

HOW HOST COMMUNITIES ENGAGE IN ECOTOURISM: EVIDENCE FROM AGRARIAN COMMUNITIES OF SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Participation of host community in ecotourism development and management has been a veritable approach to economic diversification, poverty reduction and environmental conservation. This study focused on assessment of host community participation in ecotourism development in Southeastern Nigeria. The objectives of the study were to ascertain the categories, extents as well as agencies of community participation; and to assess the participation of women and youths. Multistage random sampling technique was used to select six ecotourism sites and their six host communities. A total of 180 opinion leaders and 180 services providers were selected for the study. Primary data were collected using a combination of focus group discussion and structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data that were collected. Results showed that four out of six host communities participated actively while two participated passively. Furthermore, actively participating communities do so through town unions, age grades and other community associations. Result also showed that women and youths participated highly in ecotourism development through enforcement of conservation rules and provision of sundry services to visitors. The study concluded that more host communities in Southeast Nigeria participated actively in ecotourism development. It was recommended that community ecotourism development could be encouraged if the appropriate government and non-governmental agencies engages community associations with advocacy, training and other necessary assistance.

Keywords: Host communities, Engage, Ecotourism, Community associations, Southeastern Nigeria.

Introduction

Communities used to be the stewards of the world's natural areas until the colonization of tropical countries by countries of Europe (Drum & Moore, 2005). Colonial governments ceased most of the wildlife parks and protected areas, particularly in Africa, and excluded the local communities from management decisions with respect to the development of these natural areas. Thus, community members were not recognized as stakeholders and have been marginalized from nature tourism opportunities while private companies located in distant cities and even foreign countries control tourism activities in their locality (Drum & Moore, 2005; Giriwati, Huwa, Pamungkas, Iyati & Hidayat, 2019). Recently, the growing interest of tourists in learning from and experiencing different cultures has led the tourism industry to incorporate local communities into its activities. Also, conservationists have

recognized the crucial role that rural or local communities play in conserving biodiversity. Therefore, communities that are well organized and have titles to traditional lands are likely to be more successful in capturing a greater share of tourism spending in natural areas (Drum & Moore, 2005; Mensah, 2017; Kamilah, Hassan & Shuib, 2018; Giriwati et al., 2019).

Ecotourism being a sub-component of tourism, is believed to have a strong link to rural and culture tourism (Dorobantu & Nistoreanu, 2012; Imanishimwe, Niyonzima & Nsabimana, 2018). Ecotourism is a form of tourism widely considered as an opportunity for local people to derive positive socio-economic benefits from tourism development whilst conserving natural environments (Ishmael & Adofo, 2013; Mensah, 2017; Imanishimwe et al., 2018). Unlike conventional tourism, ecotourism thrives in relatively untouched natural environments commonly found in rural areas and does not make huge demands on investments in facilities and infrastructure (Sakhile & Urmilia, 2016; Onyeabor & Nwahia, 2020). Ecotourism has become one of the world's major economic sectors with the capability to play a significant role in the sustainable development of natural areas (Abraham, 2015; Chikezie, 2019). Therefore, community participation in ecotourism refers to communities having substantial control over and involvement in its development and management and a major proportion of the benefits remaining within the community (Drum & Moore, 2005; Chikezie, 2019). The success of community participation in ecotourism development depends on factors such as local governance structures, intra-community relationships and partnerships with NGOs and tour operators (Parker & Khare, 2008; Phuona, Song & Quang, 2020). Community participation often takes the form of a structured or loosely aligned cooperative in which members of the community hold active roles in providing accommodations, food, crafts, transportation or guide services (Drum & Moore, 2005, Onyeabor, Okereke, Njoku & Onoh, 2020).

