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 used key informant interview, group discussion and field observation methods to collect data. Stratified random sampling was used to select nine communities within the three categories of the zone. 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 a total 80 respondents. Data collected was analysed using descriptive method of qualitative data analysis. Findings revealed that support zone communities were passively involved in the ongoing ecotourism development planning process. Government adopts top-down planning approach using decide-announce-defend method, and local residents could not alter what had already been decided upon. Result also showed that host communities were happy and ready to participate in ecotourism. However, they are more willing to collaborate with NGOs than the government because NGOs adopt 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 given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully in the planning process, ecotourism can be successfully developed in the region.
Keywords: Ecotourism, Community involvement, Planning, Development.

Introduction

Over the years, project development, especially in developing countries rarely recorded success. This according to Agbor (2014), is as a result of the usual adoption of top-down planning method. However, from late '90s till date, development is being anchored on participatory approach. It is seldom to find in many countries, a development project that negates bottom-up participatory planning approach, which recognises the power of

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indigenous knowledge. Nevertheless, development agencies are still faced with the issue of how to achieve effective community participation when it concerns rural development. With the development of Local Agenda 21, community involvement has become a major parameter for 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).

Community involvement fosters community-based ecotourism that strategically influences environmental conservation and economic benefits. 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 (Stricktland-Munro & Moore 2013; Okpoko, 2005).

It is an established fact that a major criterion for 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 meetings with constituencies and community leaders, developers can foster open discussions that will enhanced 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.

Ebin (2003) also noted 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.

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.

In his study titled: "Barriers to Community Capacity Building for Tourism Development in Communities in Shiraz, Iran" Aref (2010), suggested that host communities of the park should be committed by involving them in decision making processes towards ecotourism development. Faggin & Munster (2000) also reported that the success stories recorded by ecotourism in Malaysia are because host communities were 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 that host communities benefit 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 empowers 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).

Local leadership is seen as a major determinant for the success or otherwise of such projects. In a community-based development project in Ogoja, Mowang (2011) noted the importance of local leadership and their effects on community involvement in development decisions. 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 serves as an impetus to residents' participation in nature conservation in Hhuhuwe-Umfolozi Park because community members trust their leaders. Anselem & Nzanosim (2016) demonstrated in their study on host communities' 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 reposed on them, which in turn has led to their involvement in nature conservation. Therefore, acknowledging the imprtance 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 also 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 established; 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 has 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 participate 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 remains a critical indicator that also require evaluation in order to attain sustainable ecotourism development in the region. These communities are reportedly not 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 said to have been excluded or inadequately involved in ecotourism planning. This study therefore, seeks to examine these communities' involvement in ecotourism planning and development with a view to assessing the programme's success or failure.

Theoretical framework

As in other subjects, theories and models have been used to study various aspects of tourism. Okpoko (2006) observed; "tourism literatures have recorded a number of development theories ranging from the classical econometric model through environmental theories to sustainability models". These theories entail assumptions about the main components of the tourism products and how they have catalyzed the planning and development of tourism. However, for the purpose of this paper, Functionalism, Arnstein, Pretty & Tosun's models have been selected among other theories to provide a vivid description and theoretical back up on how the involvement of host communities in ecotourism planning can be successful. These theories were chosen because of their comprehensiveness and wide opportunities that encourage careful and detailed study of the subject matter.

Functionalism theory enabled the researchers to understand the roles of each stakeholder category in ecotourism planning process in Okwangwo Division. Functionalism as presented by Fletcher (1956) in Ezeh (2006), revolves around the fact that society is a system of inter-connected parts, which are inter-operative, and work (function) in a process of inter-dependence with each other. Thus, each part is understood within knowledge of the whole, since its very significance lies in its functional interconnections with and contribution to other parts in the entire social system. Therefore, the planning and development of ecotourism rest upon

this primary recognition of the social system; and could only provide a reliable body of knowledge about its subject matter if it employs the structural functional method of analysis (Fletcher 1956 in Ezeh 2006).

