

Original Research Report



Assessment of Tourists' Perception of Okomu National Park as an Eco-Tourism Destination, Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study assessed tourists' perception of Okomu National Park as an eco-tourism destination. Tourists' destinations can be a place or a resort where tourists go and stay or it could be an area or country in where a visitor stays and travels. Data for this study were collected from primary and secondary sources. Results from this study shows that their trip motivations are attraction oriented with game viewing extremely important to their visitation. This study therefore recommended that, Okomu National Park in conjunction with other governmental bodies should fashion out a process to facilitate community empowerment with a view to diverting the attention of the inhabitants of the surrounding communities from illegal logging, which most of them depend on. Thus, to meet the needs and the satisfaction of the eco-tourists, continuous research in these areas is important particularly in emerging ecotourism markets like Nigeria.

Keywords: Assessment, Destination, Eco-tourism, National Park and Perception.

1. Introduction

Perceptions and attitudes of tourists to ecotourism destinations are, as identified in numerous studies, the key factor for the success of protected areas (Arnberger & Schoissengeier, 2012). Perception is man's primary form of cognitive contact with the world around him. As all conceptual knowledge is based upon or derived from this primary form of awareness, the study of perception has always had unique significance for philosophy and science (Efron, 1969). An attitude can be described as a negative or positive evaluation of an object or quality (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Positive perception of a recreational park is not necessarily related to the intention, followed by the

positive behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) but is certainly a very good starting point for positive action (Allendorf et al., 2007). In Nigeria, tourist destinations are either natural or manmade and are managed to some appreciable level. Tourists' destinations can be a place or a resort where tourists go and stay or it could be an area or country in where a visitor stays and travels. Adetola and Adediran (2014) argued that Nigeria is blessed with attractive tourists' products and destinations. They classified Nigeria's tourist resources into two main categories; Natural Features and Cultural/Historic Attractions, and as found in all the 36 states of Nigeria, including FCT, Abuja.

According to a report by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2002), India could generate 25 million additional jobs in the tourism sector by 2010. This is due to the reason that an increasing number of tourists now prefer to visit attractive natural environments or protected areas set aside for conservation. Undisturbed ecosystems, their plant and animal communities are critical in maintaining the clean air, clean water and healthy environments that are key tourism attractions in many destinations (Buckley, 2002). Located at the top of the environmental and industrial chain, tourism is extremely sensitive to environmental conditions and to the impacts others have on the system. In fact, the state of tourism itself may be a key indicator of system stability. Tourism is a multifaceted economic activity, which interacts with the environment in the framework of a two-way process (Bhattacharya 2005). Moreover, economic activities besides tourism use up and modify environmental resources quality available for tourism purposes. Because of this linkage, the tourism sector needs increasingly to become a knowledge participant in the planning the use of the environment and its impacts (Batta, 2000; Manning, 1992).

1.1. Conceptual Clarification

In order to better understand the conceptual underpinnings of the study, it is pertinent to define some pertinent concepts.

Assessment: Assessment is a plan of care that identifies the specific needs of a place or the client and how those needs will be addressed (Ellis & Vogelsong, 2003).

Destination: A tourism destination is that locality and the geographical space where visitors spend their leisure time or holidays. The tourism destination includes natural and man-made attractions, support services and resources. A crucial point is that, the destination has both physical and administrative (legal) boundaries which make it possible for its management, images and market competitiveness to be assessed.

Ecotourism: This is tourism directed towards exotic natural environments, intended to support conservation efforts and observe wildlife (Ayeni, 2006).

National Park: A national park is a protected area for natural resources conservation purposes on behalf of the nation. Often it is a reserve of natural, semi-natural, or developed land that a sovereign state declares or owns (Marguba, 2002).

Perception: Perception is the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted. It is a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem.

Tourism: Tourism is travel for pleasure; also the theory and practice of touring, the business of attracting, accommodating, and entertaining tourists, and the business of operating tours. Tourism may be international, or within the traveller's country

Tourist: A tourist is a person who travels for pleasure, usually sightseeing, as well as business and relaxation among others for more than 24 hours but less than 12 months (Marguba, 2002).

1.2. Statement of the Research Problem

Ecotourism as a branch of tourism is not being utilized to its highest potentials as a source of tourist's inflow into Nigeria. According to the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation, 600,000 tourists visited Nigeria in 2013 while- 4,567 (which is only 0.76% of the total tourists to the country visited Okomu National Park (ONP)). Some of the factors of low level of utilization of ecotourism include lack of awareness of the availability of ecotourism resources beyond the host communities, poor infrastructural development, and attitude and perception towards recreation among larger percentage of Nigerian public.

