

Evaluation of Security Situation and Cultural Components of Ecotourism in Okomu National Park, Nigeria

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Abstract

The security situation and cultural components of ecotourism in Okomu National Park (ONP), Nigeria was evaluated using data from personal observations, in-depth interview and three sets of questionnaire. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. The study revealed that majority of the tourists (70.59%), staff (84.00%) and all household respondents (100.00%) perceived ONP secure as the ecodestination has been relatively peaceful over the years, and due to the activities of the park protection unit (72.73%). Provision of sophisticated equipment (68.00%) for rangers topped the list of strategies suggested by respondents on how to improve security situations in the park. The park is endowed with numerous but peculiar cultural attractions which include the well cherished sacred stream (83.05%), Benin stature/cultural artifacts (27.11%), indigenous language (11.86%), Museum, traditional dressing of host communities, cultural dances, fishing festival, and the annual Igue festival. Majority of the respondents (60%) are not involved in the use of cultural products for tourism activities but did not complain. Involvement of host communities in utilisation of cultural resources for ecotourism came in the form of interpretation of community histories (28%), species identification using local language (24%) and production of signposts using trophies and animal carcass (24%). Almost all the household respondents admitted that tourism has a positive effect on their culture. Improving security in the park (40.00%), strengthening of host community-management relationship (40%) and consistent maintenance of cultural artifacts (8.00%) were strategies suggested by households on how to improve utilisation of cultural resources in the park. Sustainable use of cultural products for tourism in ONP, and the secure nature of the destination will promote indigenous culture and massive empowerment of households in park host communities.

Keywords: ecotourism, terrorism, protected area, Okomu national park, rural empowerment, Nigeria

Introduction

Tourism is the deliberate movement of persons to satisfy a particular need which ranges from pleasure, excitement, experience to relaxation (Nedelea *et al*, 2008; Ijeomah, 2007; Center for Responsible Travel, CREST, 2005; USAID, 2005; Ayodele, 2002). Tourism is as old as man, and movement of people on earth is seriously influenced by attraction (Ariya *et al*, 2017). Ecotourism, an aspect of environmental tourism is a “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and improve the well-being of local people” (The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2006). Put in another way, ecotourism entails deliberate travel and visit to natural environments to interact with nature. Ecotourism takes place in protected areas such as wildlife sanctuaries, game reserves, national parks, etc. Ecotourism has become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry and has led to the establishment of many protected areas (IUCN/UNEP-WCMC, 2012). In essence, both ecotourism and protected areas (which serve as ecodestination) have experienced tremendous growth in the 21st century.

Ecotourism virtues attract people from different areas who are eager to spend their money for vivid experiences (Ijeomah and Herbert, 2012). One of the principles of ecotourism is that there must be respect for culture of the indigenous people who are host to ecodestinations (Ceballos - Lascrain, 1992; Hetzer, 1965). Ecotourism, therefore, encourages the interaction of people with their environment and culture – this it does by using artifacts and souvenir to narrate or portray age-long ancestral interactions with host communities. Although ecotourism has been recording tremendous growth, UNESCO (2014) reported that the cultures of many indigenous people are threatened. More so, the challenges of many ecotourism destinations are increasing as booming tourist centers and their indigenous communities are now targets by terrorists (Ijeomah, 2017). Numerous studies have reported cases of insecurity and attacks on tourists in destinations around the world (Coshall, 2003; Kuto and Groves, 2004; Jehl, 1997; Filkins, 2002; Sönmez *et al*., 1999; Lepp and Gibson, 2003; Breda and Costa, 2005; Ladan, 2013; Ijeomah, 2017). Frequent attacks on tourists and tourist centers show that terrorists understand the economic and political significance of international tourism, and the fact that terrorism destroys tourism and are therefore eager to wreck the economies of many countries (Sonmez, *et al*, 1999). With these serious challenges it becomes very important to assess the security status of ecodestinations, and the effects of tourist visitation on cultures of tourism host communities.

The objectives of this study therefore are to:

1. ascertain the security status of the park
2. identify the cultural attractions in Okomu national park

3. assess the perception of host communities concerning utilization of cultural products for ecotourism
4. evaluate the effect of tourist visitation on the culture of host communities

Methodology

Study Area

The study was carried out in Okomu National Park, Ovia, South-west local government, Edo State, Nigeria (Figure 1). It lies on latitude 6°21' N and longitude 5°13' E (Inahoro, 1991). The park covers a land area of 212km² making it the smallest national park in Nigeria (National Park Service, 2009).

