

# APPRAISAL OF SUPPORT ZONE COMMUNITIES' INVOLVEMENT IN ECOTOURISM PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN OKWANGWO DIVISION OF CROSS RIVER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*This study evaluates the involvement of support zone communities in ecotourism planning and development in Cross River National Park, Okwangwo Division. The study uses key informant interview, group discussion and field observation methods to collect data. Stratified random sampling was used to select 9 communities within the three categories of the zone. These communities are: Belegette 1 and 2, Bamba, Butatong, Kayang 1 and 2, Okwa 1 and 2 and Okwangwo, whose activities directly or indirectly affect the park. Snowball sampling method was used to select 63 community members and 17 officials from government and non-governmental organizations that are believed to have relevant knowledge of the subject matter making the total 80 respondents. Data collected was analysed using descriptive method of qualitative data analysis. Findings revealed that support zone communities are passively involved in the ongoing ecotourism development planning process. Government is adopting top-down planning approach using decide-announce-defend method, where local residents cannot alter what has already been decided. Result also shows that host communities are happy and ready to participate in ecotourism. However, they are willing to collaborate with NGOs than the government because NGOs are adopting bottom-up planning approach that encourages active community involvement in decision making processes. The study concluded that if host communities are properly integrated into the proposed ecotourism project and also given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully in the planning process, ecotourism can be successfully develop in the region.*

**Key words:** Ecotourism, Community involvement, Planning, Development.

## Introduction

Over the years, project development especially in developing countries rarely record success. This according to Agbor (2014) is as a result of top-down planning. However, from late 90s till date, development is highly anchored on participatory approach. It is seldom to find a development project without bottom-up

participatory planning approach that recognises the power of indigenous knowledge, yet development agencies are still faced with the issue of how to achieve effective community participation when it concerns rural development (Ekechukwu, Diminyi & Ukaegbu 2012). With the development of Local Agenda 21, community involvement has become a major organ of ecotourism project development all over the world. The recognition and involvement of host communities in project design and management of resources are key factors to the success of any tourism project. Agbor (2014) argued that the involvement of an individual or group of people in any development process gives them the opportunity to develop aims, ideas and democratic behaviour at any level of the project, be it at the planning, implementation or evaluation stage. Therefore, the fundamental aim of involvement is to sustain development and increase the well-being of the entire population on the basis of its full participation in the process and a fair distribution of the benefits therefrom ([www.snz.unizg.hr/ph-see/full/u5-t4-s2-jaksic-pavlekovic.pdf](http://www.snz.unizg.hr/ph-see/full/u5-t4-s2-jaksic-pavlekovic.pdf)).

Community involvement fosters community-based ecotourism which strategically influences environmental conservation and economic benefits (Ekechukwu, Diminyi & Ukaegbu 2012). As key players in ecotourism development and management, host communities promote the physical, social, psychological, and spiritual well-being of tourists (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar & Tangit, 2017; Mancini & Bowen, 2003). They also familiarize with the visitors and create a platform for tourists to experience local cultural displays ((Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, & Tangit, 2017; Jaafar, Noor & Rasoolimanesh, 2015; Thongma, Leelapattana, & Hung, 2011; Mancini & Bowen, 2003). Without community participation in decision-making, tourism development in rural areas cannot be successfully executed to meet its economic and conservation objectives. The involvement of host communities in any development project does not only help to generate ideas for new projects and their implementation, but also ideas that further improve the features of the existing project (Strickland-Munro & Moore 2013; Okpoko, 2005).

Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park is an ecotourism site located at the central part of the state in Boki Local Government Area. The Park has a natural vegetation of unbroken

eco-tone that is rich in diverse species of *flora* and *fauna* and a continuous moist forest system with several tributaries that constitute the major watershed of the region (Eneji, 2015). Within and outside the park area are indigenous communities (support zone communities) with unique cultures that complement the natural ecotourism resources of the park. They are categorised into enclave communities (located within the park), communities close to the park (located at the park boundary) and communities far from the park, but whose activities are directly or indirectly affected by the park. These communities are reportedly not to have been properly involved in ecotourism planning in the region. Host community involvement is a critical success factor of any ecotourism development, yet support zone communities of Okwango Division of Cross River National Park are excluded or inadequately involved in ecotourism planning. This study therefore, seeks to examine the involvement of support zone communities in ecotourism planning and development with a view to assess the programme success or failure.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Community Involvement**

It is an established fact that a major criterion to ecotourism planning is host community's involvement. In order to ensure host community's involvement in projects development, Gunn (1972) advocated the adoption of forums. He maintained that by means of meeting with constituencies and community leaders, developers can foster open discussions that will enhance the success of ecotourism development. Without community participation, ecotourism project cannot be successful. Eja, Otu, Agbor & Emri (2013) in their paper titled 'Community Leadership and Attitude to Impact of Ecotourism Development in Cross River State' demonstrated that community involvement in ecotourism is imperative. According to them, community involvement and control of ecotourism are the catalysts that can make them respond positively to ecotourism development. Ebin (2003) strongly recommends frequent interaction between local residents and development agencies in order to understand themselves better and work together.

