

Awareness Of Rural Population About Ecotourism Centres In Nigeria: A Case Study Of Ore Town, Ondo State

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Abstract

Inadequate level of awareness has militated against the development of ecotourism in Nigeria. A lot of people especially in rural areas place little or no value on the natural resources around them, and as a consequence, have depleted the biodiversity of resources in their ecosystem through poaching, illegal forest trees felling, pollution of natural waters with refuse, overexploitation of other beneficial forest resources e.t.c. Ecotourism is one of the most intriguing aspects of environmental tourism, it affords people the experience of diverse culture, forest biodiversity and opportunity for recreation and relaxation the effect of which has brought about infrastructural development, employment opportunities, and value addition to artefacts and monumental resources. Sufficient level of awareness about the benefits that come with the existence of ecotourism attractions in Nigeria will go a long way to mitigate a conservative culture of these natural resources around us.

Keywords: Awareness, Ecotourism, Resources, Biodiversity and Recreation

INTRODUCTION

Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within

the place visited (World Tourism Organization, WTO, 2010).

Ecotourism, an aspect of environmental tourism is one of the fastest growing aspects of tourism especially in developing countries (Magigi and Ramadhani, 2013)

Visitations to natural areas have been rated highest in terms of recreation and environmental awareness as visitors are hardly disturbed by crowds. Besides interaction with nature especially plants and animals, these areas empower visitors with knowledge about their environment, and have been proved to exert healing effects on tourists (Ana and Ajewole, 2011).

Nigeria is well endowed with various ecotourism potentials including diverse culture, biodiversity, and scenic landscapes. There is hardly any community in Nigeria without unique ecotourism attractions, unique culture, food and environment (Ijeomah & Eniang, 2018). According to the Nigeria National Park Services, Wildlife resources of Nigeria are found in seven national parks, namely: Kainji Lake National Park; Cross River National Park; Gashaka Gumti National Park; Kamuku National Park; Chad Basin National Park; Old Oyo and Okomu National. Meanwhile, Yankari National park has been downgraded to a game reserve. Apart from national parks, ecotourism centres may also include but are not limited to forest reserves, game reserves, waterfalls, beaches, resort centres, mountains e.t.c.

The biophysical and anthropogenic resources of the ecotourism centres present the opportunity for recreation and relaxation in a natural environment void of any interruption or disturbance. Ecodestinations are home to plants and animals that we would not come across in cities, some of which are rare and endangered. According to Ijeomah, (2017), they also possess abundant and unique land forms; waterfalls of different heights and velocity of flow; lakes of different colours and sizes; springs of different temperatures; birds of different calls and plumage colours.

Apart from revenue generation to the government, ecotourism centers in Nigeria create employment opportunities to many of its citizens. Furthermore, it has brought about infrastructural development such as improved access roads, modern day airports, hotels, electricity supply in remote areas, railways services to mention a few

Low level of awareness concerning ecotourism resources in Nigeria has diminished the value people place on conservation thereby leading to incessant poaching of wildlife and destruction of their natural habitat which endangers their survival and eventually leads to their extinction. Ijeomah and Aiyeloja, (2010) stated that poverty, poaching, over hunting in none protected areas, bad global image, lack of maintenance culture, poor road condition with cultural traffic jam, corruption, internal insecurity, inadequate funding, misplaced priority, inadequate infrastructure etc. are all threats to the use of ecotourism as a tool for national development.

In light of the foregoing, there is a need for an assessment of the level of awareness of people about ecotourism centres in Nigeria, this has necessitated a study which assesses the level of awareness of residents of ore town about ecotourism centres. Therefore, this study sought to: (a) Examine the socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents;

(b) Assess their level of awareness about ecotourism centres in Nigeria;

(c) Evaluate the requirement for a standard ecotourism centre.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Ondo state, Nigeria. Ore township, the most populated town in the Odigbo local government area was purposively selected for the study. Ore town is inhabited by people of diverse culture, and from different tribes who are well travelled. Primary data were collected using 120 copies of well-structured questionnaires. Purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 120 respondents who were interviewed for this study. The respondents were artisans, civil servants, traders, commercial drivers and residents of the town. Socioeconomic variable such as gender, age, religion, occupation, monthly income and tribe were all considered in this study. Also, relevant questions relating to perception of, visits to and knowledge about ecotourism centres were asked the respondents. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics namely; frequency table, percentages, ranges, ranking and pie chart.