Methods of Data Collection

Data for the study were collected through the administration of structured questionnaire, field observation and in-depth interview. The first set of questionnaires was administered to 50 household representatives (but only 30 were retrieved) of the five communities selected, namely Iguowan, Agekpuku, African timber and plywood (AT&P), Extension 1 and Bisi camp who were closest to the park. The second set of questionnaires was administered to 20 field staff and 20 administrative staff but only 25 questionnaires were retrieved, while the last set of structured questionnaires was administered to 40 tourists but 34 were retrieved. In-depth interview was conducted with the head of Ecotourism, Park Protection Unit and some indigenes of the host communities.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics viz: frequencies, percentages, figures, and tables.

Results

Security Status of Okomu National Park

Results on the security status of Okomu National Park are presented from Table 1 to 6. Table 1 shows that most tourist (70.59%), staff (84.00%), and all household (100.00%) respondents perceived that Okomu National Park is safe. As presented in Table 2, the major reason for considering the park secure was the presence of park protection unit (72.73%), followed by the presence of consistent anti-poaching patrol team (21.82%). Evidences of vulnerability to terrorist attack in Okomu National Park were identified by staff respondents to include lack of sophisticated weapons (44.00%) and poor logistics (40.00%) (Table 3). Trespass was the most frequent (56.00%) form of

encroachment in Okomu National Park (Table 4). Other forms of encroachments in the park were logging (28.00%) and farming (20.00%).

Table 5 presents respondents' assessment of the ability of Okomu National Park to combat terrorist attack. Many staff respondents (64.00%) and tourist respondents (70.59%) opined that the park can withstand terrorist attack. All household respondents (100.00%) perceived that the park can withstand terrorism. Strategies to improve security situation in the park are presented in Table 6. Top on the list of strategies was provision of updated/sophisticated equipment for rangers (68.00%). Other strategies listed by respondents include provision of good vehicles for the patrol team (48.00%), and provision of good welfare package for the rangers (28.00%).

Table 1: Security Status of Okomu National Park as Perceived by Tourists, Park Officials and Households

Security Status	Frequency	Percentage
Tourists		
Secure	24	70.59
Not secure	10	29.41
Total	34	100
Park officials		
Secure	21	84.00
Not Secure	4	16.00
Total	25	100
Households		
Secure	30	100.00
Not secure	0	0.00
Total	30	100

Table 2: Reasons for considering Okomu National Park Secure as Perceived by Park Officials and Household Respondents.

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Presence of park protection	40	72.73
Presence of anti-poaching patrol team	12	21.82
Friendly surrounding communities	4	7.27
Well trained-personnel/ logistics	3	5.45
Adequate man-power	2	3.64

Table 3: Evidences of Non-Protection Against Terrorism in Okomu National Park as Perceived by Staff Respondents

Evidences	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of sophisticated weapon	11	44
Poor logistics	10	40
Inadequate training of Park officials	7	28
Poor motivation of staff	7	28
Inadequate manpower	5	20

Table 4: Forms of Encroachment in Okomu National Park as Indicated by Park Officials

Parameters	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Trespass	15	60
Logging	7	28
Farming	5	20
Hunting	3	12
TOTAL	30	100

Table 5: Ability of Okomu National Park to Withstand Terrorist Attack as Perceived by Park Officials, Households and Tourists

Ability to withstand terrorism	Frequency	Percentage
Park Officials		
Can Withstand terrorism attack	16	64
Cannot withstand terrorism attack	9	36
Total	25	100
Household		
Can withstand terrorism attack	30	100
Cannot withstand terrorism attack	0	0.00
Total	30	100
Tourist		
Can withstand terrorism attack	24	70.59
Cannot withstand terrorism attack	10	29.41
Total	34	100

Table 6: Strategies to Improve Security Situations in Okomu National Park as Indicated by Staff Respondents

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Provision of updated /sophisticated equipment for Rangers	17	68
Provisions of good vehicles for patrol team	12	48
Provision of good welfare package for the Rangers	7	28
Consistent training of Rangers	7	28
Improvement on man-power (Employment)	7	28
Good relationship between staff and community.	5	20
Proper funding by government and private collaboration	3	12
Payment of hazard allowance to Rangers	2	8
Maintenance of facilities	1	4

Cultural Attractions in Okomu National Park

Results on cultural attractions in Okomu National Park are presented in Table 7 and Figure 1. The most cherished cultural attraction as perceived by park officials and tourists is sacred stream (83.05%). Other cultural artifacts include Benin statue/cultural artifact (27.11%), indigenous language (11.86%), traditional dressings (5.08%), cultural dance (3.39%). Notwithstanding the diversity of peculiar cultures, Figure 1 shows that most staff respondents perceived that tourists still prefer wildlife to cultural attractions.