Another major benefit of tourism is its capacity to stimulate infrastructural development. Perhaps, the benefits from infrastructural development justified the primary reasons for implementing tourism programmes and activities in most states in Nigeria. Most state governors in Nigeria today, like the former Governor of Cross River State, Donald Duke, have undertaken the development of new infrastructures and the improvement of the existing infrastructures such as airports, roads, water supply, electricity, hotels and business village like Tinappa and the ranch resort (Obudu Cattle Ranch). Tourism stimulates employment creation in Nigeria (Adetola & Adediran, 2014). The tourism trade is a valuable source of employment, globally in the case of Nigeria, the development of new infrastructures provides opportunity for job creation. Indeed, the tourism sector and its sub sector employ a large number of people, and provide a wide range of jobs ranging from the unskilled to the highly specialized.

1.3. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to assess tourists' perception of Okomu National Park as an ecotourism destination. The Specific objectives of the study were to:

- (a) Assess the trip characteristics of tourists at Okomu National Park.
- (b) Investigate tourists' perceptions of Okomu National Park as an ecotourism destination.

1.4. Research Questions

The research attempts to answer the following questions:

- (a) What are the trip characteristics of tourists at Okomu National Park?
- (b) What is the perception of tourists in Okomu National Park?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Area

The study area was Okomu National Park (ONP) one of the seven National Parks in Nigeria. It lies between longitude 60 21'N and latitude 100 11'N (Churchill, 2001) with fresh water swamp along the rivers located within the park. The Park, formerly the Okomu Wildlife Sanctuary, is a forest block within 1,082 kilometres (km) of Okomu Forest Reserve. ONP covers a total area of 202sq km (making it the smallest of the seven National Parks). The Park is located in Ovia South West local government area of Edo state, Nigeria. The Park is about 60km North West of Benin City, the Edo state capital. Annual rainfall in the park ranges between 995mm and 1550mm and the average daily temperature ranges between 27°C and 35°C. The rainy season begins in April through September with the highest rainfall record between July and August. The dry season begins in October through early April. The vegetation is a typical Guinea- Congo lowland rain forest eco-

system and is characterized by a mosaic of swamp forest, high forest, secondary forest, and open scrub. It is made up of mainly secondary forest on well drained plateau sites. The Park's flora, according to Orhiere (1992), Okomu National Park vegetation is semi-deciduous lowland rainforest. There is abundance of flora in the Park, amongst the dominant plants species are Iron Wood (*Lophiraalata*), Silk Cotton Tree (*Ceibapentandra*), Cam Wood (*Baphianitida*) and Walnut (*Lovoatrichiloides*). Common trees include Ceibapentandra (Silk cotton tree), Celtiszenkeris, Triplochitonscleroxylon, Antiaris Africana, Pycnanthusangonlensis, and Alstoniacongonensis. Okomu National Park has diverse fauna, with 33 species of mammals including the African buffalo and the endangered African Forest Elephant.

2.2. Population and Sampling Procedure

The study population comprised tourists at the Okomu National Park from April to June, 2016. The sampling procedure employed in this research were the tourists who were physically present at the park during the period of the study and convenience sampling

2.3. Measurement of Variables

Both independent and dependent variables were identified and measured in the study. The dependent variable, i.e., respondents' perception of the ONP as an ecotourism destination was measured and rated on a five point Likert scale of Strongly agree-5, Agree-4, Indifference -3, Disagree-2, Strongly disagree-1. The perception scale was self-constructed by the researcher. Total perception scores were determined by summing up individual respondents' perceptual statement scores.

2.4. Types and Sources of Data used for the Study

Both primary and secondary data were collected towards conducting the study. The primary data were obtained during the administration of survey questionnaire to visitors to the ONP and recorded personal observations during the fieldwork. Published and unpublished materials including the Internet constituted the sources of secondary data. In particular, materials were obtained from the management of the National Park Service and Okomu National Park. The work was carried out between April and June, 2016.

2.5. Data Collection Technique

In order to better understand the perception of visitors and factors influencing same, the study utilized survey research design (Questionnaire). The questionnaire consisted socio-demographic characteristics of the tourists, tourists' trip characteristics (type of visit, number of times the park has been visited in the past 5 years (2012-2016), travel size, type of stay, number of days spent, leisure activities, tourists' attractions, and purpose of visit), and tourists' perception of Okomu National Park as ecotourism destination. The reliability of the experiment was confirmed using Cronbach Alpha procedure and the reliability coefficient was 0.96. The instrument was used to collect data from tourists that were in the park at the time of this study. Each participant was presented with the questionnaire and was asked to respond to the content of the questionnaire after providing informed consent orally.

