



Ecotourism and Poverty Reduction: The Case of Rural Households in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study assessed the effects of ecotourism on poverty reduction among rural households in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Twelve (12) ecotourism sites/host communities were purposively selected for the study. Interview schedule and Focus Group Discussions were used to collect data, which were analyzed using means, percentage frequency, and cross tabulation. Results showed that ecotourism provided 23 distinct employment opportunities for the respondents and contributed well above half of the incomes of about 98% of the households. Ecotourism also moved 38% and 16% out of extreme and relative poverty respectively. Communities should therefore, be encouraged to participate in ecotourism as a strategy for poverty reduction.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, Poverty Reduction, Employment generation, Income, Ebonyi State*

Introduction

The United Nations (UN, 2015) document on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) recognized the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions, as the greatest global challenge, and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. The document also asserted that poverty eradication through social and economic development depends largely on sustainable management of our planet's natural resources including oceans, seas, freshwater resources, forests, mountains, dry lands, as well as the protection of biodiversity, ecosystems and wildlife. In this regard, there seems to be an emerging consensus among development policy researchers and practitioners that the first best opportunity in addressing the challenge of poverty, may be found, in harnessing the tremendous power of tourism through the sale of abundant cultural and environmental services in our communities. Tourism possesses the linkages that catalyze the development of other industries, thus, creating employment and broadening the revenue base for the economy (UNWTO, 2017; UNWTO, 2018; WTTC, 2018; Adu-Ampong, 2018). It is a veritable instrument for achieving socio-economic growth and development (UNWTO, 2018; WTTC, 2018). According to UNWTO (2018), tourism contributed 5% of the world's GDP, and accounted for 6% of the world's exports in services, emerging the fourth largest export sector after fuel, chemical and automotive products. Furthermore, the report showed that tourism was responsible for 235

million jobs or one in every 12 jobs worldwide. Also, in 2018, developing countries accounted for 46% of total international arrivals (UNWTO, 2018).

Ecotourism, according to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2020), refers to responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education. It has been widely promoted as an ideal component of the sustainable development strategy, whereby natural (cultural and historical) resources can be utilized as tourism attractions without causing harm to the environment (Imanishinwe *et al.*, 2018; Tubey, *et al.*, 2019). In order to be adjudged successful, ecotourism must have a low impact upon a protected area's natural resources; involve stakeholders (individuals, communities, tourists, tour operators and government institutions) in the planning, development, implementation and monitoring phases; respect local cultures and traditions; generate sustainable and equitable income for local communities and for as many other stakeholders as possible, including private tour operators; generate income for protected areas conservation; and educate all stakeholders about their roles in conservation (Drumm and Moore, 2005; Onyeabor, 2016a). Properly implemented ecotourism policy can integrate conservation, rural development and poverty reduction by helping to protect valuable natural areas/resources through tourism expenditures and providing jobs and markets for the locals (Giriwati

et al., 2019; Mensah, 2017). In addition, ecotourism helps educate the travelers; provides funds for conservation, directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights (UNWTO, 2018; Wondirad and Ewentu, 2019). To achieve equitable social, economic and environmental benefits from ecotourism, and to minimize or avoid potential negative impacts, participatory planning mechanisms are needed that allow local and indigenous communities, in a transparent way, to define and regulate the use of their areas at the local level including the right to opt out of tourism development (Giriwati *et al.*, 2019). When financial benefits of tourist spending are shared throughout the community, whether by rotating the use of local houses or guides, or by collecting a fee for the community, ecotourism is better perceived and eventually viewed as a valuable method for increasing the local quality of life (Mayaka, 2018; Tubey *et al.*, 2019).

Community-based ecotourism is therefore, participatory (Giriwati *et al.*, 2019). The participatory development paradigm connotes involvement by a local population and at times, additional stakeholders, in the creation, content and conduct of a program or policy designed to change their lives (Wondirad *et al.*, 2019; Giriwati, *et al.*, 2019). Community participation in ecotourism refers to communities having substantial control over and involvement in its development and management of tourism resources with a major proportion of the benefits remaining within the community (Giriwati, *et al.*, 2019). There are strong empirical evidence that ecotourism is contributing greatly to household incomes, thereby, improving the overall standard of living of local people (Imanishinwe *et al.*, 2018; Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015). When communities engage in ecotourism, new sources of sustainable income can be generated for the community as a whole as well as through individual employment opportunities (Imanishinwe *et al.*, 2018). The income could be generated through collecting fees for access to trails, providing accommodation or guiding services, preparing and selling food and handicrafts (Sene-Harper *et al.*, 2019; Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015).

