



## PROSPECTS AND SUSTAINABILITY OF ECOTOURISM IN FINIMA NATURE PARK, BONNY ISLAND, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Prospects and sustainability of Ecotourism in Finima Nature Park (FNP), Bonny Island, Rivers State, Nigeria was studied with the objectives of identifying tourist attractions in the park, and assessing the socio-economic characteristics of households in communities bordering the park. Data for the study were collected through observation, in-depth interview, review of management records and administration of questionnaire. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics while Chi square was used to test significance of associations. Results showed that FNP is endowed with unique attractions such as the quiet park environment (24.1%) where natural sounds from animals, wind and water waves are enjoyed by tourists; suspended wooden walkway (22.4%); beach that gives a panoramic view of the Atlantic ocean (22.4%) and nature trail (10.3%) that exposes various micro habitats of the environment. Even though the park is a conserved area, tourist visitation therein has increased progressively between 2014 and 2016. Most visitors (82.10%) to Finima Nature Park were satisfied with the attractions and services in the destination. Majority of tourist respondents were resident in Rivers State. A test of association between frequency of tourist visitation and gender using Chi square was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, the occupation ( $\chi^2 = 151.880$ ) and level of education ( $\chi^2 = 51.952$ ) of tourists had significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) associations with the distance travelled to the park. The area is dominated by settlers from other areas especially Akwa Ibom State (50.3%) and Andoni (37.9%) in Rivers State. Households from communities bordering the park were mostly secondary school certificate holders (62.0%), mainly involved in fishing (37.8%), schooling or trading and therefore rely on forest resources for survival. For sustainable conservation to be ensured in the destination FNP management should develop empowerment strategies to enhance survival of households.*

**Keyword:** Finima Nature Park, Biodiversity conservation, Bonny Island, Ecotourism, Tourist attraction

### INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2012) tourism was ranked as the highest employer of labour on planet earth, employing one out of every twelve (12) workers, a spinner of benefits and a never ending tool for economic development (Messe Berlin GmbH, 2015; UNWTO, 2016; WTTC, 2016; CREST, 2016). Still, the level of unemployment in Nigeria is progressively increasing and high level of

poverty therein has instigated militancy in Niger delta, kidnapping in south east, terrorism and frequent cattle rustling in Northern Nigeria (Ijeomah *et al.*, 2014).

Nigeria with all her many tourism potentials is not listed among popular destinations in Africa. Although a lot of money has been spent by the Nigerian government on identification of tourist attractions many age - old destinations still face serious challenges which make them unpopular

before ecotourists who crave for vivid experience. As a strategy to gain patronage many tourism managers across the globe embark on aggressive marketing of destinations using the prefix 'eco' to attract environmentally conscious tourists whereas environmental conservation and empowerment of tourism host communities may not be part of the site priorities. Through this means a lot of revenue is generated as visitors are temporarily deceived and mismanaged, while the environmental resources meant to sustain tourism in the site are destroyed. Based on the outstanding performance of international visitations in 2015 with regards to growth (4.4%), contribution to economic growth and job creation in many parts of the world UNWTO (2016) emphasised that it has become critical for countries to promote policies that will enable growth and sustainability of tourism, especially ecotourism which is the fastest in terms of growth, most responsible and pro-poor (Ashley *et al*, 2000). It is therefore important to have an insight of the potential attractions in an ecodestination, socio economic characteristics of households in the host communities, visitation trend to the destination and tourists' perception of the park in terms of their satisfaction amongst other factors that could affect sustainability of both tourism and the environment. Provision of these information will be a step in the right direction to guide against sudden failure of ecodestinations due to pressure. According to Honey and Krantz (2007) ecotourism is not prevalent in coastal regions, instead, coastal tourism is dominated by mass tourism with many deleterious effects. Honey and Krantz (2007) emphasized that efforts should be made to ensure that the entire tourism

industry including destinations in coastal areas is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

Many studies have not been carried out on ecotourism in Rivers State, as most studies therein have emphasised on petroleum and conflicts. One of the few studies on ecotourism in Rivers and Bayelsa State was Ijeomah and Esaen (2011). The study focused on tourism management in Port Harcourt zoo, proposed Famous Elephant Sanctuary in Ikuru community of Andoni Local Government Area and Turtle station in Brass Local Government Area.

No study has been carried out on prospects and sustainability of tourism in Finima Nature Park. This work is therefore quite unique as findings from the study, if implemented, will be useful in sustainable management of Finima Nature Park and other eco-destinations in Nigeria. The aim of this study therefore was to identify the tourist attractions in Finima Nature Park, and assess the socio-economic characteristics of people bordering this destination that is located in a unique island of the Niger Delta of Nigeria

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The study was carried out in Finima Nature Park, located in Rivers State, Nigeria. It lies between latitude 7°3'0" and 7°16'30" E and longitude 4°21'0" and 4°30'0" N (Fig. 1a). The Park covers a land area of 1000 hectares of fresh water swamp forest lying along Nigeria's southernmost coastal area. The park is located in Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria.