The Southeastern region of Nigeria has been variously reported by Onyeabor and Alimba (2015), Emeafor and Odum (2019), Obia-ani, Nweze and Okoye-Ugwu (2019) and Odum (2020) to harbor lots of potentially viable ecotourism products, including diverse ecological and cultural resources. The people of the region are also acclaimed to have strong tradition of communalism, entrepreneurial spirit and hospitable attitude towards visitors (Ani, Ome & Nwankwo, 2014, Onyeabor et al., 2020). Over the years, tourism activities involving visit to natural areas and observation of cultural heritage have apparently prospered in some parts of the zone. Notable among the sites are Awhum Waterfall and Ezeagu Tourism Complex both in Enugu State; Oguta Lake and Nekede Forest Reserve both in Imo State and Afikpo Beaches in Ebonyi State. However, research on the form and extent of participation of local communities in planning, implementation and control of ecotourism projects and programmes in their ecosystem are limited. This knowledge is necessary for evidence-informed policy making and advocacy of community rights, privileges and benefits from ecotourism development.

Rationale for Community Engagement in Ecotourism Development

The fundamental objective of ecotourism is to improve conservation of landscapes and biodiversity. Community-based ecotourism may be seen and evaluated as one tool in achieving this (Drum & Moore, 2005; Phuona et al., 2020). Other objectives of community-based ecotourism include provision of a more sustainable form of livelihood for local communities; encouragement of local members to be more directly involved in conservation and local benefits from conservation measures such as protected areas (Dorobantu & Nistoreanu, 2012; Abraham, 2015; Mensah, 2017; Imanishimwe et al., 2018; Chikezie, 2019; Onyeabor & Nwahia, 2020).

Host community participation in ecotourism development has received considerable attention within the tourism literature. Researchers noted that involvement of a community in any ecotourism project is vital for the overall success of that project. (Drum & Moore, 2005). Mensah (2017) and Kamilah, Hassan and Shuib (2018) supported this assertion and advocated for community participation as a tool for solving the problems of ecotourism in developing countries. According to Onyeabor (2016a) and Barnias and Randore (2019), it is important to note that community participation in decision-making is not only desirable but also necessary to maximize the socio-economic benefits of ecotourism for the community. Community participation in ecotourism development can be observed from two angles: participation of the local community in the decision-making process and participation in the sharing of tourism benefits (Wijesundara & Wimalaratana, 2016). Participation of host communities in ecotourism development and management could range from the individual to the whole community, including a variety of activities such as employment, supply of goods and services, community enterprise ownership and joint ventures (Nwahia, Omonona, Onyeabor & Balogun, 2012; Adeleke & Nzama, 2013; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019).

Community-based ecotourism projects have become a two-edged sword for achieving natural resource conservation and improved livelihoods of host communities (Spenceley & Snyman, 2012; Onyeabor et al., 2020). Asker, Boronyak, Carrard and Paddon (2010) noted that community-based tourism is developed on a small scale and involves interactions between visitors and residents and is particularly suited for communities in rural areas. Aseres and Sira (2020) examined the benefits and costs of local people's participation in ecotourism projects in Ethiopia, noting that communities were beneficiaries of job opportunities and also got other direct benefits. Nwahia et al (2012) in their study on the effect of participation in ecotourism on poverty in Obudu community, South-South Nigeria, observed that the host community was involved in ecotourism through employment, supply of goods and services and enterprise ownership. Their findings were corroborated by Hassan and Shuib, (2018); Imanishinwe, et al. (2018); World Travel and Tourism Council (2017 & 2019); and Wondirad and Ewentu (2019).