According to him, such gathering will create a sense of belonging and assist in breaking some of the lingering barriers to

ecotourism development in Okwangwo region. Result from the study conducted by Ishmael and Adofo (2013) on 'Community Participation in Ecotourism at Ashanti region of Ghana' showed that community involvement in ecotourism is a complementary factor to traditional methods of resource management. By involving host communities, ecotourism can generate socio-economic benefits and make good use of biodiversity funds through support for conservation (Kiss, 2004). Muganda (2009) demonstrated in his study on 'Community Involvement and Participation in Tourism Development in Tanzania' that partnership between local people and NGOs has successfully established most Tanzanian communities as models for subsequent ecotourism development. In support of the above view, Mbaiwa & Stronza (2010) argued that, for any ecotourism project to be successful they must be cooperation and partnership among tourism industry, government and the host community.

Ebin (2003) aver that lack of community involvement is the major barrier to ecotourism resource management in Cross River National Park. According to him, host communities lack understanding of the benefits of ecotourism which has led to continuous dependence on forest resources for survival. Nwahia, Omonona, Onyeabor & Balogun, (2012) reported that support zone communities at Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park are not adequately involved in ecotourism planning; instead, decisions are reached by management and imposed on them. Involving host communities in the planning process is an invaluable step towards sustainable ecotourism development in Okwangwo.

Aref (2010) and Diminyi and Okpoko (2017) suggest that host communities of the park should be committed by involving them in decision making process towards ecotourism development. Faggin & Munster (2000) reported that the success stories recorded by ecotourism in Malaysia are because host communities are actively involved. Community involvement in ecotourism is highly advocated because ecotourism can only be effective if the local people are part of decision making. Without community participation ecotourism development cannot be feasible anywhere in the world. Therefore, community participation is significant and meaningful as it provides opportunity for members to make connections and strengthen their relationships within themselves

and between communities, thereby creating a sense of belonging, trust and credibility (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar and Tangit, 2017; Jaafar, Noor & Rasoolimanesh, 2015; Eja, et al., 2013; Sirisrisak, 2009).

Active community involvement in ecotourism development ensures host communities benefits even without government intervention. More so, participation in such development does not only provide host communities with opportunities to build long term relationships but also empower them to mobilize their own capacities in managing their resources, making decisions, and controlling activities that affect their lives. If tourism developers exclude local people from participating in decision making and control of resources, then they are likely to resent ecotourism tourism and undermine its objectives. For ecotourism to be successful, local communities must be actively involved in the planning process from the onset and also be in control of resource management and sharing of benefits (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar & Tangit, 2017; Jaafar, Noor & Rasoolimanesh, 2015; Asiedu, 2002).