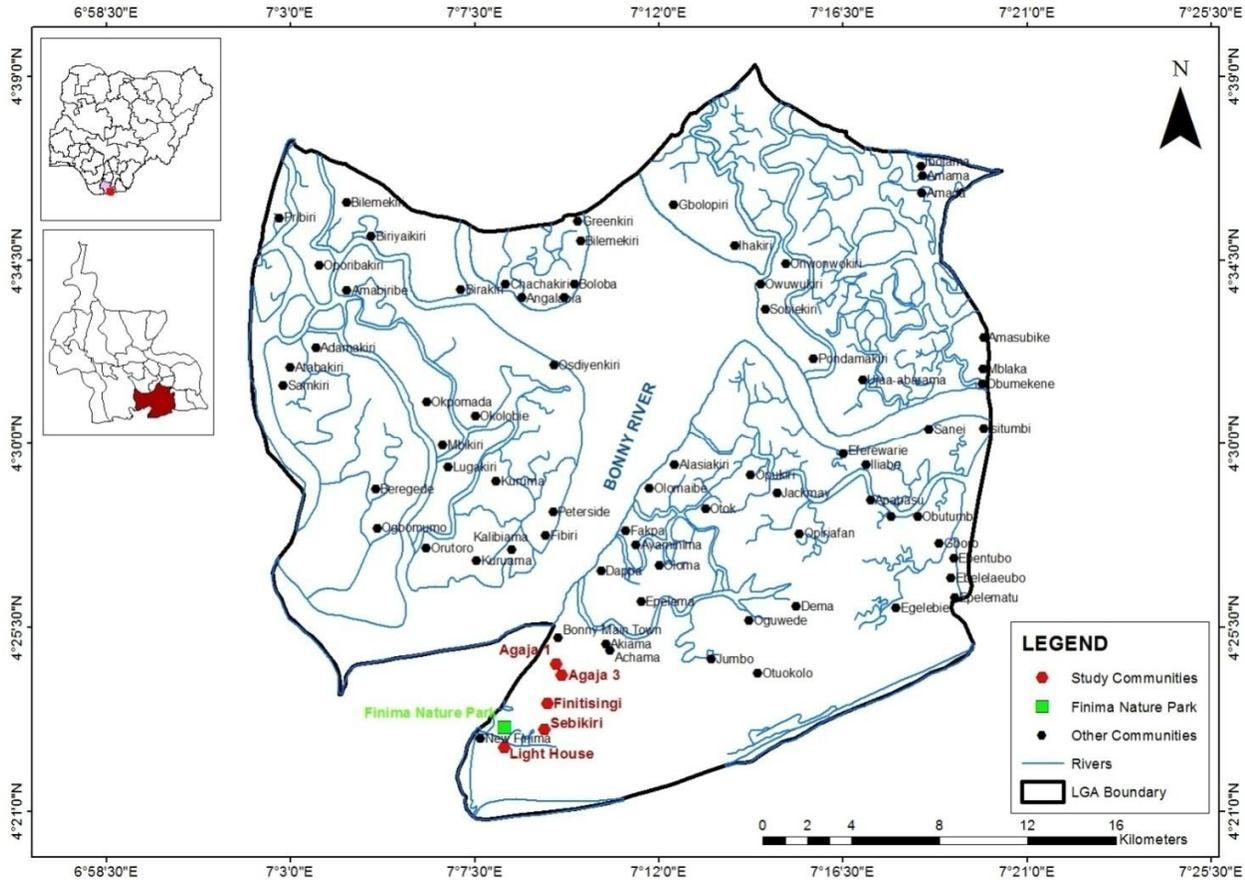


Figure 1a: Map of Bonny Island showing Finima Nature Park

**Data Collection**

Data for the study was collected through the administration of structured questionnaire, field observation, in-depth interview and review of management records. Three sets of questionnaire were administered for the extraction of data for the study. The first set of questionnaire was administered randomly to 60 tourists to collect information on the tourist attractions in the park and challenges of sustainable ecotourism development in the park but only 56 questionnaires were retrieved.

The second set of questionnaires was randomly administered to 145 household respondents in five communities. The communities were selected based on their proximity to the park. These communities were Agaja 1, Agaja 3, Lighthouse, Sebikiri and Finitisingi. This set of questionnaire was used to collect information on the socio-

economic characteristics of households bordering the park.