In order to achieve equitable social, economic and environmental benefits from ecotourism and other forms of tourism on natural areas, local and indigenous communities should be allowed to define and regulate the use of their areas at the local level, including the right to opt out of tourism development (Drumm & Moore, 2005; Onyeabor and Nwahia, 2020). Host community participation in ecotourism give the local communities the right to organize, own and communally manage own ecotourism business, including accommodation (Giriwati et al., 2019). The disadvantage of this is that local communities may lack expertise and necessary links to market, but it fosters sustainable use of and collective responsibility for natural resources (Bello & Carr, 2016; Hassan & Shuib, 2018). However, for an effective host community participation in ecotourism, the local community must be aware of the potential opportunities, risks and changes involved, and is interested in receiving visitors (Drum & Moore, 2005; Onyeabor, 2016). The community must be aware of existing potential structures for effective community decision-making and there must be no obvious threats to indigenous culture and traditions (Drum & Moore, 2005; Adu-Ampong & Kimbu, 2019). National legislation must not obstruct tourism income being earned by and retained within local communities while a sufficient level of ownership rights must reside with the local community ((Drum & More, 2005). Participating local communities should be in a position to access assistance or cooperation from tourism operators (NGOs, government of private) due to lack of skills and experiences by the local people (Chami & Semboja, 2005; Tube, Kyaalo & Sabina, 2019). There should also be understanding and strengthening of legal rights and responsibilities of the community over land, resources and development (Adu-Ampong & Kimbu, 2019).

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to analyze host-community engagement in ecotourism in Southeast Nigeria with a view to identifying and categorizing forms of engagement, agencies of community engagement and involvement of women and youths.

Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted in southeast Nigeria. The area comprises of five Igbo-speaking states which include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. Southeast has an approximate total land area of 78,612 km² and lay between longitude 4⁰30' and latitude 71⁰5.

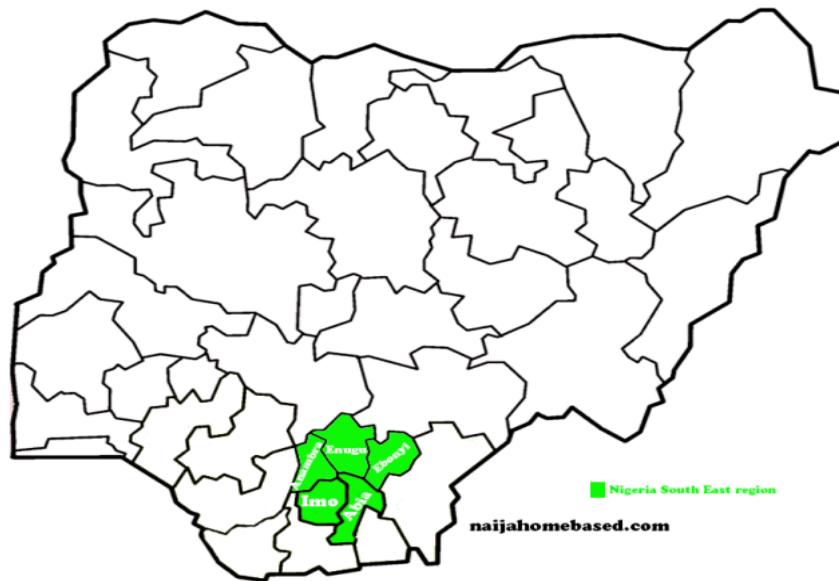


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Southeast Nigeria
 Source: <https://www.nijahomebased.com>

The area has a total population of about 22 million people (NPC, 2018). The major economic activity of the people in the area is farming which is combined with other non-farming activities in varying degrees (Onyeabor, 2014). It is basically in the rainforest area with two predominant seasons which are rainy season (April –October) and dry season (November –March). The area is richly endowed with cultural, historical and environmental resources that when fully developed, will make it an ecotourism hub. Ecotourism resources in the area include beaches, caves, fresh water and salt lakes, forests, waterfalls, native fish conservancies and zoological gardens.

Sampling Procedure, Data Collection and Analysis

Multistage sampling procedure was adopted in the study. The first stage involved random selection of three states through ballot system. The states are Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. Second stage involved purposive selection of two most visited ecotourism sites and consequently, the host communities from each of the selected states making a total of six ecotourism sites and six host communities. The selected ecotourism sites are Ndibe and Unwana Sand Beaches in Ndibe and Unwana communities both in Afikpo North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State; Awhum Waterfall in Awhum community of Udi Local Government Area and Ezeagu Tourism Complex in Obunoffia Ndiuno Community of Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu state; and Oguta Lake in Oguta II community of Oguta Local Government Area and Nekede Forest Reserve and Zoological Garden in Nekede Community in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State. In the third

stage, 30 opinion leaders and 30 services providers were conveniently selected from each of the six host communities to give a total of 180 opinion leaders and 180 service providers who were interviewed. Primary data were collected using a combination of structured questionnaire and focus group discussion. Data collected were analyzed using percentage frequencies.

