

Ecotourism in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

The paper explores the landscape of ecotourism in Nigeria, emphasizing its conceptual framework, its challenges and prospects. The conceptual framework for the paper advocates for sustainable tourism development, emphasizing the interconnectedness of tourist interests, industry needs, environmental conservation, and community well-being. Nigeria's ecotourism potential is examined through its diverse wildlife, ecosystems, emerging destinations, and economic benefits. The study recognizes challenges such as poor funding, inadequate infrastructure, political instability, and poaching. Strategic interventions, including increased funding and anti-poaching measures are proposed. The paper concludes that while Nigeria holds substantial ecotourism promise, concerted efforts are needed for sustainable development, balancing economic benefits with environmental stewardship.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, Biodiversity, Conservation

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I. Introduction

Ecotourism is regarded as an ecologically-centred approach type of tourism. It is targeted towards reducing pressure on the natural environment while facilitating the conservation of natural resources (Adekola and Meduna, 2018). Ecotourism therefore involves travelling to natural attraction areas that both conserve the culture and the environment while sustaining the wellbeing of the local community. It can therefore be seen as purposeful travel to natural areas to interact and blend with the cultural and natural environment. Ecotourism is embarked upon with the motive of protecting the integrity of the ecosystem while producing economic opportunities that makes the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people (Nigatu, 2017). With this thinking, ecotourism is seen as a potent medium that provides environmental, socio-economic, and cultural benefits at both local and national levels (Wahab, 2014; Oruonye, Ahmed, Hajara and Danjuma, 2017).

Ecotourism as an offshoot of the tourism industry has therefore, been contributing enormously towards development. For instance, the ecotourism industry is growing globally at the rate of 10-15% annually (Cater 1993; Adekola and Meduna, 2018). It equally allows nations to utilize natural attractions in gaining economic benefits without losing their rich biological resources. Ecotourism therefore contributes meaningfully to foreign exchange, job creation, revenue generation, infrastructure development among others. Ecotourism also contributes towards ensuring environmental conservation while alleviating poverty (Ijeomah, Abere and Ugwu, 2018; Oduko, Oko and Herbert, 2020; Okeke, Ijeomah and Odunlami, 2023). While ecotourism is contributing meaningfully in diverse ways, it is not without factors that are challenges. For instance, such challenges include environmental depletion, urban expansion, poor planning. These challenges have negative implications on ecotourism specifically and tourism in general. It should be noted that ecotourism has the potentials of contributing to local economy while constituting a vital instrument for uplifting the socio-economic fabric of communities surrounding ecotourism destinations. Equally, the visibility of a nation as an ecotourism destination on the global stage can foster positive international relations and contribute to the nation's overall image. This is because, ecotourism transcends mere economic dimensions while remaining an integral component of a nation's broader strategy for sustainable development. While ecotourism has several prospects yet, plagued with challenges in Nigeria, the paper seeks to appraise the challenges and prospects of ecotourism in Nigeria.

1) Conceptual Framework

Sustainable tourism development is a pivotal strategy to ensure the enduring viability of the tourism industry while mitigating its adverse impacts on the environment, economy, and local communities (Dwyer, Fennell, and McGuirk, 2000). At its core, sustainable tourism seeks to establish equilibrium among the needs of

tourists, the industry, the environment, and host communities adopting a holistic perspective that recognizes the interconnectedness of these elements for the enduring benefit of all stakeholders. Several fundamental principles guide the implementation of sustainable tourism development. The first principle emphasizes the imperative to minimize pollution, conserve resources, and safeguard natural habitats to preserve ecological balance (Fennell, 2014). The economic dimension is equally critical, with sustainable tourism designed to generate economic benefits for local communities while ensuring the financial sustainability of businesses in the long term. Social responsibility forms another cornerstone, advocating for the respect of local cultures and traditions, support for local businesses, and the equitable distribution of tourism benefits within the community. Additionally, cultural sensitivity is emphasized, with tourists encouraged to be mindful of local customs and traditions, ensuring that tourism activities do not disrupt or disrespect the local culture.

Embracing sustainable tourism development yields numerous advantages. Firstly, sustainable tourism significantly contributes to conserving natural resources and biodiversity, safeguarding the environment for future generations (Diamantis, 2004). As a catalyst for local development, sustainable tourism creates job opportunities and generates income for local communities, positively impacting the economic landscape. Moreover, it could enhance infrastructure, healthcare, and education within host communities, improving overall quality of life (Ashley, Boyd, and Goodwin, 2001). Well-managed and sustainable destinations offer tourists a more positive and fulfilling experience, contributing to overall satisfaction (Page, 2003). Sustainable tourism actively protects local traditions and customs, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage for future generations.