The last set of questionnaire was administered to all (18) management staff of Finima Nature Park to obtain information on the challenges faced by ecotourism and management in Finima Nature Park. Information on trend of tourist visitations was collected from management records of the park. In-depth interview was conducted with experienced management staff, selected tourists and few community heads to complement information obtained through questionnaire.

**Data Analysis**

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics in form of frequency, percentages, tables, pie charts and bar charts while associations were tested using Chi square test.

**RESULTS**

**Tourist attractions in Finima Nature Park**

Results on tourist attractions and visitation are presented in Table 1, Plates 1 to 4, Table 2, Figure 1b, Figure 2, Table 3 and Table 4. Table 1 shows that the park environment (24.1%), beach (22.4%) and walkway (22.4%) attract more tourists than other sources of attractions in the destination. Plate 1 shows foreign tourists in the park

destinations. Plate 2 shows a field staff of the park in front of the beach. The walk way (Plate 3) and relics of the Whale (Plate 4) are among cherished attractions in the park. Most visitors to Finima Nature Park were satisfied with the attractions and services therein. The few that were not satisfied (20.0%) complained of the presence of snakes (20.0%), absence of facilities (10.0%) and the inability to sight games (20.0%) among other things.

Table 1: Tourists attractions in Finima Nature Park

Attractions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
The park environment	14	24.1
Walkway	13	22.4
Beach	13	22.4
Whale skeleton	10	17.2
Nature trail	6	10.3
Hippo creek area	2	3.4

Source: Field Survey, 2016



Plate 1: Tourists discussing with a ranger in front of the ‘walk way’ in Finima Nature Park  
Source: Field Survey, 2016



Plate 2: A ranger taking some notes at the Beach in Finima Nature Park  
Source: Field Survey, 2016

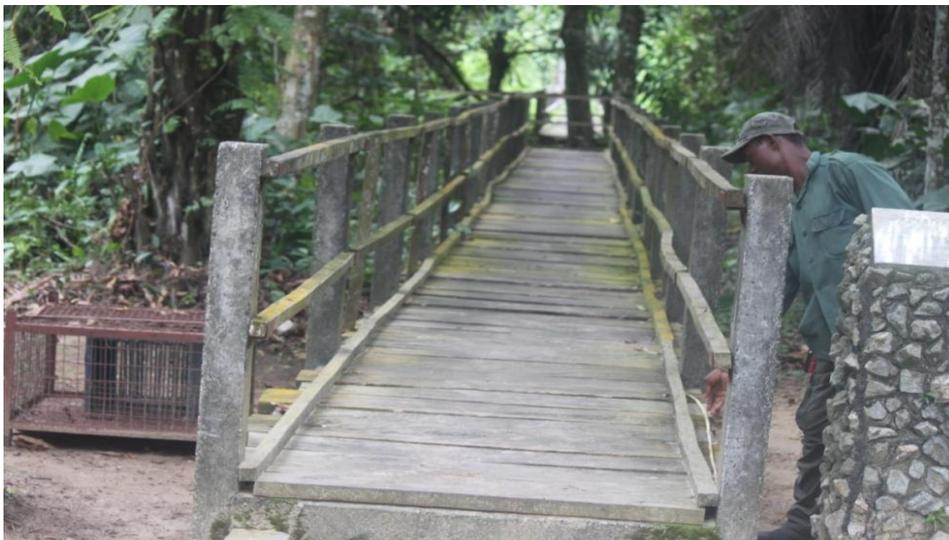


Plate 3: Walkway at the Finima Nature Park  
Source: Field Survey, 2016



Plate 4: Relics of the Whale at the Whale bone shelter in Finima Nature Park  
Source: Field Survey, 2016

Table 2: Assessment of tourist satisfaction in Finima Nature Park

Parameter	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Are you satisfied with your visitation?</b>	Satisfied	46	82.1
	Not satisfied	10	17.9
<b>If No, why?</b>	Fear of snakes	2	20.0
	Inability to sight animals	2	20.0
	Request not granted	1	10.0
	Gain little knowledge	1	10.0
	Park division	1	10.0
	Inadequate facilities	1	10.0
	Unfavourable weather condition	1	10.0
	No lodge	1	10.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Figure 1b shows that majority of tourists respondents in the three categories who have visited the destination were resident in Bonny island. This was followed by visitors outside the

island but resident within Rivers State in categories 1(4) and 2(1) while the least visitors were tourist from Sokoto State (1) in category 2. Figure 2 shows that tourist visitation to the park has increased progressively from 2014 – 2016.