Results and Discussion

Origin of Ecotourism in the Communities

Investigation showed that ecotourism in four (60%) of the communities namely: Ndibe, Oziza, Ezeagu and Oguta did not start by conscious design of the host-communities or any other agency. The communities merely instinctively responded to visitations that just began to happen. In two (40%) of the sites/host-communities studied (Awhum and Nekede), ecotourism activities were initiated by a non-governmental and governmental agency, respectively. Much in contradiction of the findings, Drum and Moore (2005), UNWTO (2018) and Snyman (2017) reported that in the Pacific Islands, East Africa, South Africa, Costa Rica and Mexico, governmental and non-governmental agencies principally guided local communities in the design and running of ecotourism projects. In that way, according to UNWTO (2018), disadvantages and abuses were consciously mitigated and much of desired benefits were channeled to local communities who constituted the first stakeholders.

Categories of Host Community Participation in Ecotourism in Southeast Nigeria

Analysis in Table 1 showed that while some host-communities actively participated in ecotourism some were passive in their identified roles. The result in Table 1 categorizes the communities according to the pro-activeness of their identified roles.

Table 1: Categories of Host Community Engagement in Ecotourism in Southeast Nigeria

Participatory Category	Communities	Roles of Community/partnering agency
Active Engagement	4 communities including Ndibe, Oziza, Ezeagu, and Oguta	Community exercised ownership, management and control and directly engaged in ecotourism businesses; residents privately provided ecotourism services and paid royalty to community
Passive Engagement	2 communities including Awhum and Umuchim-Nekede	Government/NGO exercised ownership, management and control while community residents provided private tourism services

Source: Field Survey (2020)

From the result in Table 1, four out of six (or 60%) host communities studied engaged actively in ecotourism development. The communities in this category exercised ownership and management control of the respective sites within their domains. Through their respective leaderships and community associations, the communities participated in planning, implementing, and monitoring of visitations and business activities in their respective sites. They also engaged in communal ecotourism businesses. For the two non-actively participating communities, ownership and control of ecotourism resided with a non-governmental organization and the state government, respectively. Host-community participation was limited to private provision of tourism services by community residents.

Roles of Community Associations in Community Engagement in Ecotourism

Investigation showed that communities' engagement in ecotourism were anchored by community associations including community development unions, town unions, age grades, youth groups, women associations and social clubs. The roles played by these associations are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Roles of Community Associations in Community Participation in Ecotourism

Association	Role
Town Unions	Make community development policies and plans - including ecotourism; saw to the welfare of indigenes that lived outside the community
Age grades	Made/enforced rules, decisions for development; rewarded achievements, punished deviants; defended community; protected and managed community's common property including ecological resources; carried out development projects including ecotourism; ensured the continuity of customs and traditions of community
Community Development Unions	Liaised with government and non-governmental agencies for development of community- including ecotourism development; supervised community projects including ecotourism
Women Associations	Complimented efforts of town unions; maintained peace and order among women; organized women to contribute to community development; cleaned public streams and toilets

Social Clubs	Provided entertainment in occasions; provided social and financial support to members; provided avenues of socialization
Youth Associations	Maintained peace, order among youths; enforced decisions of elders; provided security for lives and properties

Source: Field Survey (2020)

The result in Table 2 showed that host communities participated in ecotourism development through the agencies of various community associations and development unions. The community associations are town/development unions, age grades, women and youth associations and social clubs. From formulation of policies and plans to implementation and running of community-owned services, community associations undertook ecotourism development efforts as part of overall community development drive. This agreed with the findings of other authors (Baral & Heinen, 2007; Chok & Macbeth, 2007; Mugunda (2009).