### **Determinants of Community Involvement**

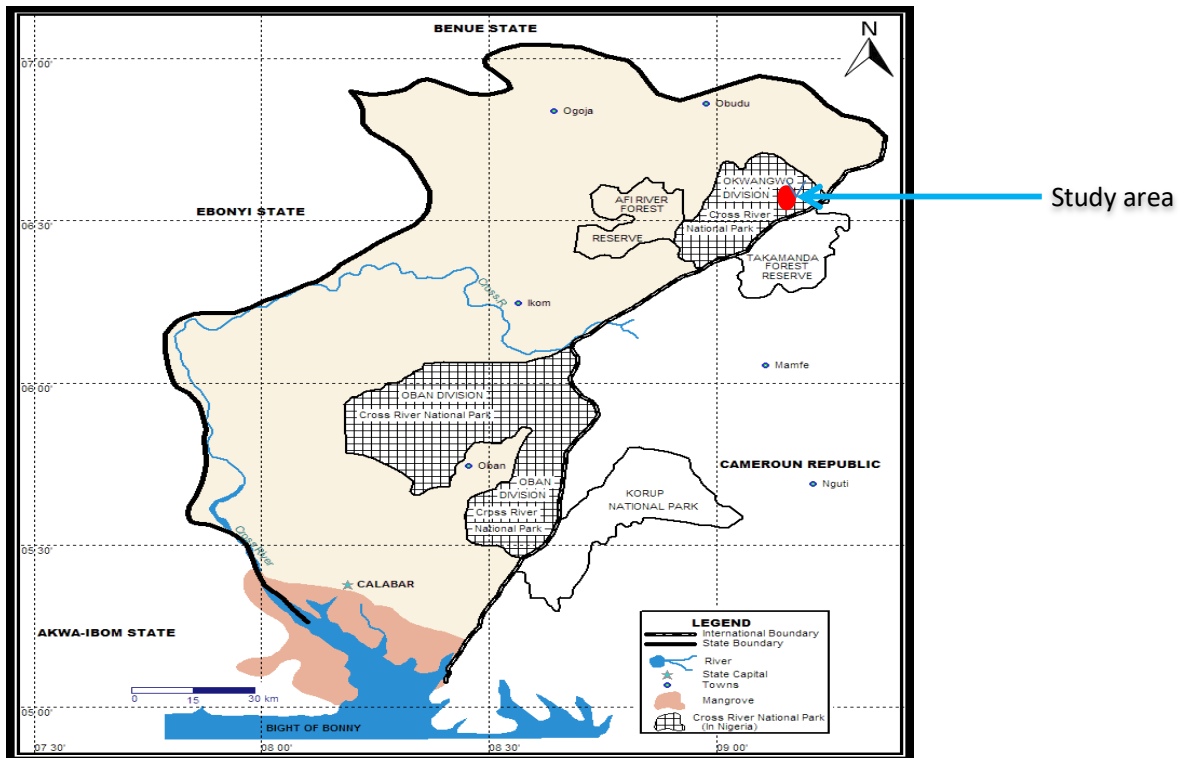
On the factors that influence community participation, Mowang (2011) in a community-based development project in Ogoja, emphasised the importance of local leadership and their effect on community involvement in development projects. The decision of community members to participate in any development project relies largely on their confidence in the capabilities of their leaders. By the same token, Adeleke & Nzama (2013) observed that effective community leadership serve as impetus to residents' participation in nature conservancy in Hhuhuwe-Umfolozi Park because community members trust their leaders. Anselem & Nzosim (2016) demonstrated in their study on host community's contribution to ecotourism and conservation in Mbe Mountain that, community members respect and listen to their leaders and get along well with them because of the trust and confidence repose on them, which in turn has led to their involvement in nature conservation. Therefore, acknowledging the ability of community leadership will enable developers to understand the commitment and level of community involvement in any proposed tourism development.

Agbor (2014) observed that partnership between host community and NGO in Buanchor has created an avenue for successful participation in biodiversity conservation in the area. Consequently, Tobias (2007) pointed out that when the relationship between host community and development agency is cordial then the prerequisite for ecotourism is given; and ecotourism can then contribute to nature conservation as well as socio-economic development. The first step to involve any group in development project is to ascertain the willingness of the group (Agbor, 2014). Obot, Eniang, Ayuk, Wari & Stopford (2011) reported that tourism have succeeded in Obudu Ranch because host communities were willing to support the project from the onset. Bassey & Kanung (1996) reported that ecotourism has failed in Takamanda axis of Cameroon Republic because the people were not willing to involve in the project. For them, tourism remains a foreign activity that cannot benefit them. Therefore, the willingness of support zone communities to participate in ecotourism planning and conservation in Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park remain a critical indicator that also require evaluation in other to attain sustainable ecotourism development in the region.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in the Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park. The park is made up of two non-contiguous Divisions: Oban and Okwangwo. Okwangwo Division is located at the north-eastern part of Cross River State, within the Boki and Obanliku Local Government Areas of the state. It is situated between latitude 6°17"N and 6.28°33"N of the Equator and longitudes 9°14"E and 9.23°33"E of the Greenwich Meridian (Diminyi and Okpoko 2017; Austine, Sijah & Rebecca 2014), covering an approximate area of 1,000 square kilometers. To the north, Okwangwo Division is bounded by the Sankwala Mountain ranges, extending into the Obudu Plateau in the north-east, to the east by the Republic of Cameroon, to the south by the Abo (Boki) group of villages and in the west by the Ikom - Obudu highway and Mbeh Mountains of Kayang.



Source: Adopted and modified from Ajalla, 2007.