Arnstein participation ladder, on the other hand, provided the background through which the extent of community involvement in the planning process was determined. Murphy & Murphy (2004) illustrated the significance of Arnstein model to ecotourism development by highlighting the following eight levels - manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and local control. They described the '***Manipulation***' level as the 'decide-announce-defend' approach where the populace cannot change what has already been agreed. At this stage**,** power distribution from developers to host communities does not exist …. The ***'Therapy'*** level provides a very low level of public participation, the main objective being to present the expected benefits of ecotourism development to the public, give them the opportunity to say something, but without providing any feedback for modification of the proposal. The ***'Informing'*** stage provide the opportunity to make contributions on pending decisions which usually may lead to small changes and minor alterations in the scope of a predetermined decision. At ***'Consultation'***, stage special public discussions are entertained in order to assess the willingness and support of the community for the proposed ecotourism project, while the ***'Placation'*** stage allows a moderate participation as the public broadly influence decisions about the project. Nevertheless, a high level of participation is experienced at ***'Partnership'*** level. There is power distribution between developers and the host community through negotiations and establishment of joint committees that review decisions and make final recommendations that are adopted. Decision-making led by the community takes place at the ***'Delegated Power'***, level. Here the constituted joint committees have majority of community members who review issues and make final recommendations. The ***'local control'*** level is the apex level of community participation which gives the local people (host community) all the decision-making power (Arnstein, 1971; Pretty, 1995; Tosun, 2000). Cooperatives are created to make policies and decisions that affect the community.

Furthermore, Pretty (1995) created a detailed typology of community participation, which looks mainly at the developers or users of participatory approaches. He identified seven types of participation beginning from 'manipulative participation' in which power exist in the hands of developers to 'self-mobilization' where the local community gain absolute control and power over all aspects of development. This model acknowledges the indigenous people's condition, the asymmetric power distribution between the host and other stakeholders and the various ways in which the term

'participation' is interpreted (Mowforth & Munt, 2000; Mason, 2003; Tosun, 2004; Hanrahan, 2008). As rightly argued by Mason (2003), Pretty's model is solely under the categories of 'interactive participation' and 'self-mobilization,' which gives the local people the opportunity to participate actively in ecotourism decision-making.

The significance of Pretty's model to this research is that, it gives room for analysis at each scale for different degrees of residents' control and external involvement. It also tries to reflect power relationship between the local people and developers, which allows for unambiguous identification of the real participation level given to support zone communities in relation to power distribution and decision-making process in ecotourism planning in Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park. Pretty's model also describes a range of values defined by the movement from control by developing agencies (government and NGOs) to control by the local people.

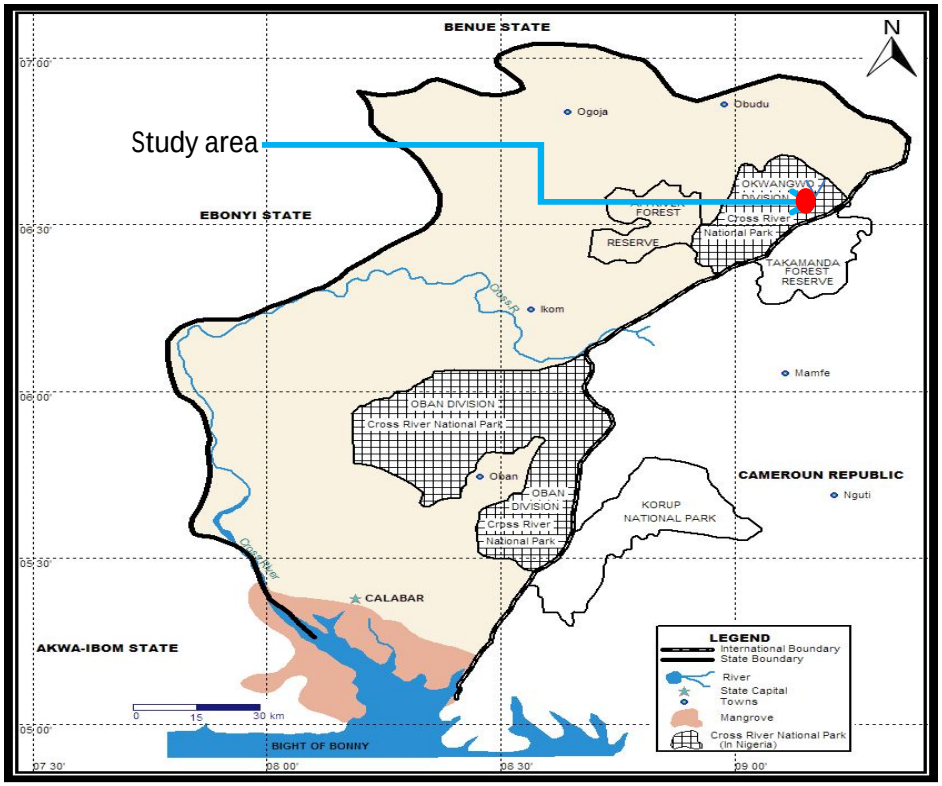
Taking a cue from Pretty's typology, Tosun (2004), developed another model of community participation for ecotourism and classified it into three main categories. Spontaneous participation, which is a typical bottom-up planning approach that encourages active community involvement in decision making processes. As an ideal form of community involvement, host communities are accorded full managerial responsibility and authority which is very useful to support zone communities of Okwangwo Division of CRNP. The second is Induced community participation' in which the host communities are made to hear and to be heard, and this implies that they also exercise certain powers in ecotourism development planning process. It is worthy of note that host communities at this point do not have power to ensure that their contributions are incorporated into the main proposal by the other powerful stakeholders (tourism companies, NGO, and government agencies). This according to Tosun (1995) cited in Hanrahan (2008), depict a certain level of tokenism or passive type of participation that is synonymous with top-down planning approach. Lastly, 'coercive participation' corresponds to 'manipulation and therapy levels in Arnstien's typology. This also agrees with passive and manipulative participation as described by Pretty (1995). According to Tosun (2004), the reason for the existence of this level is not to meaningfully involve the participants but to enable those in authority to educate host communities to refrain from potential and actual intention of causing harm to future ecotourism development.

