

Operational Services and Tourists' Wellbeing in National Parks in Southern Nigeria

¹Ijeomah, H. M. and ²Ukabuilu, E. N.

¹Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management,
University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

henryijeomah@yahoo.com

*Corresponding author:

²Department of Hospitality and Tourism
Management, Imo State University, Owerri

Abstract

Effect of operational services on tourists' wellbeing in selected national parks in Nigeria was investigated. Data were collected using structured questionnaire from 181 tourists in Okomu, Old Oyo and Cross River National Parks. Analysis was through descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Simple regression analysis revealed that operational services significantly ($p < 0.001$) contribute towards outcomes of physical wellbeing ($B = 0.934$), intellectual wellbeing ($B = 0.983$) and socio-emotional wellbeing ($B = 0.966$) of tourists. Operational services significantly impact physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing and socio-emotional wellbeing of tourists at the levels of 87.23%, 96.62% and 93.31% respectively. It was concluded that Management efforts channelled towards strengthening operational services will contribute towards enhancing outcomes of tourist's physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing and socio-emotional wellbeing in National Parks in Nigeria. The study recommended that the management of the selected National Parks in Nigeria should develop programmes, tailored to specifically address functional gaps in the operational services of the Parks, boosting their operations and processes and ensuring that all related tools and equipment required for the functionality of related outfits are up-to-date.

Keywords: Safety issues, operational services, tourists' wellbeing, national park, recreation

Introduction

The World Tourism Organization defines tourism as 'the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business or other purposes' (USAID, 2005; Ayodele, 2002). Put differently, it is 'the practice of traveling for recreation' (Center for Responsible Travel, CREST, 2005). Tourism, therefore, involves travelling from one's place of residence to desired destinations for different purposes. Tourism is as old as man. In the early times tourism was meant for the rich in the society but presently people of different economic status embark on various forms of tour to the extent that some persons have even travelled outside the planet, earth. Tourism especially ecotourism involves a lot of risks. Ecotourism is that form of environmental or nature - based tourism which involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals together with any existing cultural manifestations both past and present (Ceballos-Lascurain,

1987). It is a "responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the natural environment and improve the living standards of local people" (Ecotourism Society, 1991). By this clarification forests, national parks, waterfalls, caves, lakes and warm springs serve as potential ecotourism destinations. Meanwhile, national parks are more frequently used as their core objectives include preservation and protection of wildlife, plant life, and object of geological, archeological, historical and ethnological and other scientific and scenic interest and through their conservation and utilization promote the education, health, aesthetic values and recreation of the people (Sidi, Sulaiman and Remeli, 2019).

Uncertainties regarding security can significantly determine fluctuations of touristic flows, so residents' and tourists' safety becomes a global problem for a sustainable tourism (UNEP, 2005). Even with the best efforts, a tourist destination cannot develop or be stabilised unless it offers a high level of safety and security (Hassan, 2000). Guaranteed safety increases the likelihood of visits and re-visits to a particular destination. Thus, safety and security are vital to providing quality in tourism as the success or failure of a tourism destination depends on being able to provide safe and secure environment for visitors (UNWTO, 1996). Safety considerations in the travel and tourism context refers to a destination's ability to offer protection of life, health, physical, psychological, and economic integrity to the travelers, tourism staff, and the people who constitute the host communities (Okoli, 2001). Putting differently from a tourist's perspective, safety encompasses security from any of the concerns that might trouble tourists, workers and business operators in a tourism site, and make them feel less "at home" in their environment including health, and the availability of good, inexpensive health care; food quality; trust, and the feeling that one is not being exploited; finance and the ease of changing currency or using credit cards; and orientation. It implies taking care of tourists' wellbeing - a state of wellness, fitness, wholeness (or soundness), being free from injury. A healthy life is a product of wellbeing in every part of life - physical, social, emotional, spiritual, environmental, economic, intellectual and occupational. Physical wellbeing refers to a state of physical body fitness - not sustaining physical injury and not becoming sick. Social wellbeing is all about nurturing of relationship, relating well with partners. Emotional wellbeing refers to good mood, boosting of one's mood, self esteem or confidence, happy state, relaxation, good state of mind. Intellectual wellbeing is about broadening of perspective, thought-provoking, knowledge acquisition, while socio-emotional wellbeing refers to enhancement of mood, state of the mind or mental state for good relationships (Roddick, 2016; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2016; University of Maryland 2017; Center for Health and Well being, 2021).