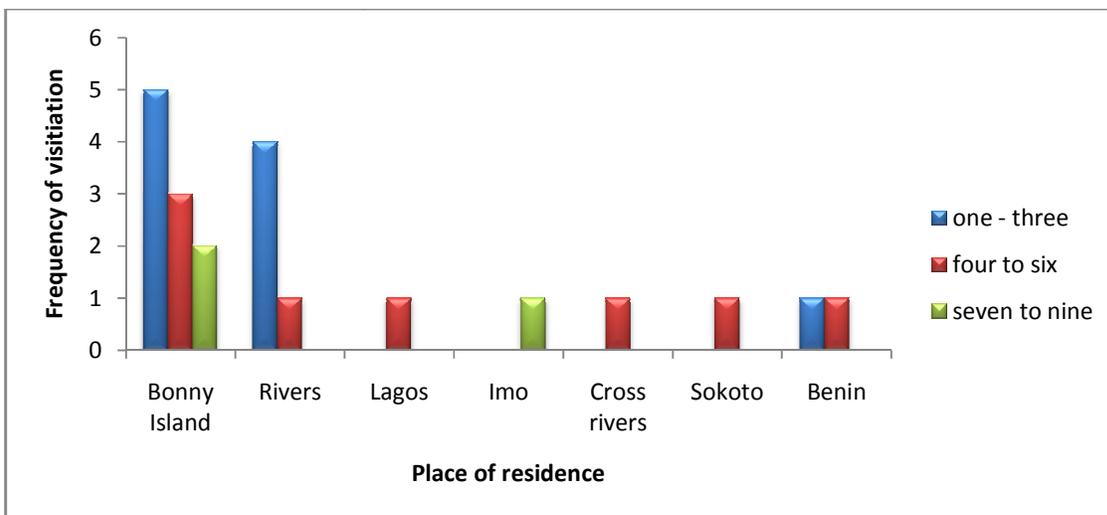


Figure 1b: visitation of tourist based on their place of residence

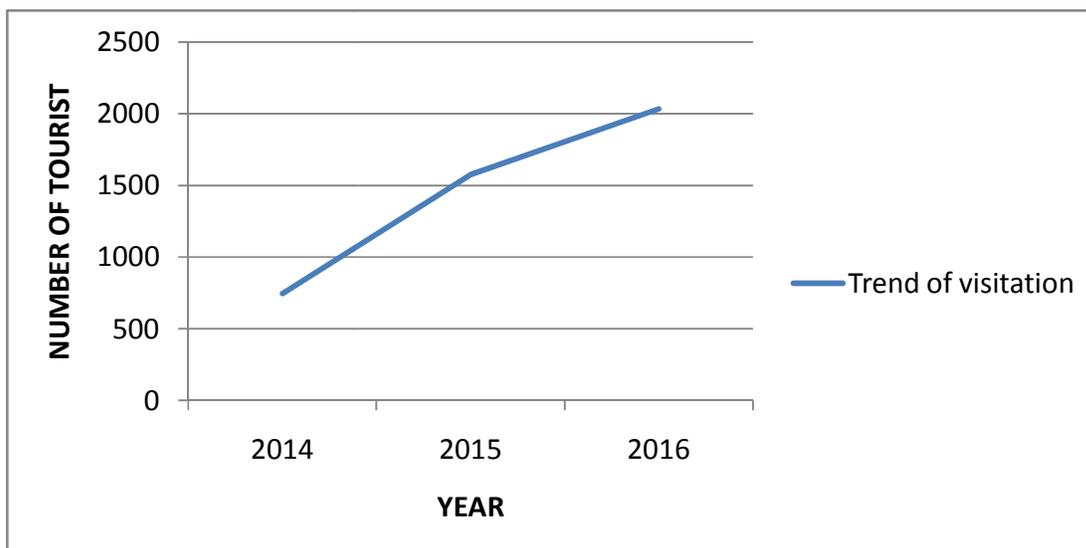


Figure 2: Trend of visitation in Finima Nature Park between 2014 and 2016  
 Source: Adapted from the Management records of Finima Nature Park

Table 3 shows that test of association between frequency of tourist visitation and gender using Chi square was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly Chi square test of association between distance

travelled to visit the park and tourist occupation and educational qualification were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) respectively.