Ecotourism provides higher multiplier values compared to mass tourism (and much more than other activities such as agriculture) and therefore, has greater per unit contribution to the economy (Chami and Semboja, 2005; Onyeabor, 2014). Generally, ecotourism requires 44% of its inputs from other sectors - far above an average of 21% for all other sectors (Chami and Semboja, 2005). Interestingly, Nigeria and indeed Ebonyi State's beautiful landscape, including beaches, rivers, lakes, springs, waterfalls, mountains, caves, rocks, forests and rich flora and fauna, presents the country as a potential ecotourism destination in Africa (NTDC, 2005). Nevertheless, despite several declarations in favour of tourism development by successive governments (Onyeabor, 2016a), tourism,

like most other sectors of the Nigerian economy has remained largely untapped due mostly to lack of commensurate genuine commitments from governments at the various levels (Akabom-Ita *et al.*, 2016).

Over the years, some tourism activities involving visits to natural sites which constitute ecotourism have obviously been going on in Ebonyi State. Notable among these sites are the Unwana, Ndibe and Ozizza Beaches, the Okposi, Uburu and Enyigba Salt Lakes and deposits, and the Amanchor Cave. However, there seem not to have been a focused empirical analysis of these activities to provide policy makers with necessary evidence-based information. Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2007) conducted a national survey involving a description of potential and on-going tourism sites in the country including some in Ebonyi State. There have also been other formal documentations on some aspects of the tourism potentials of Ebonyi State (Onyeabor, 2014; 2016a and 2016b). However, studies that investigated community participation in ecotourism, especially in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, are limited in literature. As such, little or no information exists on how communities participate or could participate in ecotourism, and how ecotourism contributes to poverty reduction in rural areas through employment creation and income generation. The study therefore, intends to fill this gap.

Methodology

The Study was carried out in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, which is located within latitudes 5°40' and 6°45' North of the equator and latitudes 7°38' and 8°30' east of the Greenwich Meridian. The State which occupies a land area of 5,935km² is bounded to the north and south by Benue and Abia States, respectively, and to the east and west by Enugu and Cross River States, respectively (Onyeabor, 2016b). The State is located in Southeast Nigeria and is made up of 13 Local Government Areas (LGA) grouped into three geo-political zones namely; Ebonyi North, Ebonyi Central and Ebonyi South. Ecologically, Ebonyi State lies in the moderately wet humid tropics with a marked rainy season from April to October, and dry season from November to March. The vegetation is mostly derived savannah with stretches of forests in the wetter southern areas. Some notable ecological sites in the State include: salt and fresh water lakes, beaches, caves, rolling hills, waterfalls, forests and rock formations (Ebonyi State Government, 2022). Historical slave routes and markets are also located in the State, which as well is the home of famous *Nkwa Umuagbogho* Cultural Dance Troupe of Afikpo. The basic occupation in the State is farming (SEEDS, 2004). Some of the best-known traditional crafts of the State are the artistic pottery products of Ishiagu, and weaved mat of Ishielu and Oshiri areas. The language of the people is Igbo, while Christianity is the dominant religion. Prominent among the cultural festivals of Ebonyi State is *Iri ji* (New-yam Festival) which is held by the various communities between the end of July and late September, each year. A two-stage purposive cum

convenient sampling technique was used for the study. The study covered the three ecological zones of the State. The first stage of sampling involved purposive selection of 2 LGAs from Ebonyi North Ecological Zone and 3 LGAs from each of Ebonyi Central and Ebonyi South Ecological Zones to make a total of 8. The basis for selection was availability of documented ecotourism resources (Ebonyi State Government, 2022). In the second stage, a total of 12 communities were purposively selected from the 8 LGAs along with the ecotourism sites located within them as follows: Ebonyi North Ecological Zone: Ishielu LGA - Onunweke Community (Inyaba River), Ezza North LGA- Ogboji Community (Okpuru Nwaleke Natural Fish Conservancy); Ebonyi Central Ecological Zone: Ikwo LGA- Oferekpe Community (Oferekpe Golden Sand Beach), *Izzi LGA*: Oguzoronweya Community (Oguzonweya Forest), Ezza South LGA: Amajim-Ameka Community (Okofia Forest); Ebonyi South Ecological Zone: Afikpo North LGA - Unwana Community (Unwana Golden Sand Beach), Ndibe Community (Ndibe Golden Sand Beach), and Oziza Golden Sand Beach; Afikpo South LGA: Amancho Community (Amanch Cave), Ohaozara LGA: Okposi Community (Okposi Salt Lake), Uburu Community (Uburu Salt Lake) and Ihenu Community (Eta River Natural Fish Conservancy).