The Park Protection Unit of national parks is therefore saddled with the task of resource protection, visitor safety, and employee safety being responsibilities central to fulfilling the mission of national parks (National Park

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Service, 2014). In essence, natural and cultural resource protection is critical to the preservation of park resources for future generations, and protecting the safety of visitors is essential for enjoyment while the safety of Park Service employees is equally necessary for protecting resources and ensuring visitor safety or wellbeing (Depper, Vigil, Powell, and Wright, 2016). The effect of the new environment on tourists' wellbeing and the ability to adapt is also given consideration. More safety issues are faced at the destinations especially in ecotourism sites because of the uniqueness of the environments and products including meeting people with entirely different cultures.

Visitation to national parks is one of the fastest growing forms of tourism due to the increasing awareness about parks' diverse natural attractions, unique recreational opportunities, scarcity of eco-destinations caused by continuous destruction of natural habitats and the associated cultural history, and the healing effects of natural environments and activities such as game viewing, hiking, bird watching, swimming, trailing, trekking, sport fishing, mountaineering, etc. (Honey, 1999; Carrell, 2018; DiLonardo, 2018; Dockrill, 2018; Fleischer, 2018; Ijeomah, Abubakar, Ezeano and Adetola, 2019; Li, Chen, Wang, Yang, Innes, Ferretti-Gallon and Wang, 2021). This increase in visitation demand is complicated by the inquisitive nature of man to see, admire, enjoy and study rare, abundant, endemic, or endangered species of plants and animals in different environments for the sake of vivid experience. The national parks in North America were 'loved to death' by almost 400 million visitors in 1991, that of China was 1.6 billion in 2018, which reached 900 million in the first half of 2019 (Guo, 2019; Li, Chen, Wang, Yang, Innes, Ferretti-Gallon and Wang, 2021). While many tourists leave the national park with memorable experiences others leave with unintentional injuries. The level of injuries and deaths recorded in many national parks around the world especially in America and Australia is alarming. Each year in the US, approximately 6,000 visitors suffer serious unintentional injuries and fatalities; an average of three visitors die every week; while a mean number of 14 persons are seriously injured daily from national parks (National Park Service, 2009). In fact, unintentional injuries or accidents constitute the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of 44 years (US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2010). The managements of national parks are facing a lot of litigations due to injuries sustained by tourists. Further increase in the bad global image of national parks may seriously affect patronage by the public, thus leading to huge revenue loss.

Safety is of utmost concern both in ecotourism and in management of wild animals especially when the animals are free ranging. This is necessitated by the fact that human is considered the most important species - when necessary the lives of wild animals are sacrificed to safe tourists, park employees or households in park host communities. For instance, six lions that escaped from their enclosures in Jos Wildlife Park of Plateau State in 1983 were killed for public safety (Ijeomah, Alarape and Ogogo, 2007). The National Park Service,

thus relies on a variety of safety management techniques or practices to promote tourists' wellbeing (especially physical, intellectual, socio-emotional etc). These practices include: paving walkways; posting warning signs; restriction of access to the source of danger through barriers, fences and other infrastructure; regulation of visitor activities and enforcement; zoning and seasonal activity restrictions; visitor education through websites, visitor centres, and face-to-face communication by park staff, and on-site signs (Rickard, Scherer and Newman, 2011; Rickard, 2014; Saunders, Weiler, Scherrer, and Zeppe, 2018). Restricting access through enforcement tend to be the least preferred option (Worboys, Lockwood, Kothari, Feary and Pulsford, 2015). Visitor safety in national parks can be understood as dependent upon: individual decision-making (e.g. choices about equipment to use), organisational management and regulation (e.g. park rules), infrastructural conditions (e.g. road and trail maintenance), and environmental conditions (e.g. weather) (Tuler, Golding, Krueger, 2002). Engineering solutions are not always practicable in national parks because of the mission of the national park service to preserve and maintain the natural, cultural and historic integrity of the park resources through their conservation and utilization to promote the educational, health, aesthetic values and recreation of the people (Sidi, Sulaiman and Remeli, 2019). Park staff, therefore tends to rely on administrative and operational controls as well as communication and educational techniques to create awareness about risks and hazards in parks (United States Department of the interior, n.d). In the case of parks in Nigeria, Edeh, Ijeomah and Odunlami (2021) summarized that the management practices for safety include tour guiding, use of armed guard, synergy with local communities and other security agencies, air surveillance, water patrol, seasonal or total restriction, communication of safety information, rules, use of safety guard and life jackets, use of personal protection equipments, clearing of paths and trails, and consistent awareness of hazardous activities and areas in the park to tourists.