Table 3: Association between frequency of visit and demographic variables of tourists

Parameter	Calculated square $\chi^2$	Chi Degree of freedom	P value	Significance	Inference
Frequency of tourists visitation versus gender	9.130 <sup>a</sup>	2	0.010	p<0.05	Significant association
Frequency of tourists visitation versus age	5.237 <sup>a</sup>	4	0.264	p>0.05	No association
Frequency of tourists visitation versus marital status	1.357 <sup>a</sup>	4	0.852	p>0.05	No association
Frequency of tourists visitation versus educational level	3.148 <sup>a</sup>	6	0.790	p>0.05	No association
Frequency of tourists visitation versus occupation	12.592 <sup>a</sup>	20	0.894	p>0.05	No association

Source: Field Survey 2016

Table 4: Association between location and demographic variables of tourists

Parameter	Calculated square $\chi^2$	Chi Degree of freedom	P value	Significance	Inference
Distance traveled by tourist versus occupation	151.880 <sup>a</sup>	100	0.001	p<0.05	Significant association
Distance traveled by tourist versus educational level	51.952 <sup>a</sup>	30	0.008	p<0.05	Significant association
Distance traveled by tourist versus gender	7.632 <sup>a</sup>	10	0.665	p>0.05	No association
Distance traveled by tourist versus age	13.084 <sup>a</sup>	20	0.874	p>0.05	No association
Distance traveled by tourist versus marital status	28.293 <sup>a</sup>	20	0.103	p>0.05	No association

### Socio-Economic Characteristics of People Bordering the Park

Results on socio-economic characteristics of people bordering the park are presented in Table 5, Figure 3 and Figure 4. Table 5 shows that majority (97.8%) of household respondents were

non indigenes from Akwalbom State (50.3) and Andoni (37.9) Local Government Area of Rivers State. Only a few of the respondents were indigenes of Bonny Island, Rivers State. Most of these non indigenes (42.8%) have resided in the bordering communities for a long time and are mostly 21 - 40 of age, and married with family size below six (6).

Table 5: Demographic characteristics of households from communities bordering Finima Nature Park

Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Sex</b>	Male	84	57.9
	Female	61	42.1
<b>Age</b>	<20	30	20.7
	21-40	98	67.6
	41-60	16	11.0
	Above 61	1	0.7
<b>Marital status</b>	Single	53	36.6
	Married	90	62.1
	Divorced	2	1.4
<b>Family size</b>	<6	88	69.8
	6-10	34	27.0
	11-15	1	0.8
	16-20	3	2.4
<b>State of Origin</b>	Akwalbom	73	50.3
	Rivers (Andoni and Ogoni)	55 and 1	37.9 and 0.7
	Imo	3	2.1
	Delta	3	2.1
	Osun	3	2.1
	Cross River	2	1.4
	Abia	2	1.4
	Bayelsa	2	1.4
	Ondo	1	0.7
<b>Duration of residence</b>	<15years	60	41.4
	16-25 years	62	42.8
	26-35 years	18	12.4
	35 and above	5	3.4

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Figure 3 shows that majority of household respondents bordering Finima Nature Park had secondary school education (62.0%) while (28%) had first school leaving certificate. Only 2% of

the population had no formal education. As presented in Figure 4, fishing (37.8%) was the predominant occupation among the households

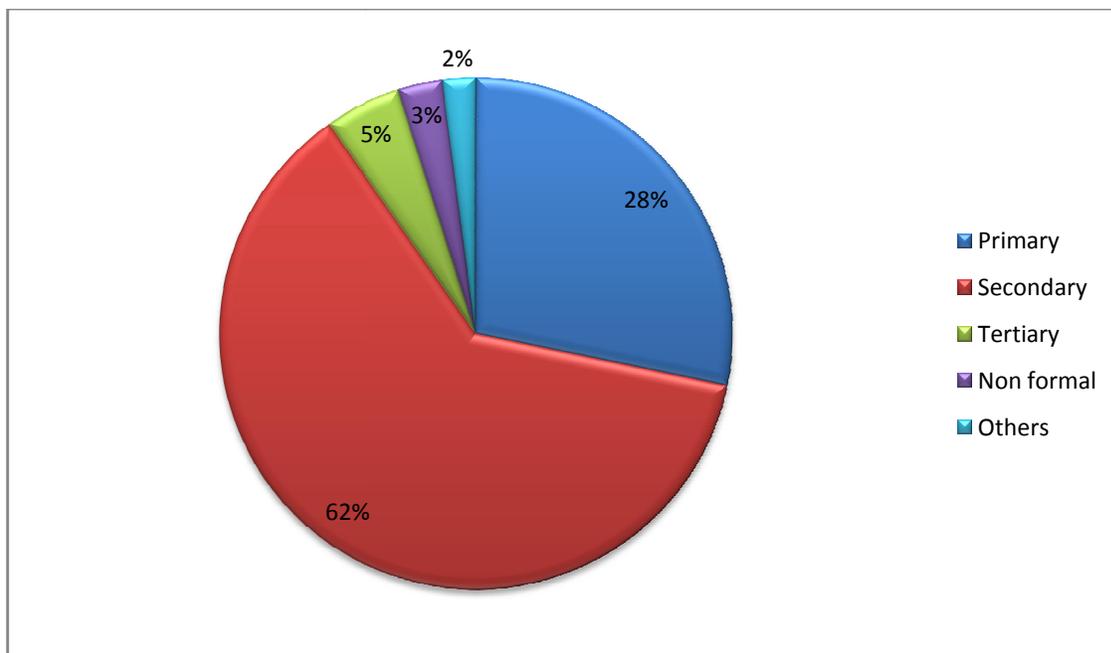


Figure 3: Distribution of households bordering Finima Nature Park based on educational background  
Source: Field Survey, 2016