The design of this study is descriptive. The population of the study consists of all people within the communities that are directly or indirectly affected by the ongoing ecotourism project in Okwangwo Division and relevant government ministries and NGOs. Stratified random sampling was used to select 9 communities. The procedure followed was, grouping the communities into three categories- enclave communities, communities close to the park and communities far from the park, then names of all the communities in each of the three categories were separately written, folded and mixed in a hat, thereafter three were randomly picked to represent each of the categories. Snowball sampling method was used to select 27 community leaders (chiefs, women leaders and youth leaders), 36 community members (farmers, hunters, business owners and civil servants), 10 park staff, 4 NGOs staff and 3 staff from other government ministries making the total of 80 participants. Data collection was carried out between September and November, 2017. In-depth interview, focus group discussion and field observation were the instruments used in

collecting primary data, while secondary information was obtained through literature review. Data was analyzed using descriptive method of qualitative data analysis.

### **Result and Discussion**

Out of 80 respondents contacted, 69% constitute male while 31% were female. This high involvement of men was because of the active role they play issues that affect the community. Beside, men also form majority of community representatives during deliberations with park authorities and NGOs on matters concerning ecotourism in the region. Majority of respondents (64%) have had some level of education comprising 23% primary level, 17% secondary level and 24% higher institution (B.Sc, HND, NCE & ND). However, about 36% of them had no formal education but were all actively involved. 66% of respondents were between the ages of 41 and 60, 21% fall within 61 and 80, 8% between 20 and 40, and 5% were above 80 years.

The study demonstrated that stakeholders in Okwangwo Division do not to have a broad consensus regarding ecotourism planning in the area. Rural people noted that they have been passively involved in the planning process, and are calling for the adoption of collaborative management approach that will actively involve them in all stages of the plan. Result shows that government (park authority) is adopting top-down coercive participatory approach which corresponds with manipulative and passive involvements (Arnstein, 1971; Pretty, 1995 and Tosun, 2004). Host communities are not actively involved in ecotourism planning and decision making. The government uses 'decide-announce-defend' approach, where the local residents cannot change what has already been agreed. Power distribution between the government and host communities does not exist as they are not involved in decision making process. However, host communities are engaged in series of meetings to listen to presentations and also share their opinion, but they are never provided with feedback for modification of proposal. This tokenistic involvement of support zone communities in ecotourism planning and development has often triggered negative reactions from local resident, thus; confirming the result of Nwahia et.al (2012) that, decisions are reached by management (park authority/government) and imposed on the local communities of

Okwangwo Division and this has resulted to its poor collaboration with the local people.

Park officials (Government) claim that they adopt a bottom-up planning approach by engaging host communities in regular meetings. They also claim that the implementation of development projects across support zone communities is a testimony of their collaborative management approach to ecotourism planning and development in the area. The divisional head of Okwangwo Division (Mr. Karim) said:

*Right now, we are only preparing their minds towards ecotourism because the resources and the possibilities of developing ecotourism in the area are still under assessment. You know this area is highly remote and underdeveloped. There is no infrastructure, but we will make sure that we reflect all the norms and opinions of the communities in the plan. We will also project the significance of ecotourism in all our activities and in our meetings with them (Okongo, 2015; personal communication).*

The above claim, was however, not supported by host community members. Result from focus group discussion revealed that local residents feel that they are often manipulated by the decisions of the government. Also, individual interviewees from all sample communities said the government-imposed decisions on them. They argue that their views are generally not taken into consideration. Community dwellers insist that management of the park stay in their offices and make laws and give orders that favour them without considering the landlords.

As discussed in functionalism theory, the total structure of ecotourism planning and development can be systematically analyzed in terms of its stakeholders or institutional parts. However, the whole is a system of inter-connected parts, the parts are inter-operative, they work (function) in a process of inter-dependence with each other. No part (stakeholder or institution) can therefore be understood excepting within knowledge of the whole. For ecotourism to succeed in Okwango zone, they must be collaborative contributions by all stakeholders. The government, private sector and local communities must work together to achieve the desired objectives. Support zone communities must be actively involved in decision making at all levels of the planning process in order to maintain equilibrium.

Although the benefits emanating from NGOs are few, local communities were happy that they have benefited and hope to receive more. They are also willing to collaborate with the NGOs rather than the government. NGOs implemented projects that reflect the opinion of the local people, indicating a strong relationship/collaboration between them. This type of community involvement is consistent with the degree of citizen control, which gives the general public all the decision-making power (Arnstein, 1971). Cooperatives are created to make policies and decisions that affect the community. This is also supported by Murphy & Murphy (2004), who stated that certain ecotourism groups establish cooperative tourism boards to plan and operate local tourism ventures. Support zone communities are given the opportunity to make their own decisions and determine what they want in relation to micro community development projects provided by the NGOs. This also corresponds with self-mobilization, where people participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems (Pretty, 1995).