Most studies on tourism in national parks in Nigeria have focused on tourism products identification, development, management and marketing, and occupational hazards (Ijeomah and Odunlami, 2013; Ijeomah, Odunlami and Esaen, 2018). There is hardly any work on safety issues concerning tourists in national parks. The few studies on insecurity cases are not focused on tourists' wellbeing inside national parks but outside the eco-destination whereas there are possibilities of tourists sustaining physical injuries in parks, not being satisfied with their experience or being socio-emotionally disconnected from relations as consequence of their visits.

For instance the diving of a group tour member (from a suspended platform) inside the Wikki hot spring at the Yankari Wildlife Park led to a neck injury, which was so serious that the group (foreign tourists) had to leave the destination unprepared (Ijeomah and Odunlami, 2016). Also, the drowning of a bank manager and his brother (in the presence of the wife and four children)

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during a picnic at Ibeno beach of Akwa Ibom state in April, 2018 caused a lot of socio-emotional injuries in addition to the death (Folarin, 2018). There is paucity of information on accidents and injuries recorded by tourists in many eco-destinations especially national parks in Nigeria.

The effect of operational services of Nigeria's national parks on tourists' wellbeing is yet to be ascertained. This work therefore investigates the effect of operational services on physical, intellectual and socio-emotional wellbeing of tourists in Okomu, Cross River and Old Oyo National Parks of Nigeria as conceptualized in figure 1.

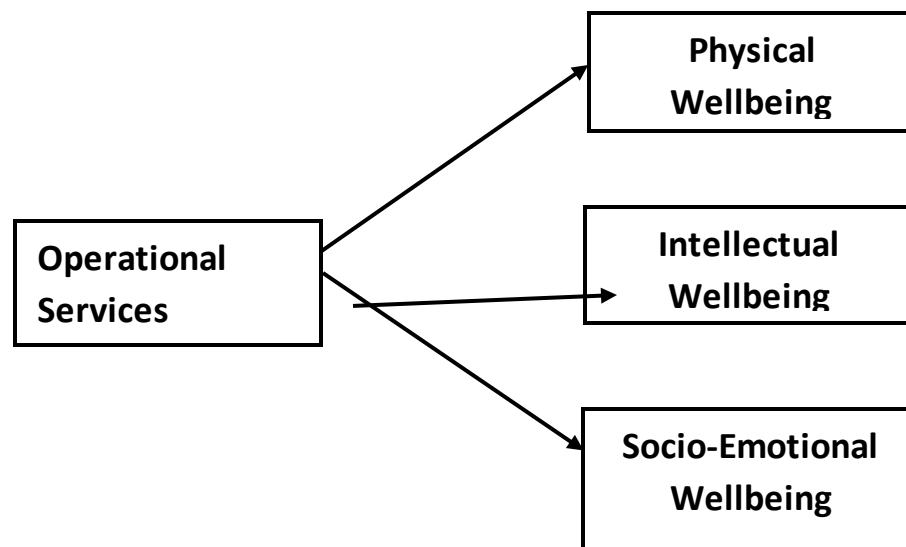


Figure 1: Framework of the study as conceptualized by the researcher

Method

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between operational services and tourists' wellbeing in national parks in southern Nigeria using the cross-sectional survey research design. The sample size for this study was 246, based on calculation estimates using Cochran formula as the population of tourists in the national parks is unknown (Baridam, 2001). The data for this study were sourced primarily using the structured questionnaire. Only 181 out of the 246 copies of structured questionnaire were retrieved and used. The reliability test assessed the extent to which the instruments are understandable and consistent in its measurement of the constructs. This study utilized the Cronbach alpha reliability test and was carried out using the SPSS software. A threshold of 0.70 was adopted as benchmark in line with Nunally's (1970 cited in Sekaran, 2003) position for social research. The result for reliability test

shows that Operational services, Physical wellbeing, Intellectual wellbeing and Socio-emotional wellbeing had Coefficient values of 0.891, 0.906, 0.878 and 0.779 respectively which indicate that all instruments are reliable as related alpha coefficients are all observed to be higher than 0.70; the adopted benchmark for the study.