2.6. Data Analysis Technique

All the 120 survey questionnaires used to collect primary data were cleaned and entered into the computer database for analysis by Statistical Package for Social Scientists (IBM SPSS) 21.0. The primary data were subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentage.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Tourists' Trip Characteristics

Table 1: Tourists' Trip Characteristics (N=120)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
First Time visitor	15	12.5
Repeat visitor	105	87.5
Times visited the park in the last 5 years:		
2-3 times	94	87.0
4-5 times	14	13.0
More than 5 times	0	0
Number of family members		
1	23	19.2
2-3	92	76.7
4-5	13	10.8
More than 5	15	12.5
Type of stay		
Day	27	22.5
Overnight	93	77.5
Leisure Activities		
Game viewing	58	48.3
Bird watching	53	44.2
Others	9	7.5

The distribution of respondents' Trip Characteristics is presented in Table 1. The table indicates that 87.5% were repeat tourists to the park, while 12.5% of them were first time tourists. Also, 87.0% had visited the park 2-3 times in the last 5 years, while 13.0% had visited the park 4-5 times in the last 5 years. Furthermore, 76.7% of the tourists were 2-3 travelling members during their visit at the time of this study. In addition, majority (77.5%) of the respondents stayed overnight in the park, while 22.5% were day visitors, 53% spent 2-3 days while 12.5% spent a day. Furthermore, 29.2% agreed that nature and availability of the game/bird in the park was their major attraction to ONP, while 18.3% said it is affordable and convenient compared to other National Parks in Nigeria. Also, 61.7% respondents came to the park for relaxation/vacation, while 6.7% were in the category of others as their purpose for visiting ONP.

3.2. Tourists' perceptions of Okomu National Park as an ecotourism destination

The results depict the tourists' perceptions of Okomu National Park (ONP) as an ecotourism destination. Results of the analysis revealed that 50.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that the

Park deserves to be an ecotourism destination, while a negligible 4.2% disagreed and 0.8% undecided. Also, 64.2% strongly agreed that Okomu National Park is very rich in wildlife resources while 8.3% disagreed. Furthermore, 74.2% strongly agreed that there is adequate security for tourists in ONP and 0.8% strongly disagreed. Survey results also show that 76.7% strongly agreed that the staff in the park were friendly, and no respondent disagreed. Five out of every ten tourists strongly agreed that ONP is better equipped in terms of infrastructures that will make tourists want to come visiting again, 3.3% undecided and 4.2% strongly disagreed. Also, 43.3% strongly agreed that inadequate facilities such as accommodation hinder tourists' traffic in the park and 6.7% strongly disagreed.

Larger percent (56.7%) of respondents strongly disagreed that ONP has improved positively in terms of infrastructures compared to the last time they visited while 5.0% strongly agreed. With respect to cost of living, it was observed that 41.7% disagreed that the Park is more expensive compared to other parks in Nigeria, while 10.3% agreed to the test statement. Also, 50.0% of the respondents agreed that the host communities of ONP are hospitable to tourists while 10.8% strongly disagreed. 50.0% disagreed that the government and authorities concerned are doing enough to ensure that the park meet its conservation purpose while 10.0% agreed to the test statement. Moreover, almost 70% of the respondents agreed that ONP is suitably positioned to meet international standard while 9.2% strongly disagreed to the test statement.

4. Conclusion

This work assesses the trip characteristics of tourists to Okomu National Park, and determines tourists' perception of the Park. Also, 61.7% respondents came to the park for relaxation/vacation, while 6.7% were in the category of others as their purpose for visiting ONP. Furthermore, 76.7% of the tourists were 2-3 travelling members during their visit at the time of this study. Almost 70% of the respondents agreed that ONP is suitably positioned to meet international standard. Therefore, understanding tourists' perception of ONP as an ecotourism destination can help the park to improve their marketing strategies. This study therefore recommended that, Okomu National Park in conjunction with other governmental bodies should fashion out a process to facilitate community empowerment with a view to diverting the attention of the inhabitants of the surrounding communities from illegal logging, which most of them depend on.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

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Formal analysis: TTO

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Data analysis: TTO

Writing – original draft, review & editing: TTO

Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article. Further enquiries can be directed to the author.

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