the researcher is prompted to examine how socio-economic factors relate with ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State.

Statement of the Problem

In many rural communities, limited community involvement, inadequate infrastructure, lack of financial resources and management expertise, poor marketing strategies and inconsistent regulations, which hinder economic benefits to local population, and can lead to environmental degradation, pose significant challenges to leveraging ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development. Socio-cultural issues include, community alienation and lack of participation, leading to potential conflicts. Environmental challenges arise from over-tourism and resource degradation. Understanding the socio-economic dynamics influencing eco-tourism in these contexts is crucial for fostering sustainable practices that balance economic benefits with environmental and cultural conservation.

Ecotourism development is the deliberate planning, management and promotion of tourism activities that promote environmental conservation, sustainability and community engagement. It involves all activities carried out to conserve, preserve, maintain, safeguard, protect and sustain natural environment and cultural heritage within the community to ensure continuous benefit of natural resources to both humans and ecosystem. The conservation of natural ecosystem has significant effect on the social, economic, ecological and environmental well-being of the entire society and not just the rural communities. The understanding of socio-economic impacts of natural ecosystem conservation to rural communities and society at large has necessitated the establishment of ecotourism activities areas and building partnership with different conservation agencies. Unfortunately, this expectation seems to be far from attainment as there seems to be an increasing trend of destructive forest practices in protected areas in Nigeria society. These unsustainable practices observable among communities where protected areas or ecotourism sites are established in Nigeria range from unauthorized logging, indiscriminate hunting, indiscriminate bush burning and using explosives as fishing strategies. The major problems of managing eco-tourism sites in Nigeria are loss of wildlife habitats, poaching including overhunting, collection of non-timber forest products, logging and grazing, farming, bush burning, animal hunting, timber logging, overexploitation of forest and other deforestation practices.

Though measures like indiscriminate logging, unauthorized hunting, indiscriminate bush burning and using explosives as fishing strategies in rural communities have been designed by government in partnership with Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) to reduce the level of unsustainable and destructive practices in ecotourism areas. It is still perceived that high level of degradation of natural resources including forests, water, and land, loss of biodiversity devastating socio-economic impacts on rural communities leading to decreased economic opportunities, reduced quality of life and threatening their sources of income, food and health is still prevalent in many areas. Therefore, the researcher seeks to investigate the Enhancing Eco-Tourism Development in Rural Cross River State: An Empirical Analysis of Infrastructure and Local Business Initiatives.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been raised to guide the study;

- 1 To what extent does provision of infrastructural facilities influence eco-tourism development in rural communities of Cross River State?
- 2 How does local business development influence eco-tourism development in rural communities of Cross River State?

Literature Review

A study by Ognonna & Igbojekwe (2020), examined Local government and responses to sustainable tourism development in Nigeria: A study of local government authorities in Imo State. Local government plays an important role in promoting sustainable tourism development. Federal government and state governments are responsible for providing infrastructure and amenities the sector requires. As major tourism activities occur at the local level, local government is also well situated to avoid, remedy or mitigate the sector's potential socio-economic and bio-physical effects. The purpose of this study was to examine how local governments are involved in tourism development in Nigeria, to determine the role local government can play to promote sustainable tourism development and to provide useful solutions to local governments authorities. The research methods used included initial review of related literature, interview and structured questionnaire administered on the local government chairmen and tourism committee members. The results revealed that the states government do not give the local councils autonomy to plan and develop within the domain, lack of information regarding tourism trends and development among the people, no strategic plans for the enablement of sustainable tourism development at the local government level, lack of adequate facilities to attract and provide for visitors were identified as their major problems. The researchers noted that there is an urgent need to involve the community members and local councils in tourism planning in Nigeria and recommended that a broad-based community participation through the local government as a corner-stone for such process, that there should be more effective partnership between the federal, state and local governments and the industry. The state government should not assume the role of planning and developing tourism alone without involving the local government authorities.

Emeka & Nwambuko (2023), conducted a study on assessing the relationship between infrastructural development and tourism destination competitiveness: Evidence from Nigeria. The travel and tourism industry are considered one of the growth sectors of the Nigerian economy. As a result, the government is looking to diversify the economy that is currently dependent on crude oil by harnessing the tourism potential in the country. That said, many factors lead to tourism development and destination competitiveness. One such factor is infrastructural development. This study, therefore, focuses on the effect of infrastructural development on destination competitiveness using Nigeria as a case study. The study made use of secondary data from various publications of the World Bank, World Economic Forum and United Nations World Tourism Organization. Regression analysis was applied to assess the effect of infrastructure on international tourist arrivals, while Pearson Correlation was applied to understand the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The findings show that various forms of infrastructural development in Nigeria had negative effects on the number of international tourists visiting the country. Visitors expect easy access to destinations either by road, air or sea, as well as information communication technology. When a country lacks infrastructure, it affects the number of visitors arriving in the country negatively. The study concludes that the findings can contribute to the limited literature on destination competitiveness and help to guide policymaking in the future.