The analysis of the univariate distribution for the study addressed the extent to which the variables are manifested or expressed within the context of investigation. The study adopted the mean and standard deviation as the primary descriptive tools for the univariate analysis. Interpretations for the mean draw on Sekaran and Bougie's (2016) position on the interpretation of mean values for multi-item scales. Hence, a mean benchmark of $\bar{x} = 2.0$ was adopted as the threshold for assessing poor or weak distributions for the variables (where $\bar{x} < 0.20$) or substantial distributions for the variables (where $\bar{x} \geq 2.0$).

In bivariate section of the analysis, the bivariate relationship between the operational services and the measures of tourist's wellbeing are addressed. The test was carried out using the simple regression analysis. A significance level of 0.05 was adopted in conformity with 95% confidence interval. The decision criterion for significance was therefore based on a probability value of $p > 0.05$ for insignificant relationships and $p < 0.05$ for significant relationships.

Results

Operational services

The distribution for the properties of Operational services and its measures (attributes) as shown on table 1 demonstrate the substantiality of the variable given the mean distributions for the items and indicators of the variable. Evidence from the analysis points to mean values that can be considered as substantial (where $\bar{x} > 2.0$). The result points to the evidence of moderate or agreeable levels of operational services. The analysis thus offers evidence which affirm these factors (operational services) as characterizing the National Parks in Southern Nigeria.

Table 1: Univariate distribution for properties of Operational services

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
	Park rules are well enforced here	2.5083	.50132	Agreed
Operations Services X = 2.4761 SD = 0.57444	Availability of adequate safety guard and life jacket in water bodies	2.2762	.84389	Agreed
	Paths and trails are very visible	2.5193	.52272	Agreed
	There is seasonal/total restriction of tourists in some sections of parks where dangers and high risks exist	2.3812	.70197	Agreed
	There are rules to regulate operation of tourist in the park	2.5193	.92803	Agreed
	Availability of functional and adequate patrol vehicles, boats and helicopter	2.6409	.86171	Agreed
	The park has a clinic where health challenges are easily addressed	2.6700	.60199	Agreed

Source: Research data (2022)

Tourist's Wellbeing

The univariate analysis on the distribution for tourist's wellbeing is addressed in this section. Presented on table 2 below is the distribution for the properties of the variable. The distribution for tourist's wellbeing, its indicators, as well as measures (physical, intellectual and socio-emotional wellbeing), demonstrate the prevalence of the variable and its characteristics within the National Parks in Southern Nigeria. The distribution for the indicators as shown on table 2, indicate that participants identify the variable as one reflected in their experience and in their disposition, thus, based on the observed distributions for the indicators and observed properties of the variable (where $\bar{x} > 2.0$) it is affirmed that there is a substantial level of physical, intellectual and socio-emotional wellbeing experienced by tourists in the National Parks in Southern Nigeria. The standard deviation scores in table 2 show that the responses were not widely dispersed from the central as all of the results showed scores below 1.00.

Table 2: Univariate distribution for properties of tourists' wellbeing

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
Physical Wellbeing X= 2.4893 SD = 0.57718	I am safe here	2.5083	.50132	Agreed
	It is difficult to sustain injury here	2.3812	.70197	Agreed
	Tourists can hardly be attacked	2.7514	.65749	Agreed
	I know how to operate safely in this park	2.2652	.82755	Agreed
	I comply with safety measures in the park	2.5083	.50132	Agreed
	Staff always attend to tourists on time when called for attention	2.3711	.89023	Agreed
	Security facilities here are functioning well	2.6298	.85049	Agreed
Intellectual Wellbeing X= 2.4807 SD = 0.54100	I learnt new things here	2.5110	.61902	Agreed
	This place is thought-provoking	2.5083	.50132	Agreed
	I learn in this place without fear of distraction or fear of failure of anything	2.3867	.69493	Agreed
	The services provided in this place facilitate learning	2.5193	.52272	Agreed
Socio-Emotional Wellbeing X= 2.4309 SD = 0.58473	I am relaxed here	2.2652	.82755	Agreed
	I am more bonded with my friends/family when I visit here	2.5100	.66698	Agreed
	This national park enhances my mood	2.4000	.70197	Agreed
	I am not disappointed visiting here with my friends	2.3867	.69493	Agreed
	When I am here with my friends I am not bothered or disturbed at all	2.5590	.09893	Agreed
	I will still come here with loved ones	2.3867	.69493	Agreed
	Tourists with friends and family leave the parks always happy	2.3339	.70932	Agreed
	Parks safety measures do not reduce the value of visitor's enjoyment of their chosen activity	2.6243	.85782	Agreed