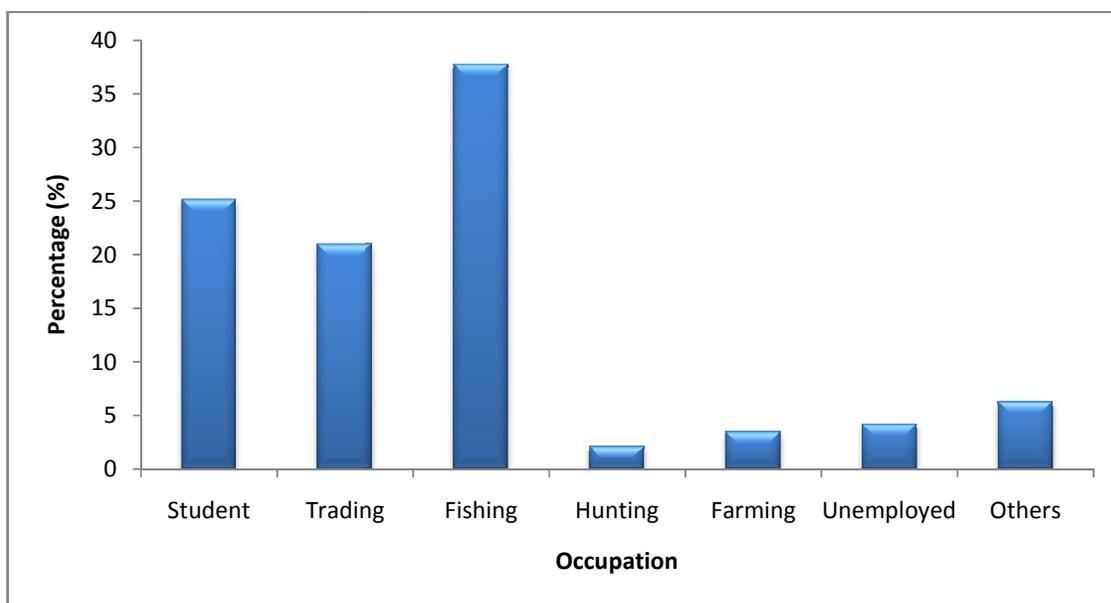


Figure 4: Distribution of households bordering Finima Nature Park based on occupation  
Source: Field survey, 2016

**DISCUSSION**

**Tourist Attraction in Finima Nature Park**

Finima Nature Park unlike Gashaka-Gumti National Park is devoid of plateaus, mountains and rocks. When compared with Gashaka-Gumti

National Park, Cross River National Park or Kainji Lake National Park, the park is relatively small - a land area of about 1000 hectares (10 km<sup>2</sup>) (Finima Nature Park Tourist Guide, 2016), of swamp fresh water forest but intricate part of

Bonny island that stretches along the coast of Bonny River. The park environment is natural with dense litter falls and fuel load. The park is endowed with some abundant and easily observable indigenous plant species (of various economic importance to rural households) such as: *Cleistopholis patens*, *Terminalia sp.*, *Lophira alata*, *Elaeis guineensis*, *Calamus deeratus*, *Alchornea cordifolia*, *Monodora myristica*, *Harungnamadaga scariensis*, *Spondia thuspreussi*, *Rauvol favomitoria*, *Raphiasp*, *Chromolaena odoratum*, and *Aframomium melegueta* amongst others. Wildlife species such as Mona monkey (*Cercopithecus mona*) is abundant in the environment while Monitor lizard (*Veranus niloticus*) can also be observed by chance while in the park.

The consistent quietness of the park environment makes it possible for tourists to listen and enjoy different natural sounds produced by water, wind, birds and other animals while in the park. This virtue makes the park environment a very unique place for relaxation, inspiration, sightseeing and enjoyment (Table 1). It was based on these natural attractions that many visitors ranked the park environment the best attraction in Finima Nature Park.