Table 7: Cultural Attraction in Okomu National Park as Perceived by Park Officials and Tourists

Parameter	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sacred stream	49	83.05
Benin stature/ Cultural artefact	16	27.11
Language	7	11.86
Museum	3	5.08

Traditional Dressing	3	5.08
Cultural Dance	2	3.39
Fishing festival	2	3.39
Yearly Igue festival	2	3.39
Food	2	3.39
Shrine	1	1.69
Ijaw boating activity	1	1.69
Total	88	100

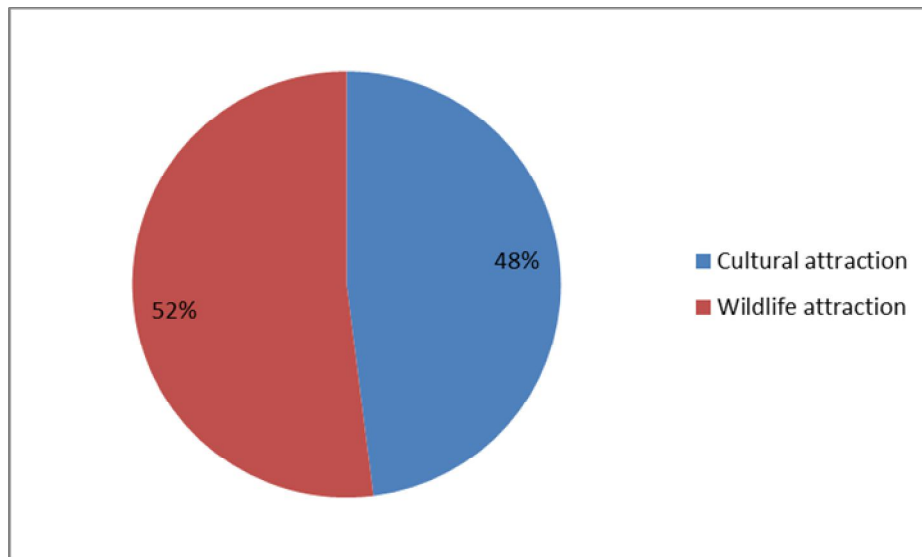


Figure 1: Tourist preference of cultural and wildlife attractions in the study area as perceived by staff respondents.

Utilization of Cultural Products for Ecotourism

Results on the perception of host communities concerning utilization of cultural products for ecotourism are presented in Figures 2 and 3, Tables 8 and 9. Most staff respondents (60.00%) claimed that host communities are not involved in the utilization of cultural products for ecotourism (Figure 2). Table 8 shows that some household respondents (40%) are involved in the interpretation of community history to tourists. Others could be involved in species identification and trophy collection. Sixty percent of staff respondents indicated that households are not complaining about the use of cultural products for ecotourism (Figure 3). Table 9 presents a list of strategies to improve the utilization of cultural resources for tourism in the park as suggested by park officials. The major strategies among others are: improvement of internal security in the park (40.00%) and strengthening of

host-management relationship (40.00%). Others are consistent maintenance of artifacts and incorporation of local people in the management of the park.

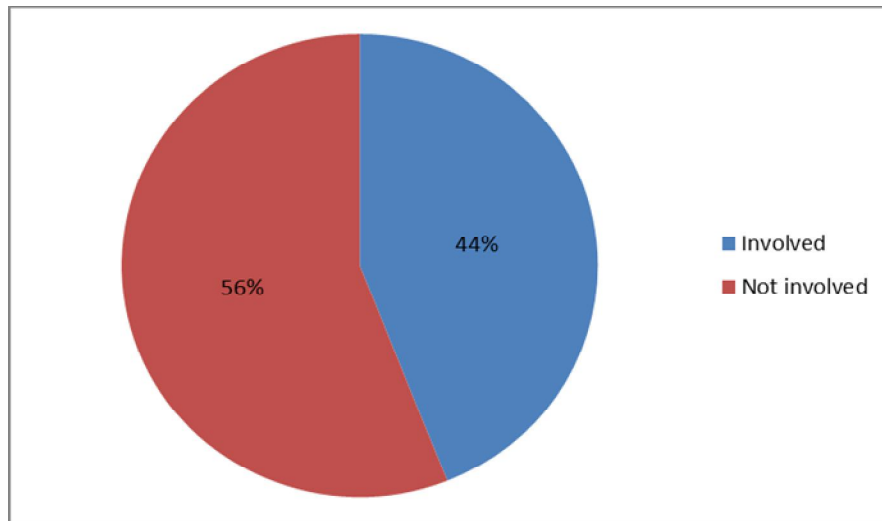


Figure 2: Involvement of host communities in the use of cultural resources for tourism as assessed by staff respondents.