Source: Research data (2022)

Bivariate Data Analysis

The tests for the relationship between operational services and tourists' physical wellbeing (where standardized B = 0.934 and P = 0.000), operational services and tourist's intellectual wellbeing (where standardized B = 0.983 and P = 0.000), and operational services and tourists' socio-emotional wellbeing (where standardized B = 0.966 and P = 0.000) are revealed in table 3, to be respectively significant. The evidence shows that operational services contribute substantially at the level of 87.23%; 96.62% and 93.31% toward tourist's physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing and socio-emotional wellbeing respectively in the National Parks in Southern Nigeria. The tests show that operational services significantly contribute positively toward the outcomes of tourist's wellbeing in the selected National Parks in Nigeria.

Table 3: Operational services and tourists' wellbeing

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	.166	.068		2.430	.016
	Operational services	.938	.027	.934	34.971	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Physical Wellbeing						
2	(Constant)	.188	.033		5.756	.000
	Operational services	.926	.013	.983	72.092	.000
b. Dependent Variable: Intellectual Wellbeing						
1	(Constant)	-.004	.050		-.079	.937
	Operational services	.983	.020	.966	50.048	.000
c. Dependent Variable: Socio-Emotional Wellbeing						

Discussion

The relationship between the variables demonstrates the capacity of operational services to significantly determine outcomes of tourists' physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing and socio-emotional wellbeing. Ondicho (2000) stated that much can be achieved through the integration of functions such that ensure a more cohesive and harmonized approach toward addressing safety concerns of any particular outfit, when various functional units and departments within the organization or establishment are able to

collaborate and are interdependent such that contribute toward the overall wellbeing of the system.

This research identifies operational services as being integral to the effectiveness and performance of the selected National Parks in Nigeria. The finding positions related services that ensure the smooth running and operations of the Parks as a significant predictor of the outcome of tourist's wellbeing. The compulsory use of tour guides apart from making tours more thought-provoking and educative for tourists helps in saving tourists from hazards. This is because the tour guides or interpreters are quite knowledgeable about the park environments and can prevent tourists from getting lost in the park as the environment of each of the park is relatively large – Cross River National Park is about 4000 km². The guides are equally knowledgeable about the attractions and likely risks involved at different parts of the park, and therefore can appropriately advise tourists on how best to be physically and emotionally safe in the park at any situation. The guide knows the appropriate safety information to give a tourist when faced with difficult situation in the wilderness (park) as in the case of encountering a poacher or ferocious wild animal. The safety information could sometimes be to climb a nearby tree, move backwards, be motionless, maintain silence, be vigilant etc. This is because the guides understand the behaviour of different wildlife species. An experienced ranger with a driver and a tourist while inside Kainji Lake National Park – about 3 kilometers to Oli camp encountered a group of 14 lions of different age and sexes on the road in the year, 1994. The fact that the lions were reluctant to leave the road was worrisome and therefore required experience to save both the tourist and park officials. The ranger knowing the precautionary measures to take, instructed the driver not to blow horn (to avoid inciting the lions) but should gradually and progressively raise the sound of the vehicle. As the driver (who was also a ranger) complied with the instruction, the lions turned boldly, looked at the vehicle, some even sighed, but still remained on the road. As the vehicle moved gradually and continuously forward with the progressively increasing sound, the lions, sluggishly and reluctantly left the road one after the other.

The park officials know the depth of different water bodies in the parks, the carrying capacity and functionality of park facilities. A group of twenty tourists who once visited Okomu National Park in August 2013 were not allowed to use the hanging bridge together but in groups of three persons at a time to prevent the facility from failing as the tour guide knows the capacity of the facility. Most times tour guides inspect the facility, demonstrate how an equipment is used to test the functionality of the facility before allowing tourists to use it. These are to ensure safety of tourists. These agree with previous studies (Okpoko and Okpoko, 2002; Page, 2003; Anita, 2010; Nwankwo, 2012) that identified operational services as a core feature of Parks, and as one which requires a consistent or constant evaluation and checks as a way of avoiding accidents or a malfunction of machinery. It supports the

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findings of Anita (2010) that the related supervision and assessment of the functionality of units such as those of the life guards, safety departments, park protection unit, fire extinguishers and the other facilities, are necessary in ensuring related equipment, skills and resources are readily at disposal when required. This corroborates the observation by Page (2003) that the activities of tourist establishments and the wellbeing of tourists, are hinged on the extent to which operational facilities and services can be considered as safe and with the required back-up in the case of emergencies or accidents.