3. Prominent Ecotourism Destinations in Nigeria

The Chad Basin, situated across the states of Borno and Yobe, serves as an indispensable ecological enclave, encompassing significant zones such as the Sambisa Game Reserve and portions of the Hadejia and Nguru wetlands. This region is distinguished as a critical sanctuary for avian migration and boasts an impressive catalog of 377 recorded bird species. Transitioning southward, the Cross River National Park, located in Cross River State, emerges as a biologically diverse landscape featuring the largest rainforest in Nigeria and the oldest surviving rainforest in Africa. It is a testament to the continent's preeminent tropical biodiversity, with Cross River alone harboring twenty percent of the world's known butterfly species.

In the west, the expansive GashakaGumti National Park, spanning Taraba and Adamawa States, establishes itself as Nigeria's largest national park, extending its reach to the border with Cameroon. The park's diverse topography, encompassing grasslands and the imposing ChappalWaddii, colloquially known as the "Mountain of Death," soaring to an elevation of 7,936 feet, creates a sanctuary for diverse flora and fauna. In the western region, Kainji National Park, situated in Niger and Kwara States, claims the distinction of being the oldest national park in Nigeria, comprising the Borgu and Zugurma sectors or game reserves.

Strategically positioned near the Kaduna International Airport in Kaduna State, Kamuku National Park offers a distinctive savannah woodland habitat teeming with a diverse array of avian species and mammals, including elephants, roan antelopes, mountain reedbucks, side-striped hyenas, and jackals. Shifting to Edo State, Okomu National Park, nestled within the expansive Okomu Forest Reserve, assumes the mantle of the second-largest rainforest in Nigeria. This park provides an undisturbed milieu for avid birdwatchers and primatologists. Old Oyo National Park, spanning across Oyo and Kwara States, distinguishes itself with a wealth of archaeological and cultural sites, including the most extensive collection in Nigeria. These encompass royal cemeteries and remnants of walls that once enclosed the ancient capital city. Meanwhile, Yankari Game Reserve in Bauchi State, inaugurated to the public in 1962, takes pride in hosting West Africa's most substantial population of elephants, various ungulates, and endangered species such as the elusive leopard.

Lekki Conservation Centre serves as an urban oasis, offering an escape from city life. With diverse ecosystems like mangrove forests and lagoons, visitors can spot various bird species, monkeys, and reptiles. Educational programs and boat tours make it an ideal destination for families and nature enthusiasts. Ecotourists can explore hidden gems beyond the national parks, such as Kajuru Castle, a medieval-style castle surrounded by lush greenery. Additionally, Idanre Hills provides a hiking adventure with panoramic views, caves, shrines, and cultural relics. Agbokim Waterfalls, nestled in a serene rainforest setting, offers a breathtaking cascade, inviting visitors to hike, swim in natural pools, and enjoy the tranquility of the surroundings.

4. Significance of Ecotourism in Nigeria

Ecotourism offers more than stunning landscapes and iconic creatures like elephants, chimpanzees, and gorillas; it is a potent force for economic development, environmental conservation, and community empowerment. The significance of ecotourism is discussed as follows:

- i) **Biodiversity and Wildlife Richness:** Nigeria's diverse natural landscapes, ranging from rainforests and savannas to wetlands and coastal areas, support a vibrant tapestry of life. This rich biodiversity, encompassing iconic wildlife species like elephants, chimpanzees, gorillas, lions, and many birds, forms the foundation for a thriving ecotourism industry in the country.
- ii) **Economic Significance:** Ecotourism significantly contributes to Nigeria's economic growth by generating revenue, creating employment opportunities, and supporting local businesses. The hospitality, transportation, tour operator, and handicraft industries (Ajayi, 2012) benefit directly and indirectly from tourism activities. By promoting wildlife tourism, Nigeria can diversify its economy, reduce dependence on traditional sectors like oil (Aregbe, 2012), and foster sustainable economic development.
- iii) **Conservation and Wildlife Protection:** Ecotourism protects Nigeria's natural heritage. The presence of tourists in protected areas acts as a deterrent to poaching and habitat destruction. At the same time, revenue generated from tourism can be reinvested in conservation projects, anti-poaching initiatives, habitat restoration, and community-based conservation programs (Ajayi, 2012). This creates a symbiotic relationship between tourism development and biodiversity conservation, ensuring the long-term survival of Nigeria's wildlife.
- iv) **Community Empowerment and Sustainable Development:** Wildlife tourism empowers local communities by involving residents of ecotourism communities in decision-making processes and providing them with sustainable livelihood options. Community-based tourism models, such as community-owned lodges and guided tours, offer economic opportunities beyond traditional livelihoods and promote a sense of environmental ownership and responsibility. This approach helps alleviate poverty, improve community well-being, and encourage sustainable development practices that preserve natural resources for future generations (Ajayi, 2012).
- v) **Cultural Exchange and Environmental Education:** Wildlife tourism fosters cultural exchange and environmental education. Visitors gain firsthand experiences of Nigeria's natural and cultural heritage, developing a deeper understanding of local traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and the importance of environmental conservation (Oyewole, 2019). Educational programs and interpretive centers raise awareness about these issues among tourists and local communities (Ajayi and Adeola, 2018), promoting a collective commitment to protecting Nigeria's unique natural and cultural treasures.