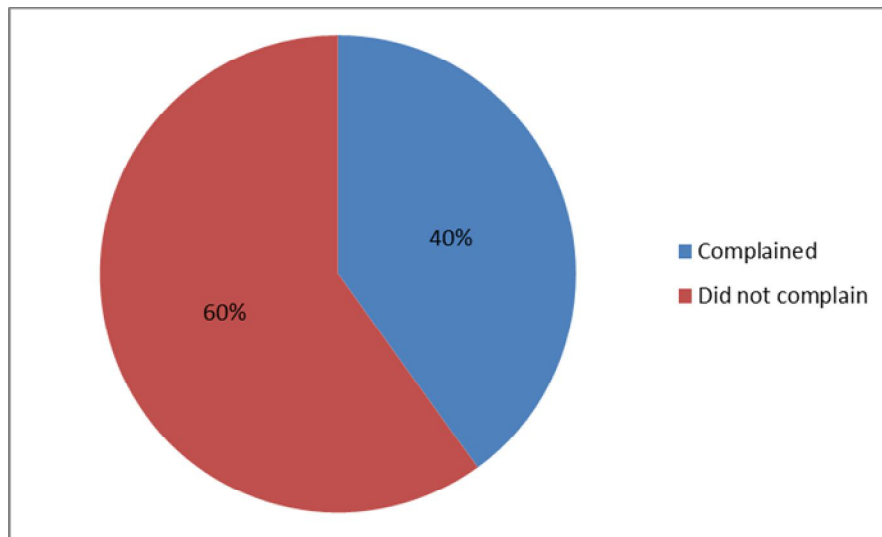


Figure 3: Reaction of host communities about the use of cultural resources for tourism as assessed by staff respondents

Table 8: Forms of Host Communities Involvement in the Utilization of Cultural Resources for Tourism in Okomu National Park as Indicated by Park Officials

Forms of involvement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Interpretation of the community histories	7	28
Involved in some activities of tourism	7	28
Species identification using local language	6	24
Act as curators	6	24
Communities take the contract of making trophies and carcass as signposts	6	24
Worshipping in Arakhua stream	5	20

Table 9: Strategies to Improve on Utilization of Cultural Resources for Tourism in the Park as Suggested by Park Respondents

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improvement of security in the park	10	40
Host-management relationship should be strengthened	10	40
Consistent maintenance of artifacts	2	8
Incorporation of local people in the management of park	2	8
Provision of infrastructure (amenity)	2	8
Sufficient funding from the government	2	8
Community should package their cultural artifacts	2	8
Construction of good roads to the park	1	4
Proper research (education and enlightenment)	1	4

Effect of Tourist Visitation on the Culture of Host Communities

The effect of tourist visitation on the culture of host communities is represented in Figure 4. Majority (90.00%) of household respondents stated that the use of cultural products for ecotourism has no negative effect on culture of host communities while only 10.00% of the respondents said that it has negative effects on their culture.