The use of rules, clearing of trails, weekly patrol by rangers, regular supervision and maintenance of park facilities are part of the operational practices used in the management of national parks. Some student tourists at Okomu National Park in August, 2013 who did not keep to the instruction of not disposing waste and pouring of dirty water around the lodge woke up one morning to surprisingly notice that exceptionally 'big' soldier ants (*Eciton burchellii*) have invaded the environment - thousands of the ants surrounded the lodge and gathered around food particles. The significant and positive effect of operational services on tourists' wellbeing equally agrees with the report of Ijeomah and Emelue (2009) that the operational practice of restricting tourists from visiting Pandam Wildlife Park during wet season when the eco-destination is always flooded has enabled the park to have no cases of drowning in the Pandam Lake. The consistent use of tour guide especially for group visits at Idanre Hill tourism site in Ondo State, motivates tourists to climb the hill that has about 682 steps, enables them learn the unique and interesting history of the destination host community through useful interpretive narrations, brings about socio-emotional closeness of partners involved in the adventure tourism, and prevents tourists from unknowingly stepping on the ancient tomb at the ancient market on the hill top. Any tourist who steps on the ancient tomb becomes 'a working corpse' - mad, whereas there is no inscription by the management of the eco-destination to prevent adventure tourists from stepping on it. Meanwhile the tomb looks like other parts of the ancient market, and tourists get to the site of that market always tired (after climbing the 682 steps). Implementing the rule that wild animals have right of ways in the parks has also helped in reducing accidents and attacks of tourists by wild animals. This research, based on the evidence presented, validates the actions of management geared toward the maintenance of operational facilities (such as hanging bridges, tree houses, patrol vans, lifeguards, guns, ammunitions, communication gadgets, boats etc.) and the emphasis that related support functions that serve as back-ups to these facilities are consistently evaluated in line with the growing population and demands on the Parks, as well as the changing standards of practices related to such services. This reiterates the position of previous scholars on the need for the training and retraining of operational staff and personnel as well. The significantly higher impact of Operational services on intellectual wellbeing (96.62%) when compared with both physical wellbeing (87.23%),

and socio-emotional wellbeing (93.31%) of tourists shows that non provision of effective operational services in the parks will seriously affect tourist experiences and learning.

Conclusion

Drawing on the findings of this research, operational services are revealed to significantly impact on tourists' wellbeing in Okomu, Old Oyo and Cross River National Parks of Nigeria. This positions related operational services such as availability of adequate safety guard, tour guide and facilities such as life jacket (can save tourists from drowning), consistent clearing of paths and trails (to increase visibility and reduce human-wildlife conflicts), seasonal restriction of tourists in some accident prone sections of the park (to prevent the risk of injury), availability of functional patrol van, and other facilities, provision of facilities for air surveillance, water and land patrol and motivation of rangers through provision of ammunition, repair and maintenance of infrastructure coupled with proper implementation of rules as being imperative to ensuring the wellbeing of tourists in selected National Parks in Nigeria. This therefore presents operational services as significant predictor of outcomes of tourist's physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing and socio-emotional wellbeing. On this basis, this study concludes that Management effort channelled toward strengthening operational services will contribute toward enhancing outcomes of tourist's physical wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing and socio-emotional wellbeing in the selected National Parks in Nigeria. It is therefore recommended that:

- i. The management of selected National Parks in Nigeria, should develop training programs, tailored to specifically address functional gaps in the security features of the Parks, boosting their operations and processes and ensuring that all related tools and equipment required for the functionality of the parks are up-to-date.
- ii. The management of National Parks in Southern Nigeria should emphasize bridging operational gaps through the focus on reinforcing internal linkage, networking and a systemic approach toward the operations of the park. This can be achieved through a structuring of functions that allow for improved communication between units and groups, and a focus on strengthening collaboration across the various units in the Parks.
- iii. While ensuring the provision of adequate and up-to-date operational facilities such as patrol vans, rifles, ammunitions etc. there should be proper maintenance of existing ones to ensure effective delivery.
- iv. Adequate qualified staff should be employed for efficient and effective delivery of operational services.
- v. Park safety rules should be strictly implemented.

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