Another tourist attraction, the walkway (Plate 3), is located in the Eastern block of the park and covers a distance of about 2.85km. It is an elevated wooden platform created to enable tourists (cross the swampy areas) have access to the park. While on the walkway tourists can view some attractions in the park especially species like the monitor lizard or clean patch of water which the Mona monkeys utilize for drinking. However, it does not give a panoramic view of the entire park. The walkway which is one of the only two facilities created in the park is unlike the hanging bridge of Okomu National Park (0.15km) (Ijeomah *et al.*, 2015) that is shorter in length but suspended in the air to give tourists a better view of the park facilities, different sections of the park and game viewing spots. However, both the walkway of Finima Nature Park and the hanging bridge of Okomu national park were designed to enable tourists access desired parts of the

destination. Both are also sources of excitement to tourists.

The “snake - like’ shape or pattern the walk way was constructed within the park with tree canopy above and forest floor covered with herbs, climbers, litters and fallen trees below makes it interesting and exciting to tourists especially when the atmosphere is calm. The walk way continues through the nature trail and terminates in the beach.

Finima beach is still in the eastern block of the park and marks the boundary of the park opening up to the Atlantic Ocean. Just like the Lagos bar beach in Lagos State the beach gives a panoramic view of the sea. Swimming is strictly prohibited in the Atlantic Ocean as the beach carries massive force in each wave that is thrust, still tourists visiting the destination are fascinated by the enormity of the ocean, the sound and height of waves (crashing over each other) which can be heard even from a far distance to the park; the compelling wind, and the feeling of clean beach sand beneath one’s feet as one feels the cool air (Table 1). The waves of the Bonny beach is more turbulent than that experienced in Port Harcourt beach. The ocean deposits debris such as fruits of *Nypafruticans*, waste materials from boats, dead tree branches and relics of the dead whale (which the remains are preserved in the park till date) at the edge of the beach. The beach looks unmanaged and devoid of facilities. Proper management of the beach with provision of adequate facilities could interest tourists thereby attracting more visitations while increasing revenue generation. However, revenue generation is not one of the management objectives of the park. This is evidenced in the fact that visitors do not pay any gate fee to access the destination. Besides, the management could be conscious of the fact that the provision of facilities in the beach may attract too many visitors that could become difficult to control and may negatively affect the park environment -the fact that mona monkeys move and operate freely in the park, displaying their attendant socio ecological characteristics without fear of human presence indicates that the species has not experienced noticeable hunting threat. The part of the beach very close to the

ocean was observed to be very smooth (like a finely tarred road) but very hard. This could be ascribed to many years of deposition of sediments from the Atlantic Ocean. Tourists stand in this location to enjoy cool breeze from the ocean.

The whale skeleton (Plate 4) which is kept in a shelter at the entrance of the eastern block of the park, serves as an attraction for some of the tourist (17.2%). Some tourists cherish watching the remains of the Whale, world's largest sea creature washed up the shore of the park. This attraction was of great interest and importance to many school children; who considered it a great privilege to have had the opportunity of observing the skeleton of a whale, and were overwhelmed by the large size.

The nature trail within the park passes through different sections of the park environment exposing various attractions and micro habitats in the destination. This makes walking an exciting experience as tourist feel "cocooned" in the dense forest. Ijeomah and Emelue (2009) made a similar observation in Pandam Wildlife Park (PWLP) of Plateau State.

Few tourists are attracted to the hippo creek (Table 1). The hippo creek is located in the western half of the park. The hippo creek itself does not attract tourists but the fact that tourists hear that the hippopotamus, a big game that capsized boats on Bonny river and walked the beach fronts settled in the creek as its habitat, makes the section of the park attractive. Similarly tourists enjoy viewing the footprints of *Hippopotamus amphibious* in the play ground of PWLP located in front of the Pandamlake. Pygmy Hippopotamus was also one of the major attractions in Jos Wildlife Park before it died (Ijeomah *et al*, 2005). Hippopotamus in Finima Nature Park are observed when the tide goes down. Findings from personal interaction with knowledgeable household respondents revealed that the animal has been observed many times by age-old residents in the area.

Many tourists leave the park satisfied while some complained of not being satisfied with their visits to the destination. Frequent rainfall makes the walkway slippery and the tour unenjoyable when

tourists become wet and uncomfortable with no place to wait (without becoming wet) inside the park. However, the carefulness in passing through the walkway is part of tourism excitement for some visitors. Being wet by the rain or attempting to run or walk fast to avoid being soaked by the rain could also be exciting as a form of interaction with nature by ecotourists. Tourists that complain about the rain may not be much interested in having a vivid experience of the natural environment. The absence or inadequacy of facilities was also a reason for some tourists being unsatisfied with their visits as they expected to see more activities created to satisfy and sustain their interest during the visit. Swimming in Oguta Lake (especially during hot weather) has been a cherished activity by many visitors (Ijeomah *et al* 2015). This is in line with the work of Oladeji and Adedapo (2014) that greater percentage of tourists are likely to revisit a destination when their visit has been enjoyed or purpose of visit has been achieved. Some tourists complained of gaining little knowledge during their visit, no lodging facilities, and inability to cover the entire sections of the park (Table 2).