Ninety (90) ecotourism services providers were also conveniently selected from 3 Communities/ecotourism sites that entertained significant number of visitors and where visitor-related activities were on-going. Convenience sampling technique was adopted here to select any available and willing service provider since most do not have permanent location around the sites. The 3 communities include; Unwana and Ndibe in Afikpo North LGA of Ebonyi South Ecological Zone, and Oferekpe in Ikwo LGA of Ebonyi North Ecological Zone. Nine (9) Community members; made up of the elderly, middle-aged and the youths of both sexes were also conveniently selected in each of all the selected (12) communities to form Focus Groups. The basis for selection was availability and willingness to participate in the discussion. Data were collected through personal interviews using interview schedule, focus group discussions (FGD), and personal observations. Interviews were conducted by trained ad-hoc enumerators recruited from final-year undergraduate class of the Department of Agricultural Economics, Management and Extension, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State and National Youth Service Corp members who were either indigenes or serving in the communities of interest and could interact in the local dialects. Data and information relating to tourism activities/services and personal benefits were sought for and obtained. This was complemented with FGDs and direct observations. The FGDs were used to elicit general information on ecotourism sites, corporate involvement or participation of host communities and implications. Direct observation of ecosystem sites and the general environment of host communities were also carried out under the guidance of local guides and

interpreters. Data were analyzed using means, percentages, frequency distribution and cross tabulation. One-third (1/3) of mean per capita household income was used as absolute poverty line, while two-thirds (2/3) of mean per capita household income (MPCHHI) was taken as relative poverty line. Households whose income fall below 1/3 of MPCHHI are regarded as absolutely poor, while households whose incomes fall below 2/3 of MPCHHI but above 1/3 MPCHHI are adjudged relatively poor (NBS, 2019).

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for the study was sought in writing and a written approval obtained from the Ebonyi State University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) on 29th April, 2019. Informed consent was also sought in writing and obtained from each respondent before interviews and recordings were done. Similarly, Informed consents were also sought and secured from Community leaders (Ezeogo, Town Union Leader or sometimes Chairmen of security Committees) before accessing each of the ecotourism sites.

Results and Discussion

Effect of Ecotourism on Employment Creation among the Rural Dwellers

The result of the effect of ecotourism on employment creation among rural communities in Ebonyi State is shown in Table 1. Result shows that ecotourism created 23 distinct employment activities in the host communities. This finding is in agreement with Akabom-Ita *et al.* (2016) who reported that ecotourism provides several employment opportunities to local communities. Smallness of businesses, low capital requirements and local content of ecotourism businesses could be some of the factors that aid the creation of multiplicity of employment opportunities through ecotourism. Transportation employed the highest number of ecotourism services providers (12.9%), including men, women, youths and adults. Cars, trucks and motorcycles were employed by service providers to move humans, agricultural and food materials, provisions and timber products to and fro the site. The relatively high percentage involvement of locals in guiding and interpretation (11.2%) shows how much ecotourism creates market opportunity for indigenous knowledge and cultural products. Similarly, 10.4% of the ecotourism services providers were engaged in restaurant businesses and food vending, while 6.9% were employed in selling fresh agricultural produce to visitors. These results represent important linkage between agriculture and ecotourism which was also reported by Onyeabor (2014). Furthermore, ecotourism provided full-time employment for close to 37.8% of the respondents and part-time employment to about 60% (Table 2). This proportion of participants who depend wholly on ecotourism for income is adjudged high in view of the advice by Adu-Ampong (2018) that residents should not depend entirely on ecotourism for survival, especially at its developmental stage when visitation is mostly seasonal. While Adu-Ampong's (2018) advice remains correct under normal

circumstances, in a situation of high rate of unemployment, a high percentage of full-time employment in ecotourism remains at advantage. However, the development remains a plus in the situation that prevailed.

Effect of Ecotourism on the Income Level of Rural Dwellers

The result of the effect of ecotourism on the income level of the respondents is presented in Table 3. The result shows that average annual and daily incomes earned by an ecotourism services-provider was N3,756,736.80 and N10,292.43 respectively. Also, 75.5% of ecotourism earners in the communities were classified in the low-income group (\leq N3,000,000.00 or \leq \$20.02 daily), while 25.5% were classified in the middle- and high-income group (Table 3). The high average income recorded actually came from big earners like hotels, timber and sand dealers that conducted their business activities around and on the beach sites.