RESULT

Socioeconomic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 revealed that 43.3% of the respondents from the study area were males while 56.7% were females, the modal age range was between 31 - 40 years (40.8%). Over half of the respondents, (54.1%) were Christians while 39.2% were Muslims. The analysis of the educational level from the study revealed that 29.2%, 44.2%, 15.8%, 10.8% of the respondents had tertiary, secondary, primary and no formal education respectively.

The respondents were dominated by the Yoruba Tribe (46.7%), while Hausa and Igbo Tribes were 29.1% and 19.2% respectively. By profession, 29.2% the respondents were Civil servants; 43.3% Traders; 14.2% Commercial Drivers; 6.6% Artisans while 6.6% of the respondent's occupations were not revealed.

The monthly Income of 60.8% of the respondents was between N10,000 - N50000, while that of 14.2% fell between N50,000 - N150,0000. However, 25% of the respondents didn't reveal their monthly income.

TABLE 1: SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
GENDER		
Male	52	43.3
Female	68	56.7
Total	120	100
AGE		
20-30	33	27.5
31-40	49	40.8
41-50	35	29.2
>50	3	2.5
Total	120	100

RELIGION

Christianity	65	54.1
Islam	47	39.2
Others	8	6.7
Total	120	100

LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Tertiary	35	29.2
Secondary	53	44.2
Primary	19	15.8
No Education	13	10.8
Total	120	100

TRIBE

Yoruba	56	46.7
Hausa	35	29.1
Igbo	23	19.2
N/A	6	5
Total	120	100

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OCCUPATION

Civil Service	35	29.2
Artisans	8	6.7
Trading	52	43.3
Driving	17	14.2
N/R	8	6.6
Total	120	100

MONTHLY INCOME

₦10,000 - ₦50,000	73	60.8
₦51,000 - ₦150,000	17	14.2
N/R	30	25

Total **120** **100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Level of Awareness about Ecotourism

Table 2 revealed that most of the respondents (79.2%) from the study area were aware of the existence of various ecotourism centres around Nigeria, 12.5% were unaware while 8.3% didn't signify their level of awareness. By implication, respondents are sufficiently aware about the different ecotourism centre in and around the country and as such, would like to visit one should the opportunity present itself. According to Ijeomah and Eniang, (2018), Awareness of an area as a tourism city and the consciousness of the inhabitants of the area to receive visitors is part of human development as it gradually becomes part of the people's lifestyles.

Table 2 : LEVEL OF AWARENESS ABOUT ECOTOURISM

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
LEVEL OF AWARENESS		
Aware	95	79.2
Unaware	15	12.5
N/R	10	8.3
Total	120	100

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Ecotourism Centres Visited by Respondents

Eight ecotourism centres were identified in this study. Findings revealed that most of the respondents have visited more than one ecotourism centre per time. About 9.9% respondents claimed to have visited Kanji lake national park, 13.7% Old Oyo national park, 10.7% visited Gashaka-Gumti national park. Yankari games reserve was visited by 8.3% of the respondents while Idanre hills was visited by 11.5%. Likewise, 11.5% have visited Okomu national park while 7.6% and 6.9% have visited Erin-Ijesha and Ikangunsi waterfalls respectively. Some of the respondents (13.7%) have visited other ecotourism sites that were not captured in this study. Only 6.2% of the respondents have never visited any ecodestination, a few claimed never to have heard about their availability while others insisted that lack of touring finances have truncated their chance of a visit to any ecotourism centre.

TABLE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS BY THEIR VISITS TO ECOTOURISM CENTRES

S/N	Ecotourism Centre	Number of Responses	Percentage
1.	Kanji Lake National Park	13	9.9
2.	Old Oyo National Park	18	13.7
3.	Gashaka-Gumti National Park	14	10.7
4.	Yankari Games Reserve	11	8.3
5.	Idanre hills	15	11.5
6.	Erin Ijesha Waterfalls	10	7.6
7.	Okomu National Park	15	11.5

8.	Ikangusi warm spring	9	6.9
9.	Others	18	13.7
10.	Never Visited	8	6.2
	Total	131	100

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Multiple Response

Frequency of Visits to Ecotourism Centres by Respondents

Findings from this study revealed that 10.8%, 10%, 8.4% and 20.8% of the respondents have visited different ecotourism centres once, twice, thrice and uncountable times respectively. However, a large percentage (50%) of the respondents didn't specify how frequently they have visited ecotourism centres. The high frequency of visits by respondents to ecotourism centres is expected to increase the value they place on the ecosystem thereby positively influencing their perception about biodiversity conservation.