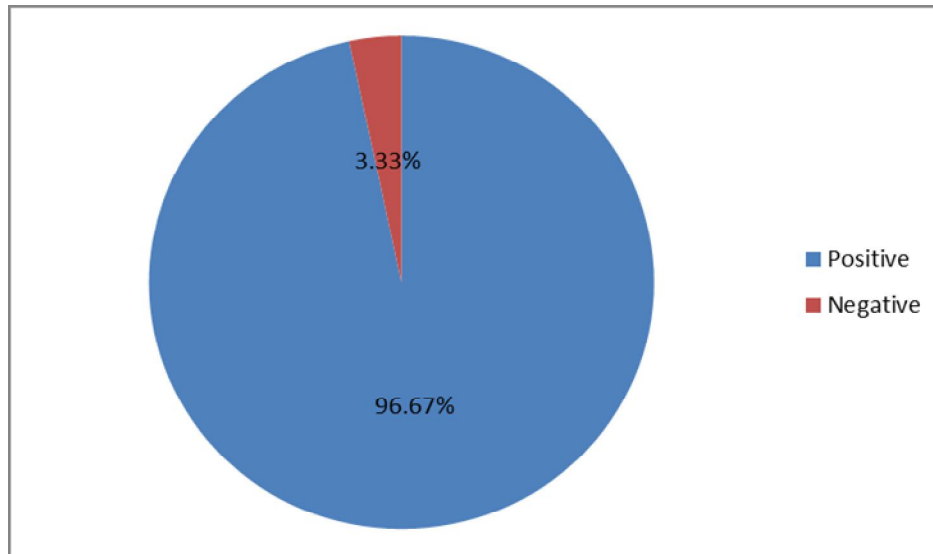


Figure 4: Effect of tourist visitation on the culture of host communities as perceived by household respondents

Discussion

Security Status of Okomu National Park

Majority of both tourists and staff respondents, and all the household respondents perceived that Okomu National Park is secure (Table 1). The perception of household respondents could be attributed to the fact that operations of militants once experienced in the destination in 2006 stopped and never re-occurred. The collective efforts made by host communities, the park management, the military and the then President of Nigeria in forcefully ejecting them from the destination impressed households. Besides, herdsmen have never invaded the park. This is contrary to the report of Ijeomah (2017) on the poor security situation in Kamuku National Park, Sambisa game reserve and Pai River game reserve. Paramilitary activities also controlled the rate of poaching in the park and stealing of agricultural crops in the communities. In the case of tourists, there are no reported cases of insecurity throughout their stay in the destination; that could be the reason

many visitors repeat visits to the destination. The opinion of staff respondents could be because of the presence of park protection unit, regular anti-poaching patrol team and friendliness of host communities (Table 2). The presence of the park protection unit is felt in the park. Anti-poaching patrols are embarked upon about 6 times in a week to monitor the resources in every range of the park. This is in contradiction with what obtains in Kamuku National Park where rangers hardly embark on anti-poaching patrols because of fear of being attacked by terrorists who lurked in the destination (Ijeomah, 2017). The existing cordial relationship with the host communities prompted their involvement in the security of the park. It will be very difficult to provide adequate security in a park without involving the host communities as their connivance with outsiders can worsen security situations.

However, about 44.00% of staff respondents stated that the park is still vulnerable to militants' invasion especially as Okomu National Park is deficient in sophisticated weapons (Table 3). The weapons currently used in the park are not as sophisticated as the ones used by militants. The park also lacks other logistics (40.00%) in forms of modern communication gadgets, good anti-patrol vehicles (like Hilux) and GPS. Ijeomah and Ogbara (2013) reported similar challenges in Kainji Lake National Park. Lack of these basic monitoring facilities has led to various forms of encroachment in the park.

Land dispute is frequently experienced in Okomu National Park (Table 4). Illegal logging activities are more prevalent in Okomu National Park than in Kanji Lake National Park, where encroachment of herdsmen for grazing of cattle is frequently experienced (Ijeomah *et al.*, 2013). Grazing of cattle is hardly experienced in Okomu National Park because it is difficult to access the park from all sides: from the Arakhwan and Iguowan ranges there is a monitoring gate at Iguowan; from Julius creek, there is a river and hill. The back of the park can only be accessed through the river and creek; the marshy nature of the environment could drown domestic animals. The fear of losing some animals hinders herdsmen from encroaching on the park. However, the animals are grazed along the boundaries of the park or in front of the monitoring gate. Farming and hunting are among the reasons persons encroach in the study area. Majority of staff respondents, tourists, and all household respondents agreed that the park can withstand terrorist attack (Table 5). This is because the respondents have not really experienced terrorist attacks and the high level of their operation. This is contrary to the report of UNEP (2010). The security situation in the park is different from that of Pai River game reserve of Plateau State, Kamuku National Park and Sambisa game reserve where operations of militants, cattle rustlers and terrorists are well pronounced (Ijeomah, 2012). More so, most parks across

the globe including protected areas in East Africa are seriously faced with the challenge of how to prevent terrorists from invading their parks especially when the invaders are equipped with sophisticated facilities like helicopter, goggles for night vision and AK47 brand of gun.

Strategies suggested to improve security situations in the park include the provision of adequate and powerful security facilities for rangers as the sound of a very powerful gun alone can scare away intending militants (Table 6). Besides, the rangers will be confident in fighting against encroachment if they have modern security gadgets that are similar or more sophisticated than the type the poachers possess. Provision of good field vehicles would enable park officials to penetrate difficult terrains. Besides, it will aid rangers to move apprehended poachers to the head office (immediately arrests are made) without patrol activity being disrupted. This agrees with the findings of Ijeomah and Ogbara (2013).