Olusola (2016) has discussed the economic consequences for local communities in Nigeria of sustainable rural tourism. The study explored sustainable rural tourism and its economic consequences for Nigeria's local population. The results have shown that sustainable rural tourism growth is a good choice for a developing country like Nigeria. And the position of the local community is very significant in achieving full benefits. It is also crucial to recognize the position of other stakeholders and the role of political leadership that helps create unity is equally significant. Rodriguez (2018) shows that the economical contribution from the touristic project is still low but, required in the community. The community members respect their agreement for keeping their natural and cultural resources for the benefits of the future generations; even when, this represents a limited economic retribution. Lebambo (2019) found

that most clients and recipients of these policies and the support institutions are urban, literate and well-established entrepreneurs, while the rural entrepreneurs do not access the support due to lack of knowledge or information, or cannot due to distance and cost. Rural entrepreneurs are subjected to a one-size fits-all policy implementation approach which is counter-effective. The study recommends adapting policy implementation to suit the unique local conditions of rural communities. The paper concludes by proposing policy interventions imperative in developing entrepreneurship in the rural areas.

Beridze (2019) found that the joint endeavors of government, municipal authorities, and business providers, with the involvement of people from rural area are crucial for the development of populated rural territories. Special heed ought to be given to the social initiatives and economic activities of local people through the involvement in the tourism sector development. Tien and Anh (2019) present the quintessence of agro-tourism and its socio-economic significance such as proficient actuation of the country dwellers giving them chances to diminish unemployment and boost living standard. Extraordinary consideration has been given to agro-tourism as a factor of improvement of small entrepreneurship in rural areas. Yasuo Ohe (2020) addressed the relationship between community-based rural tourism (CBRT) and entrepreneurship and concludes that it is necessary to establish entrepreneurship for an upward shift in demand to establish a market. He also pointed out that rural tourism enhanced multifunctional and created chances to internalize the externalities through rural tourism.

Adetola & Adediran (2021) examined indigenous communities' attitudes towards ecotourism business development in Olumirin Waterfall in Southwestern Nigeria. This study investigated indigenous communities' attitudes towards sustainable ecotourism development in Olumirin Waterfall Southwestern Nigeria. A field survey via structured questionnaire was conducted on 150 village respondents living in the vicinity of Olumirin waterfall of which fifty questionnaires were randomly distributed to each of the three communities that were purposively selected. This is also complemented by observation during field survey. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Result showed that awareness and knowledge of ecotourism was high in the communities. Majority (95%) of the sampled population have positive attitude towards ecotourism business activities in Olumirin waterfall, exhibited great appreciation of the existence of the waterfall and were interested in the continuity of the site as ecotourism attraction. The researchers noted that ecotourism has a positive impact on local business development, with 75% of respondents indicating that ecotourism has created new business opportunities in their community. The researchers recommended that effective regulation and proper planning is essential in order to enhance the sustainability of ecotourism in Olumirin waterfall while local people's active involvement at different level of ecotourism development is vital in ensuring its success.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The population of the study comprised of 47,483 tourism workers and tourism business owners in the study area. Multi stage sampling procedure was adopted to select the LGAs, communities and respondents therein for the study. First of all, stratified sampling technique was applied to stratify the state in line with the 3 senatorial districts. Next, applying simple random sampling technique, the names of all the LGAs in each senatorial district were written on a small piece of paper and folded into a paper ball. All the LGAs in the state had a zero chance for being selected because they all have patches of protected areas within them. Using a bowl each for the educational zones, the paper balls were mixed up and the researcher with a blindfold picked one (1) LGA from Calabar South Senatorial District, three (3) LGAs each from Calabar Central Senatorial District, and one (1) LGA from Calabar North Senatorial District with a total of nine (9) LGAs across the state. Thirdly, purposive sampling technique was used to select five (5) accessible rural communities within each LGA. Lastly, proportionate sampling technique was used to select 10% of tourism workers and tourism business owners in the communities.