Most tourists who are satisfied could be those who have not visited many other destinations and cannot therefore make fair comparison of resources in different tourism sites. Satisfied tourists could also be eco-tourists who are more interested in studies, biodiversity conservation and are pleased with the park which is a natural environment in an Island of Rivers, a state where functional national parks, game reserves or other forms of in-situ based eco-destinations are non-existent. Eco-tourists therefore cherish protection of natural environment for the sake of vivid experience.

Some tourists complained of fear of snake bites. In eco-destinations, animals including species of snake have right of way and are expected to be in their habitat. This corroborates the findings of Ijeomah and Okoli (2016). However tourists are supposed to be guided by park officials to ensure their safety. Tourists complained of the inability to sight games, which agrees with the report of Ogunjimi and Ijeomah (2010) in Kainji Lake National Park, Ijeomah and Emelue (2009) in

Pandam Wildlife Park and Ijeomah *et al.*, (2015) in Okomu National Park that tourists always complain of difficulties in sighting games in parks unlike in zoos where games are confined.

Most visitors to the park are resident in Bonny Island which implies that they repeat visit because of the closeness of the park to their residence. Similar observations were made by Mckercher and Lau (2008) on the study of global tourist inflow that 80% of all travels occur within 1km with a few exceptions.

The number of tourists visiting Finima Nature Park has increased progressively from 2014 to 2016 regardless of the fact that the number of facilities and activities present therein are few as the park was created for conservative purposes. Management record shows that just from the year 2014 to 2016 tourist visitation has increased from about 500 persons to about 2000 persons in a year. This increase in tourist influx implies that more people are becoming aware of the park. It was also observed that majority (59.1%) of tourists who repeated visits were males visiting for as many as 9 times.

A test of association between gender of tourist and frequency of visitation to the park using Chi square was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 4.3). This can be attributed to the fact that males in Africa have more freedom and opportunities of embarking on tours and recreation. This happens because men are always richer than females, more educated and head of households. Women are always burdened or engaged with domestic responsibilities.

Similarly the test of association between the distance travelled to visit the park and tourist occupation and educational qualification were respectively significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 4). Educated persons are more interested in environmental conservation due to high level of awareness. They also tend to travel more than people that are not formally educated. Some occupations allow or enable people to travel further distances than others. This enablement could be in terms of time, sponsorships or responsibilities.

### **Socio-Economic Characteristics of People Bordering Finima Nature Park**

Majority of the household respondents (Table 5) from communities bordering the park falls within the middle age class which implies that the respondents are mostly the active citizens of the communities having strength and vitality for engineering various social and economic activities in the community or illegal activities in the park.

The respondents are mostly engaged in fishing (37.8%), depend largely on fuel wood for the drying and preservation of catches that they formerly obtained from the forest where the park is now located. Reliance on fuelwood by most households is because it is the cheapest source of fuel available in the environment. The location of the park has caused scarcity of fuel wood in the immediate environment. Consequently, households, in the communities either go across the sea, a place known as 'Samba' to fetch fuel wood or be forced to buy from local markets. This agrees with Ijeomah (2012) in Kayarda, one of the host communities to Pandam Wildlife Park. However, in the case of Pandam Wildlife Park households are allowed to enter the park once (specified number of days) in a year by the Plateau State Tourism Corporation to harness fuelwood.

Most household respondents were fishermen as the communities are 'fishing ports' or 'fishing settlements' that were developed in the course of fishing and marketing of products from other locations that are linked with Bonny River. In essence, the communities are fishing settlements. The communities bordering the park are therefore, populated with non-indigenes mainly from AkwaIbom State and Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State (Table 5).

Students either in school or school dropouts were about 25% of the total population in the communities. Many households were traders. Other household members were either involved in mixed jobs; unemployed, farmers or hunters. Hunters and farmers were the least in population because of the restriction in assessing games from

Finima Nature Park, proximity of the communities to the ocean and the nature of soil in the area that makes farming difficult. The number of unemployed citizens in the community was higher than populations of hunters and farmers which means that there is a high probability of resorting to forest resources as a source of raw materials, food or income generation by households.

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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Finima Nature Park is well endowed with biodiversity that can continuously attract tourist if properly conserved. For sustainable conservation to be ensured in the destination FNP management should develop empowerment strategies to enhance survival of households. More facilities should also be created in the park to ensure tourists' satisfaction. Efficient visitor management should also be sustained to avoid degradation of the park environment.

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