By harnessing the power of wildlife tourism, Nigeria can balance economic development, environmental conservation, and community empowerment. This holistic approach paves the way for a sustainable future where wildlife thrives, communities prosper, and the natural beauty of Nigeria is preserved for generations to come.

5. Challenges of Ecotourism in Nigeria

Nigeria possesses a rich array of ecotourism resources, which, if effectively utilized, could contribute significantly to government revenue and provide a sustainable source of employment for local communities. However, several challenges have impeded the development of ecotourism in the nation. These challenges include poor funding, inadequate infrastructure, political instability, and the persistent issue of poaching.

- i. **Poor Funding:** The need for more financial support for the ecotourism sector has limited the implementation of comprehensive plans and hindered the development of necessary facilities. Adequate funding is essential for creating and maintaining infrastructure, implementing conservation efforts, and promoting ecotourism initiatives.
- ii. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** The lack of proper infrastructure, including transportation, accommodation, and other amenities, poses a significant obstacle to the growth of ecotourism. Visitors may need help reaching ecotourism sites, and the overall experience may be compromised with proper facilities.
- iii. **Political Instability:** Political instability in the country has added another layer of complexity to ecotourism development. Uncertain political environments can deter potential investors and tourists, hindering the sector's growth.
- iv. **Poaching:** The threat of poaching undermines the rich biodiversity that could otherwise attract ecotourists. The illegal hunting of wildlife diminishes the natural resources and the appeal of ecotourism destinations.

2) Prospects of Ecotourism in Nigeria

Ecotourism is a rapidly growing sector that offers significant opportunities for economic development, environmental conservation, and community empowerment. With its rich biodiversity and diverse ecosystems, Nigeria has great potential to attract wildlife enthusiasts and nature lovers worldwide. These include;

- i) **Abundant Wildlife Resources:** Nigeria boasts a remarkable array of wildlife species, including elephants, lions, chimpanzees, gorillas, hippos, and various bird species. The country's national parks, such as Yankari National Park in Bauchi, Gashaka-Gumti National Park in Taraba and Adamawa States, and Cross

River National Park, provide essential habitats for these iconic animals. The presence of rare and endangered species makes Nigeria an attractive destination for wildlife enthusiasts seeking authentic and unique experiences.

ii) **Diverse Ecosystems:** Nigeria's diverse ecosystems, ranging from rainforests and savannahs to wetlands and mangroves, offer a variety of wildlife habitats. This diversity creates opportunities for visitors to explore landscapes and observe flora and fauna. For instance, the Niger Delta region is renowned for its rich mangrove forests and diverse birdlife, while the Cross River region is home to rare primates and endemic bird species.

iii) **Emerging Tourism Destinations:** Several emerging wildlife tourism destinations in Nigeria hold significant potential for attracting domestic and international tourists. In addition to established national parks, there are efforts to develop new protected areas and wildlife reserves, such as the Pandam Wildlife Park, Nassarawa State, and Kamuku National Park in Kaduna State. These destinations offer unique opportunities for wildlife viewing, nature photography, hiking, and cultural interactions, providing visitors with unforgettable experiences.

iv) **Economic Benefits:** Developing wildlife tourism in Nigeria can bring substantial economic benefits. It creates employment opportunities directly in tourism-related businesses and indirectly in supporting industries such as hospitality, transportation, and handicrafts. Revenue generated from wildlife tourism can contribute to local economies, improve infrastructure, and support conservation efforts. Additionally, wildlife tourism can promote sustainable development by encouraging the preservation of natural resources and traditional practices.

v) **Conservation and Environmental Awareness:** Wildlife tourism can significantly raise awareness about the importance of conservation and environmental stewardship. By experiencing wildlife in its natural habitat, visitors gain a deeper understanding of the value of biodiversity and the need to protect fragile ecosystems. This increased awareness can lead to more significant support for conservation initiatives, community engagement in wildlife protection, and the enforcement of sustainable tourism practices.

II. Conclusion

Nigeria's ecotourism sub-sector presents a dichotomy of potential and challenges as Nigeria is endowed with remarkable ecotourism resources that promise substantial economic benefits and local community empowerment. Despite these positive facets, the sector faces formidable challenges, including inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructure, political instability, and the pervasive threat of poaching. Addressing these challenges necessitates strategic interventions, including prioritized funding, improved infrastructure, political stability, and stringent anti-poaching measures. Nigeria can elevate its natural and cultural heritage into a thriving industry. Embracing sustainable tourism practices, committing to robust conservation initiatives, and decisively addressing the challenges mentioned earlier are imperative for unlocking the full spectrum of ecotourism benefits, namely, environmental preservation, economic prosperity, and enhanced livelihoods for local communities. Nigeria's trajectory toward sustainable ecotourism mandates a concerted effort from governmental entities, local communities, and stakeholders to ensure a symbiotic equilibrium between economic development and environmental stewardship.

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