NGOs adopt bottom-up planning approach that encourages active community involvement in decision making processes. As an ideal form of community involvement, host communities are accorded full managerial responsibility and authority which has fostered mutual relationship/collaboration between them and NGOs than the government (Tosun, 2004), supporting the findings of Muganda (2009) that, partnership between the host community and NGO is a key factor for successful participation in ecotourism planning, and the only way for any community development agency to succeed is to collaborate with the local residents. Smart Okongo (a youth leader at Belegette) said:

*Despite series of meetings that the government has been having with us, none of our opinions have reflected in what they are doing. I think we are just being deceived by the government. Why are they not inviting our representatives to Calabar or Abuja where final decision are taken? Come to talk of it, how many of our people are employed at the administrative level of the park? Were we not told from the onset that we will be relocated? Why are they not talking about it? They will say one thing today and do another tomorrow. It is only the NGOs that take our opinion and put into action. They are trying to make life better for us by creating alternative livelihoods together with other micro projects, but the government is not working with them in all aspects, particularly in the area of empowerment and life support programmes/projects (Okongo, 2015; personal communication).*

This is a clear testimony that the government and NGOs are not flowing together in some aspects of the planning process. Host communities collaborate more with NGOs than the government. Support zone communities feel strongly that team-based management was necessary for effective ecotourism planning and development in their area. They advocate stakeholder collaboration and active involvement of community leaders in decision-making, shared responsibilities and local control. Residents were perceived to strongly believe in their leaders as majority of the villagers in a focus group discussion said:

*We follow the decisions of our leaders because we trust them. If government is actually serious about this development, our leaders should be part of decision making. Our leaders speak for us, they have been representing us well, if management agrees with their conditions we will all support the project.*

Rural people are ready to participate in any ecotourism activity and also collaborate with the park authority (government) if their leaders are spontaneously involved (Tosun, 2004) in the planning process because they believe in them. This finding corresponds with the report of Adeleke & Nzama (2013), that the involvement of community leaders in the management of Hhuhwe-Umfolozi national park provided an impetus for residents' participation in nature conservancy because they trust their leaders. Management, especially NGOs working in the park, is doing their best to win the minds of local residents.

Host communities are willing to participate in ecotourism if they are actively involved in every step of the planning process. However, their involvement also depends on perceived benefits that come with its development. Participants commented that, they cannot abandon their farms for tourism if they cannot benefit from it. In support of the above view, the divisional head of the park and the chairman of Okwangwo Forest Conscience Organization remarked that, 'the success of ecotourism planning and development in the area can be triggered by collaborative planning and management approach where local communities are actively involved in the whole process with clear roles. Support zone communities were perceived to be willing and ready to lend their support in all possible ramifications of the planning process to actualize successful ecotourism programme in Okwangwo Division

of Cross River National Park. This finding corroborates the report of Obot et.al (2011) that tourism has succeeded in Obudu Ranch because host communities were willing to support the project from the onset. The findings also indicate that ecotourism will record success stories if indigenous people are actively involve from the onset of the project till its implementation, because they are willing to participate, unlike in Takamanda axis of Cameroon Republic where ecotourism development failed because the people were not willing to participate in the project (Bassey & Kanung 1996).

### **Conclusion**

Community development is a key factor that determines the success or failure of any given project especially when it concern rural development. This study has succeeded in examining the involvement of support zone communities in ecotourism planning and development in Okwangwo zone. Although, from the beginning, the researchers were confronted with the problem of information hoarding emanating from unwillingness of some people to provide relevant information or participate in the survey, this situation was however resolve by community leaders (chiefs, youth and women leaders), who sensitized their members on the relevance of our study, hence the need for giving us audience. Despite all the challenges, information gathered revealed that host communities are not actively involved in the proposed ecotourism development planning process even when they are willing and ready to support the programme. Ecotourism advocates for locally controlled tourism industry that will ensure benefits to the local people and the sustainable use of resources. This goal can only be achieved by involving all stakeholders in the planning process. It is believed that if host communities are properly integrated into the programme and also given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully in the planning process, ecotourism can be successfully develop in the region. Management (park authority) should therefore, cooperate with NGOs working in the park to achieve a common goal by adopt collaborative bottom-top management approach that will actively involve community members in decision-making at all levels, and clearly spell out the roles of host communities in ecotourism development and management. This will encourage effective power

distribution among stakeholders and provide the local communities with a sense of belonging.

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