

ECOTOURISM POTENTIALS IN AKWA IBOM STATE: CASE STUDY
OF ITU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA.

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Abstract

Tourism in Nigeria is experiencing rapid growth because of its huge contributions to the National Economy. It is the science, art and business of attracting, transporting visitors, accommodating them graciously and catering for their needs. Tourism is often called invisible export in that many nations realize large amount of foreign currency by effectively encouraging foreign visitors to travel inside their countries. Tourism constitutes the largest single item in the world trade. With recent economic melt down in the country, due to drop in oil sector, it is pertinent the country diversify her economic base from her sole dependence on oil to non-oil sector of the economy, such as ecotourism which is increasing in popularity across the world, but has significant practical value in developing countries where the needs of impoverished communities may conflict directly with the need to capitalize. There are numerous socio-economic benefits abound in the industries if properly harnessed. The paper examined the ecotourism potentials abound and its contributions in sustainable developments if fully developed in Itu Local Government of Akwa Ibom State.

Tourism is the science, art and business of attracting and transporting visitors, accommodating them graciously, catering for their needs and wants (Ayedole and Falade, 1993). According to Ayedole (2002) any activity that voluntarily and

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temporarily takes a person away from his/her usual place of residence in order to satisfy a need, either for pleasure or excitement, experience or relaxation can be termed tourism. Tourism comprises the activities of a person traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one year for leisure, business and other purpose (USAID) (2005). Tourism is often called invisible export in that many nations realize tangible amount of foreign currency by effectively encouraging foreign visitors to travel inside their countries.

Tourism constitute the largest single item in world trade: transportation by air, sea, land, catering services, the manufacturing and sale of thousand items from souvenirs to jet aircraft.

The Nigeria Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Ogbuewu (2003) Omotosho (2004) and Nigerian Tourism Deveopment Corporation (NTDC) (2005). Classified Nigerian Tourism as follows: Cultural/heritage, Conference, Beach, Slave Route, Religious, Sports and Ecotourism.

Ecotourism entails traveling to pristine environment to view games and interact with nature. As a component of green economy, is one of the fastest developing sector of the economy after oil (Wienberg, Bellows and Ekster, 2002).The demand for high quality ecotourism sites by tourists is continuously increasing for the sake of vivid experience. Ecotourists travel to remote destinations in search of unique naturalism, experiences that hardly exist in cities due to lack of communities and standard wildlife parks or unaltered natural environments.

Wall (2002) defined ecotourism as tourism that consist in travelling to undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with specific objectives of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural manifestation found in these areas. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (2005) currently defined Ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.

Ecotourism is the fastest growing segment of tourism today. It has direct and induced impacts on economic development and the industry is one of the most crucial trades in the world (W.T.O, 2004).

Most tourism in natural areas today is not Ecotourism and is not therefore sustainable. Ecotourism is distinguished by its emphasis on conservation, education, traveler responsibility and active community participation especially Ecotourism (WTO, 2004).

Ecotourism Principles

Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement, participate in the marketing ecotourism activities should adopt the following ecotourism principles.

- (i) Minimize physical, social behavioural and psychological impacts.
- (ii) Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- (iii) Provide positive expenses for both visitors and host?
- (iv) Generate financial benefits for conservation.
- (v) Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to the host community's political, environmental and social climates.
- (vi) Design, construct and operate low impact facilities.
- (vii) Recognize the right and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in their community and work on partnership with them to create empowerment.

Increased tourism to sensitive natural areas with appropriate planning and management can threaten the integrity of ecosystem and local cultures. The increase of visitors to ecological sensitive area can lead to significantly environmental degradation. Likewise local communities and indigenous cultures can be harnessed in numerous ways by an influx of foreign visitors and wealth.

Additionally, fluctuations in climate, currency exchange rates, political and social conditions can make over-dependence upon tourism a risky business. However, this same growth create significant opportunities for both conservation and local communities.

Ecotourism can provide much needed revenues for protection of national parks and other natural areas, revenues that might not be available from other sources (Ayodele 2002, Holden 2003 and Falade 2005).

Ecotourism can provide a viable economic development alternative for local communities with few other income generating options. Moreover, Ecotourism can increase the level of education and activism among travelers, making them more enthusiastic and effective agents of conservation (WTO 2004).

Roles of Ecotourism in Sustainable Development

Carefully planned and operated Ecotourism sites, especially, it is village based and involves local participation is able to provide direct benefits that might offset pressure from the less sustainable activities than use of natural and cultural resources.

The role is to promote and preserve the natural environment. Both small and large scale Ecotourism attraction play a vital role in the socio-economy of the surrounding areas. Conservation and preservation education go hand in hand with sustainable travel initiatives.

Ecotourism help in community development by providing the alternative source of livelihood to the local community which is more sustainable. Ecotourism aim is to conserve resources especially biological diversity, and maintain sustainable use of resources, which can bring ecological expense to travelers, conserved the ecological environment and gain economic benefits such as:

- (i) **Earth Friendly Travel:** Exposing travelers to the wonders of nature and reducing the carbon foot print, while vacationing is a primary goal of ecotourism promoters and travel agents.
- (ii) **Preservation of Natural Area:** Increased travel to a little known natural areas as well as major outdoor attraction, gamers, funds to maintain the area and preserve the environment for future generation.
- (iii) **Environmental Education:** The purest form of Ecotourism involves educating the public about environment and the impact human have on the planet by teaching conservation techniques and enjoyment gained by sustainable travel, the visitors leave with enhanced desires to do their part in protecting mother Earth.
- (iv) **Cultural Tolerance:** Ecotourism can introduce rural or reduced cultures to visitors and a greater awareness and tolerance can be gained between the diverse groups and shearing of heritage through food, art and songs, leaving lasting impression on all parties involved.
- (v) **Economic Growth:** Ecotourism grows through money spent by Ecotourism in local grocery, stores, markets and camp grounds benefit areas which are typically disadvantaged (Butcher 2006, Holden 2003).