Table 4: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY NUMBER OF VISITS TO ECOTOURISM CENTRES

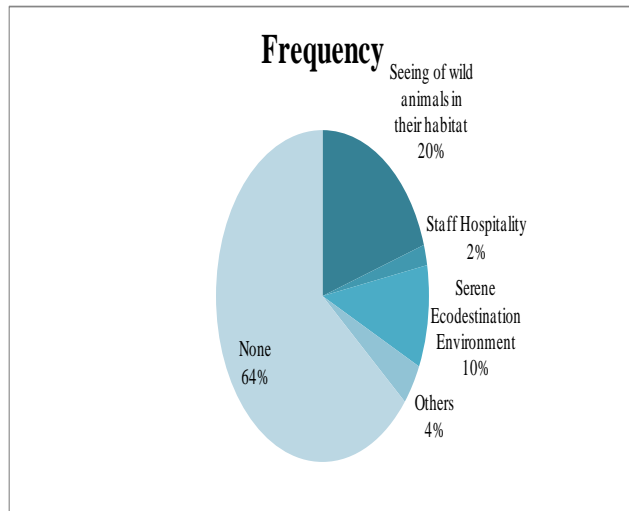
S/N	Number Of Visits	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Once	13	10.8
2.	Twice	12	10
3.	Thrice	10	8.4
4.	Four Times	-	-
5.	Uncountable Times	25	20.8
6.	Not Specified	60	50
	Total	120	100

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Interests During Visits to Ecotourism Centres

More than half (64%) of the respondent's population were unable to decide precisely what interested them most during visits to ecotourism centres as revealed by Figure 1. However, Scenery of wild animals in their natural habitat accounted for 20% of the respondents interest during their visits. Furthermore, 10% of the respondents claimed that the serene environment of the centres interested them most during their visits while 2% indicated that Tourist centre's staff hospitality was their point of interest. Only 4% of the respondents stated other points of attraction during their visits. Some said they were intrigued by the adventures they took during visits while some others were fascinated by the pleasant distraction the centres provided.

FIGURE 1: INTERESTS OF RESPONDENTS DURING VISITS TO ECOTOURISM CENTRES



Requirement for a Standard Ecotourism Centres

Respondents during the study suggested what they felt was required to obtain an up to standard ecotourism centre. Creation of standard Amusement park came first in the ranking of the perceived requirement. Procurement of historical materials, availability of varieties of wild animals, artefacts and monuments materials ranked second, third and fourth respectively. The opinions of the respondents were pointers to the inadequacies with regards to the availability of relevant ecotourism resources in Nigeria. The availability of these natural virtues according to Ijeomah *et al.*, (2011) is an indicator of potential success in the use of ecotourism for national development.

TABLE 4: REQUIREMENT FOR A STANDARD ECOTOURISM CENTRE

Requirement	Frequency	Rank
Amusement parks	75	1 st
Historical materials	25	2 nd
Varieties of wild animals	28	3 rd
Artefacts & Monuments	14	4 th
Others	14	4 th

Source: Field Survey, 2018

CONCLUSION

Multiple Response

The importance of ecotourism anywhere in the world cannot be overemphasized. Apart from the fact that it brings about infrastructural and economic development, it presents tourists the opportunity for relaxation as well as adventure in a sane climate void of any kind of disturbance as they interact with nature. This study assessed the level of awareness of people in the study area about ecotourism centres in Nigeria. Findings from the study revealed that majority of the respondents were adequately aware about the existence of various ecodestinations in Nigeria. In fact, many of them have visited more than one ecotourism centre at different periods during which they identified various points of attraction. Finally, respondents suggested what they believed is required to improve ecotourism in Nigeria so as to boost international patronage, create more employment opportunities and bring about a positive change in the economy.

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