Forms and Extent of Community Participation in Ecotourism

The result presented in Table 3 showed that the communities participated in ecotourism in cooperation or partnership with various internal and external groups, organizations and governments. Four identified agencies - host communities, state governments, non-governmental organizations and private businesses - participated in the supply-side of ecotourism development. Five distinct forms of community participation in ecotourism were found in the study area (community-private partnership, community-government-private-partnership, community-to-NGO pseudo-concession and community owned and run. In the community-private partnership as found in Ndibe and Oziza Beach ecotourism, host-communities worked directly with private ecotourism businesses through various community agencies such as development/town unions and age grades. This approach to ecotourism development has also been reported by researchers in Kenya (Mayaka, 2018). and in South Africa (Snyman, 2017) where it was found to facilitate transfer of ecotourism management skills to local stakeholders and retention of more ecotourism income within local communities. Success of this community participatory model in the Southeast zone appears to have been limited by lack of expertise and experience on the part of the host-communities' leaderships and the partnering local businesses and individuals.

Table 3: Form and Extent of Community Participation in Ecotourism in the Zone

Sites/ Community	Form of Participation	Extent of community Participation
Golden Beach/ Ndibe Community	Community/ Private partnership	Ownership, planning, monitoring and controlling of site was exercised by community while private businesses were registered and allowed to operate and pay royalty to Community.
Golden Beach/ Oziza Community	Community/ Private partnership	Same as in Ndibe Golden beach
Awhum Ecotourism Complex/ Awhum Community	Pseudo concession from community to NGO	Ownership, planning, implementation, monitoring and controlling were exercised by an NGO. Community residents ran private ecotourism services independently
Ezeagu Ecotourism Complex/ Ezeagu Community	Community owned and run	Ownership, planning, implementation, monitoring and controlling exercised by Community. Privately run tourism services existed independently
Oguta Ecotourism Complex/ Oguta Community	Community/ Government /Private partnership	Community exercised ownership over the lake, operated communal business, monitored and controlled private businesses operating on the site, and received royalties from them. Shell Petroleum Development Company and AGIP Petroleum provided infrastructural development on the site as part of social responsibility to the oil producing community. State Government owned the historical sites in the complex, leased boats to private operators and provided security.
Forest Reserve and Zoological Garden/ Nekede Community	Government-owned and ran	State Government owned, planned and controlled the site. Community residents operate independent private tourism services

Source: Field Survey (2020).

In the Oguta form of participation, the community partnered with the state government and private businesses to provide ecotourism services,

making it a community-government-private partnership. This form of community participation was highly recommended in World-Wide Fund for Nature (2001) report and by the Nature Conservancy report (Drum & Moore, 2005) as it provides the opportunity for combination of private expertise and support from relevant government agencies with the community's indigenous knowledge and customs to create excellent conservation of the ecosystem and tourism experience. The Ezeagu form of community participation in ecotourism was a case where host-community exercised full ownership and singular control of ecotourism development. The complex, including a cave, waterfall and a lake are owned and managed by Ezeagu community through the community development union. Private ecotourism service-providers existed and operated independently without formal community recognition or control. The government had no presence in the complex. In addition to the disadvantages associated with the form practiced by Ndibe and Oziza communities, the Ezeagu form of participation seemed likely to lead to abuses as ecotourism activities grow.

The last two participatory forms were similar on the ground of exclusion of the host-community. The Nekede or government-private partnership form of participation represented an exclusively government-owned-and-controlled ecotourism outfit run in partnership with private businesses. On the other hand, the Awhum form of community participation was controlled or run by a faith-based NGO without community's willful and or formal consent. The NGO managed the site and also provided services such as accommodation, feeding and sale of fresh farm produce while private ecotourism businesses existed independently – without formal recognition or control. The community had no communal role or benefit in the ecotourism and had tried to win back the control of their natural endowments without success. World-Wide Fund for Nature (2001) reported this form of participation as a vestige of colonialism, particularly in West and East Africa where colonial governments established and managed forest and game reserves without host community involvement. Drum and Moore (2005) reported that this form of participation was associated with complaints (and in some cases protests) of deprivations and cultural violations by host communities while the projects witnessed sabotaging such as poaching and illegal felling of trees.