The ideas from these models will help the researchers to identify the real level of community participation from passive to authentic and collaborative, in relation to power distribution and decision-making process in ecotourism planning 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-contagious 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, in the east by the Republic of Cameroon, in the south by the Abo (Boki) group of villages and in the west by the Ikom–Obudu highway and Mbeh Mountains of Kayang.



Source: Adapted and modified from Ajalla, 2007.

Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park is located at the central part of the state, specifically 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: Belegette 1 and 2, Bamba, Butatong, Kayang 1 and 2, Okwa 1 and 2 and Okwangwo.

Design

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 nine communities. The procedure followed was that the names of all the communities in each of the three categories were separately written, folded and mixed in a hat out of which 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, four NGOs' staff and three staff from other government ministries making a 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.

Results and Discussion

Out of 80 respondents contacted, 69% were males while 31% were females. This high number of men involved in the process reflect the active role they usually play on issues that affect the community. Besides, 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% tertiary level (B.Sc, HND, NCE & ND). However, about 36% of them had no formal education, but were all actively involved. The age range of the respondents are as follows: 66% were between 41 and 60 years old, 21% fall within 61 and 80, 8% between 20 and 40, while 5% were above 80 years.

The results revealed that stakeholders in Okwangwo Division did not have a broad consensus regarding involvement in ecotourism planning in the area. Rural people noted that they have been passively involved in the planning process, and called for the adoption of collaborative management approach that will actively involve them at all stages of the plan. Result also showed that government (park authority) adopts top-down coercive participatory approach, which corresponds with manipulative and passive involvements (Arnstein, 1971; Pretty, 1995 and Tosun, 2004). Power distribution between the government and host communities seem not to exist as the latter are not involved in decision making process. Although host communities are engaged in series of meetings to listen to presentations and also share their opinion, 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 residents, 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 poor cooperation 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 to the collaborative management approach to ecotourism planning and development in the area. According to Mr. Karim, the divisional head of Okwangwo Division:

> *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 were often manipulated by the decisions of the government. Also individual interviewees from all sampled communities said the government imposed decisions on them. They argued that their views were 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. Thus, for ecotourism to succeed in Okwango zone, there 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 opinions 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 efforts, where people participate by taking initiatives independently 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. The only way for any community development agency to succeed is to collaborate with the local residents. Smart Okongo, one of the youth leaders at Belegette, gave a concise account of their encounters, thus:

> *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 decisions 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 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 strongly believe in their leaders, and 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 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 conservation because they trust their leaders. Management, especially NGOs working in the park, are doing their best to win the minds of local residents.

Host communities would willingly participate in ecotourism if they are genuinely involved in every stage 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 said 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 supported the project from the onset. The findings also indicate that ecotourism will record success stories in Okwangwo if indigenous people are actively involved from the onset since they are willing to participate, unlike the 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 concerns 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 the refusal of some people to provide relevant information, this situation was, however, resolved by community leaders (chiefs, youth and women leaders), who sensitized them on the relevance of our study and the need to give us audience. Howbeit, the 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 generally 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 given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully in the planning process, ecotourism can be successfully developed in the region. Management (park authority) should therefore, cooperate with NGOs working in the park to achieve a common goal by adopting bottom-top collaborative management approach that will actively involve community members in decision-making at all levels, and spell out the roles of host communities in the process. This will encourage effective power distribution among stakeholders and make the local communities have a sense of belonging.

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