Cultural Attractions

There are lots of cultural attractions in Okomu National Park (Table 7). Some of the cultural attractions are sacred streams in Arakwan, Benin statue/cultural artifacts, indigenous language, museum, traditional dressing, cultural dance, and festivals. The sacred stream in Arakwan is where the indigenous people go for traditional worship, which tourists also find fascinating. However, traditional mode of worship is under pressure as a result of civilisation and the introduction of new religious practices. The indigenous people educate the tourists on the Benin statue/cultural artifact; as an individual from one of the host communities interprets the history. Both plant and animal species in the park are identified by indigenous persons in local language, this helps in sustaining indigenous identity (Okpoko and Chukwuka, 2016).

The Igue festival is a major festival which has been incorporated into the national park's tourism package. Information gathered through personal interview revealed that the indigenous people participate actively in the festival. It was gathered that in Udo (one of the communities), which served as the venue for the Igue festival, there was once a 'powerful man' called Arua who by magical power made a standing palm tree to sweep the venue for the festival. Tourists cherish viewing the statue of Arua especially when the tales of his magical deeds are told. The fishing festival is also cherished by tourists. Fish caught by households in the host communities are sometimes distributed to tourists at no financial charge. This act is cherished by many tourists. The local people generate income by selling souvenirs. The management of Okomu National Park gives the local people contract to make signpost, with carcass or trophies from animals. Notwithstanding these

well cherished unique cultural activities, most tourists still prefer to view wild animals in the national park (Figure 1). This cannot be unconnected with the fact that many areas no longer have large congregation of observable wild animals especially big games. Besides, wild animals are mobile and some could do interesting displays that entertain visitors. This is also attributed to the fact that in some national parks, only some species of mammals are found. Tourists, therefore have to save money to travel to a destination just to view games. In Okomu National Park the White throated monkey (*Cercopithecus erythrogaster*) is one of the popular species. Similarly, Ijeomah and Odunlami (2016) observed that tourists enjoy watching mona monkeys in Finima Nature Park of Bonny Island, Rivers State. Some tourists visit from far and near just to view this game and its acrobatic displays. This agrees with the report of Eltringham (1984) that game viewing is the major attraction to tourists in Africa. This is also in tandem with the report of the Government of Kenya (GOK) (2010) that protected areas are the main site for wildlife tourism. It equally agrees with Odunga and Maingi (2011) that about 50% of foreign tourists in Kenya desire to have at least one wildlife viewing opportunity.

Utilization of Cultural Products for Ecotourism

Majority of those involved in the use of cultural values for ecotourism are household members (Figure 2). Tourists buy cultural artifacts as souvenirs. The local people are involved in activities like traditional cultural dance, fishing, and identification of species using local language and making of trophies, sale of traditional attire and souvenirs, and interpretation of histories (Table 8).

Some strategies on how to improve the utilization of cultural resources as suggested by respondents include the provision of adequate security in the park (Table 9). It is only when a destination is secure that tourists can feel safe and enjoy the cultural resources in the park. Besides, strengthening existing cordial relationship between host communities and the management of the park will further promote the use of cultural resources for ecotourism.

Effect of Tourism on Cultures of Host Communities

Visitation of tourists promotes the culture of host communities especially by making people from different areas become aware of their cultural dances, festivals, history, food, traditional attires and languages. Sale of souvenirs helps in sustaining artistic tradition and keep the indigenous cultures in the memory of tourists (Figure 4). However, some members do

not like the mode of dressing (the type that exposes body of females) of few tourists because of its negative influence on the young ones.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Okomu National Park is relatively secure as a result of the presence of the park protection unit, anti-poaching patrol team, and friendly surrounding communities. Okomu National Park is endowed with many cultural attractions which form a major component of ecotourism. Security of destinations and sustainable use of cultural products for tourism in the park will promote indigenous culture and bring about massive empowerment of households in host communities. The management of Okomu National Park should ensure that the weapons used by rangers are upgraded, and efforts should be made to ensure that tourism is not managed in a way that destroys indigenous cultures. The level of manpower should be increased and indigenes given special consideration in employment. The existing cordial relationship between the host communities and the management of the park should be sustained to foster maximum security. The community should as frequently as possible be made to understand the concept of park protection and its importance for posterity.

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