Effect of Ecotourism on Poverty Reduction of Rural Households

The effect of ecotourism on poverty reduction of rural households is presented in Tables 4 and 5. Results show that close to half of the respondent households (47.8%) earned all their income (100%) from ecotourism, while 52.2% earned well above half of their incomes (average of 62%) from ecotourism. This finding tends to support that of Akabom-Ita *et al.* (2016) who reported that ecotourism contributed significantly to the economies of participating households and by extension, the local community. With one-third of the mean per capita

household income (1/3 MPCHHI = N1,252,245.60) as the absolute poverty line, result showed that absolute poverty declined from 72% to 42% among households due to participation in ecotourism (Table 5). Relative poverty, taken as two-third of mean per capita household income (2/3 MPCHHI = N2,504,491.20) increased from 11% to 40%, as about 29% of the participating households were moved away from absolute poverty status to a relative status. In the same vein, non-poor households increased from 8.9% to 24.4%. This finding corresponds with Imanishinwe *et al.* (2018).

Conclusion

The study investigated the role of ecotourism in poverty reduction through employment creation and income generation. Based on the findings of the study, ecotourism contributed significantly to poverty reduction in the host communities. These imply that if ecotourism development is diligently pursued as a community-based development strategy, it will lead to sustainable poverty reduction in the communities in the long run. In view of the foregoing, it is therefore, recommended that the community development associations (CDAs), town unions and local and State and governments should adopt and promote the development of community-led ecotourism as a viable pro-poor community development strategy.

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Table 1: Frequency distribution of respondents according to their ecotourism employment activities

Types of Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Guiding and interpretation	26	11.2
Sale of fresh farm produce	16	6.9
Restaurant services/food vending	24	10.4
Sale of general good	8	3.5
Accommodation services	12	5.2
Production/sale of artifacts	1	0.4
Transportation	30	12.9
Photography	2	0.9
Music/entertainment	4	1.7
Security	6	2.6
General services (luggage bearers, loader/un-loaders, etc)	2	0.9
Timber Dealer	8	3.5
Timber Loader	18	7.8
Lorry Driver	6	2.6
Sand Miner	12	5.2
Sand Carrier	26	11.2
Boat Maker/Repairer	2	0.9
Artifact maker/seller	1	0.4
Boat Operator	7	3.0
Fisherman	9	3.9
Chemist/Medicine Dealer	2	0.9
Security	6	2.6
Vegetable Farmer	4	1.7
Total	232*	100

Source: Field survey, 2019; *Multiple responses recorded

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the respondents according to the nature of their employment in ecotourism

Nature of Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Full time	34	37.8
Part time	56	62.2
Total	90	100

Source: Field survey, 2019

Table 3: Frequency distribution of annual ecotourism income of the respondents

Income class	Income range (₦)	Frequency	Percentage
Low income	≤100,000	29	32.2
	100,001 – 500,000	12	13.3
	500,001 – 1, 000, 000	8	8.9
	1,000,001 – 1,500,000	7	7.8
	1,500,001 – 2,000,000	6	6.7
	2,000,001 – 2,500,000	4	4.4
	2,500,001 – 3,000,000	2	2.2
Lower middle income	3,000,001 – 5,000,000	6	6.7
Higher middle income	5,000,001 – 10,000,000	8	8.9
High income	10,000,001 – 50,000,000	5	5.6
	>50,000,000	3	3.3
Total		90	100
Average daily ecotourism income = ₦10, 292.43			
Average annual ecotourism income = ₦3, 756, 736.80			

Source: Field survey, December, 2019

Table 4: Summary of result of Cross Tabulation of total annual incomes and annual ecotourism incomes of participating households

Total Annual Household Income (₦)	Highest amount contributed by ecotourism to household income (₦ / %)	Frequency/ Percentage (%) of households
≤1,000,000	1,000,000 (100)	43 (47.8)
1,000,001 – 5,000,000	3,000,000 (75)	25 (27.8)
5,000,001 – 10,000,000	5,000,000 (71)	8 (8.9)
10,000,001 – 15,000,000	7,000,000 (54)	5 (5.6)
15,000,001 – 20,000,000	10,000,000 (59)	4 (4.4)
20,000,001 – 25,000,000	16,000,000 (70)	2 (2.2)
25,000,001 – 30,000,000	18,000,000 (67)	1 (1.1)
≥ 30,000,000	21,000,000 (38)	2 (2.2)
Total		90 (100)

Source: Field survey, 2019

Table 5: Summary of result on effects of ecotourism income on poverty status of participating households

Poverty Status	Without Ecotourism	Percentage	With Ecotourism	Percentage	Percentage Change
Absolutely poor	72	80	38	42	38
Relatively poor	10	11.1	36	40	28.9
Non-Poor	8	8.9	22	24.4	15.5
Total	90	100	146	100	

Source: Field survey, 2019

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