The sample for the study consists of one thousand and forty tourism workers and tourism business owners selected from five rural communities with ecotourism attractive sites. 10% of the population were selected from five (5) rural communities across five (five) LGAs in the study area. The sample for the study comprised 1,040 respondents in the study area which multi-stage sampling approach was adopted. Data

were collected using a questionnaire titled “Socio Economic Factors and Ecotourism Development in Rural Communities Questionnaire” (SEFEDRCQ). The instrument was validated by three research experts from Educational Foundation department of the University of Calabar. The reliability of the instrument was determined with Cronbach Alpha reliability method which gave reliability coefficient which ranged from .83 to .89. The data collected were analyzed using Simple Linear Regression and Multiple Linear Regression tested from .05 level of significance.

Result Presentation

Research Question 1: To what extent do provision of infrastructural facilities influence ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State?

Table 1: Summary of data and descriptive Statistics results on the extent of the influence of provision of infrastructural facilities on ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State

Items	provision of infrastructural facilities	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision Rule
Item 1	We have good roads construction in my community.	2.59	1.14	Agreed
Item 2	There is no functional power supply in my community.	2.54	1.13	Agreed
Item 3	We rate the quality the quality of air and water very high in our community.	2.56	1.12	Agreed
Item 4	There are no waste management initiatives in my community.	2.58	1.14	Agreed
Item 5	There are sufficient healthcare facilities services in my community.	2.57	1.14	Agreed
CM				Agreed
CM – Cumulative mean		2.76	1.04	(N = 1032)

This section presents the research participants’ responses on the influence of infrastructural development on ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State. A criterion Mean of 2.5 and above for positively worded items agreed that there was an influence of the sub-independent variable (infrastructural development) on the dependent variable (ecotourism development), while a mean of below 2.5 revealed otherwise to the statement under review. However, a criterion Mean of 2.5 and below for negatively worded items also revealed that there was an influence of one variable on the other, while a mean of 2.5 and above for negatively items also revealed no influence existed among both variables. These two options were used in answering the research questions as stated above. The data was analyzed to determine if there was an influence of the sub-independent variable (infrastructural development) on the dependent variable (ecotourism development) at the study area. The result as indicated in item one revealed that the road construction increases access to ecotourism sites, making it easier for tourists to visit and experience the natural beauty of the area. These results confirm the mean threshold value of over 2.5. In a similar development, the result of item two also revealed that lack of power supply can limit the range of services can be offered to tourists such as internet access, hot water and refrigerator. Result of item three reveals that clean air and water is essential for ecotourism, as it contributes to the overall health and well-being of tourists and local communities. Furthermore, the results of item four and five revealed that insufficient waste management leads to environmental degradation, deterring Eco tourists and inadequate healthcare facilities poses health risks to tourists, negatively impacting the local ecotourism industry. These results also confirmed the mean threshold values of >2.5. In summary, the cumulative mean result ($\pi =$

2.76; SD= 1.04) revealed that there was an influence of provision of infrastructural facilities on ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State.

Research Question 2: To what extent does of local business development influence ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State?

Table 2: Summary of data and descriptive Statistics results on the extent of the influence of local business development on ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River Stat, Nigeria

Items	local business development	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision Rule
Item 1	Low patronage challenge in doing business during tour visits in my community	2.56	1.12	Agreed
Item 2	lack of business support from government and NGOs in my community	2.58	1.14	Agreed
Item 3	There are initiatives to promote business innovation in my community.	2.55	1.13	Agreed
Item 4	We do not ha enough internet services in our community.	2.58	1.15	Agreed
Item 5	Tourism business are mostly owned by local residents.	2.55	1.13	Agreed
CM				Agreed
CM – Cumulative mean		2.78	1.06	(N = 1032).

The result of item revealed that lack of training and capacity-building programs by Government or NGOs can limit the ability of local communities to develop and manage ecotourism businesses. Furthermore, the results of item four to five revealed that business innovation can enhance the competitiveness of rural ecotourism destinations, attract more visitors and increase revenue. While locally owned businesses provide tourists with more authentic experience, showcasing the local culture and traditions. These results also confirmed the mean threshold values of >2.5. In summary, the cumulative mean result ($\pi = 2.78$; SD= 1.06) revealed that there was an influence of local business development on ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results of the study it was concluded that provision of infrastructural facilities, and local business development, to influenced ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State remain very necessary. Based on this ground, the following recommendations are made:

1. Policymakers and stakeholders should invest in infrastructure development to support ecotourism development.
2. Policymakers and stakeholders should support local business development by providing training, funding, and other resources to local entrepreneurs and small-scale businesses.

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