Communal Ownership of Ecotourism Businesses

From focus group discussions and interviews it was learnt that actively participating host communities both directly and indirectly engaged in communal ecotourism businesses. Ndibe and Oziza communities owned boats operated on the sites by approved individuals in the community on rotational basis and proceeds shared between the two parties. The Ezeagu community collects access fee of ₦4000 from every group of visitors that arrived to experience the sites while Oguta community, through their youth association, directly collects tolls from motor park users and commercial

vehicles at the sites. In addition, the communities earn communal income in the form of rents, fines and royalties from businesses and individuals that operated in and around the sites.

Participation of Women and Youths

In all the communities studied, focus group discussions showed that women were disallowed by tradition from participation in decision-making, including those that guided tourism activities in the communities. However, women participated in the provision of most ecotourism services except road transportation. Women were most involved in restaurant business, sell of provisions and drinks, buying and selling of various agricultural produce and trans-loading of timber products in some of the sites. Result also showed that over half of those who participated in ecotourism in the studied communities were aged between 21 and 40 years. The youths dominated such ecotourism services as transportation, guiding and interpretation, restaurant services/food vending, sale of general goods, music and entertainment, and general services such as luggage bearing, loading and unloading of goods.

Table 4: Percentage Frequency of Participation of Women/Men and Youths in the Provision of Ecotourism Services

Services	Women	Men	Total	Age		
				(21-40)	(41-60)	(>60)
Guiding and interpretation	4 (22.2)	14 (77.8)	18 (100)	12 (66.7)	6 (33.5)	0 (0)
Sale of fresh farm produce	32 (88.9)	4 (11.1)	36 (100)	16 (44.9)	12 (33.3)	8 (22.2)
Restaurant services/food vending	23 (85.2)	4 (14.8)	27 (100)	16 (59.3)	8 (29.6)	3 (11.1)
Transportation	0 (0)	26 (100)	26 (100)	20 (76.9)	4 (15.4)	2 (7.8)
Sale of general good	8 (59.14)	6 (42.9)	14 (100)	8 (57.4)	4 (28.6)	2 (14.3)
Accommodation services	1 (12.5)	7 (87.5)	8 (100)	2(25)	4 (50)	2 (25)
Production/sale of artifacts	3 (50)	3 (50)	6 (100)	3 (50)	2 (33.3)	1 (16.7)
Music/entertainment	2 (50)	2 (50)	4 (100)	3 (75)	1 (25)	0 (0)

Boat making/mending	0 (0)	3 (100)	3 (100)	0 (0)	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)
General services (luggage bearers, loader/un-loaders, etc)	0 (0)	2 (100)	2 (100)	2 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	73 (50.7)	71 (49.5)	144 (100%)	82 (56.9)	42 (29.2)	20 (13.9)

Source: Field Survey (2020).

Male youths in all the studied communities participated in some levels of decision-making regarding ecotourism but female youths were totally barred from decision-making by custom and tradition. Female youths only participated in the provision of services to ecotourists.

Conclusion and Recommendation

From the findings, it can be concluded that most host communities in Southeast Nigeria actively participated in ecotourism. It can also be deduced that host communities participated in ecotourism through various community associations and in partnership with public or private agencies, and that women and youths were more involved in providing ecotourism services. It is, therefore, recommended that community ecotourism development should be pursued as a pro-poor program for boosting women and youth employment. Furthermore, community ecotourism development could be encouraged if the appropriate governmental and non-governmental agencies and organizations engage community associations with advocacy, training and other assistance.

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