Ecotourism Potentials that Abound in Itu Local Government

Numerous ecotourism potentials abound in Itu Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, which if properly harnessed would play vital role in the socio-economy of the area, the state and Nigeria as a whole.

Itu Local government Area occupies a land man of approximately 606.10km². It is located in latitude 5⁰ 100' North 7⁰ 59'. Bounded in the North and North-East by Odukpani in Cross River State, and Aruchukwu in Abia State, in the West by Ibiono and Ikono Local Government Areas, in the South and South-East, it is bounded by Uyo and Uran Local Government Areas respectively ([http://wwaksgonline.com//ga aspex?gr ID = Itu](http://wwaksgonline.com//ga.aspex?gr ID = Itu)). The people of the area are predominantly Ibibio speaking group with pockets of Efik and Ijaws. Itu has a population of proximately 127,856 people based on the 2006 National Census figure.

The rich traditional culture is expressed in Ekpo, Ekpe and Ebre Masquerade and dances. Their main occupations are mainly farming, fishing, trading, hunting, craft and lumbering. The area is also rich in natural resources such as crude oil, fine sand, gravel, clay and limestone. Forest resources are timber, wildlife, palm trees, raffia palms, cane plants, gmelina plantation and fuel wood. Marine resources include fish, crayfish, oyster, lobster, shrimp and periwinkle among others.

The area is located in lowland rainforest zone with undulating landscape. The luxuriant, evergreen forest is with diverse flora and fauna. Tourist attraction such as beaches, navigable water system and beautiful topography abound in the area (*Ibom yellow page.com/Itu lga*).

Ecotourism Potentials Abound Are

- (i) **Old Itu Island:** These three Islands are “Akpan Akpene Ofon”, “Esit Ufak” and “Okono”, according to the believe of the community, the dramatic nature of the water, if the water from these three shores are put together could stay apart and not mixed up. If marvelously so, such wonders remain as potential regarding Ecotourism and would attract people to the area if properly harnessed.
- (ii) **The Beaches:** The abandoned Queen and Miller beaches, precisely named after Queen Elizabeth on her first visit to this part of West Africa, can be a potential tourist attraction, when harnessed.

The bridge beach along Itu – Calabar highway could be developed as tourist site. Sporting activities such beach soccer, traditional wrestling and other

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annual events, and festivals such as canoeing regalia, “Inaha” fish festival, watching of popular “Itu Ubem” the manatees (*Manatee Manatus*) could be tourist attraction during their mating period or when they are browsing at the shore.

- (iii) **Slave Master Houses – Okopedi Itu and U.A.C Ware Houses:** The Itu River was a renowned trade route and the old jetty still stands. The U.A.C warehouses and residential buildings of colonial masters could be turn into Museum.

They are number of old prison-like warehouse where slaves were kept to await shipment via the Itu River. The abandoned slave chains iron handcuffs and other slave equipment can serve as tourist site.

The old merchant ship also owned by UAC could be made an historical site for study and research for archeologist.

- (iv) **Lat Rev. Mary Mitchel Slessor House Tomb:** The monument are spot where Mary Slessor was buried and the house she lived before her death situated around Ikot Odon/Itu village, as tourist attraction.
- (v) **The Presbyterian Church, Itu:** The Old Presbyterian Church built under the supervision of Late Mary Slessor who stopped the killing of twins among the people of the area, another tourist attraction when developed.
- (vi) **Craft Industries:** Itu is noted for cane craft using Cane plants (*Calmus deerratus*) for making furniture, these products are money making ventures, as souvenirs, provide employment and reduce youth restiveness.
- (vii) **The Ravines:** The terrains, rolling topography and the ravines, if connected with aerial walkways so that tourist could view the luxuriant evergreen tropical rainforest below with wildlife in the natural habitats.
- (viii) **Traditional Festivals:** The rich traditional culture is expressed in “Ekpo”, “Ekpe” and “Ebre” masquerades and dances are potential tourist attraction.

Other Festivals are:

- (a) **Awa Itam Day Festival:** This is one of the Itam traditional festivals that commence on the third week of every sixth month of the year. The “Oku One Awa Itam” performs the festival aimed at bringing God in communion with the

people of Itam. It is a year's most important ceremony as it marked at a time when the king's body is sacred. The ceremony is performed to ensure the continuity of the dynasty and welfare of the entire Itam clan and Itu Local Government Areas at large.

- (b) **New Yam Festival:** This is an annual festival of Itam people that commences in the month of August / September of every year. The significant of this festival is the ability of the king to sight the new moon to fag off its activities, which is followed by variety of traditional dances and displays.
- (c) **Christmas Festival:** This festival commences every 31st day of December of the year. The festival is usually flagged off with traditional plays and traditional wrestling competition, masquerades and dances.

Conclusion

Ecotourism has been identified as an effective tool for renewable natural resources conservation when properly managed. The attendant destruction of protected area have become a global challenge. The rate of destruction has increased continuously because conservation areas have previously served as source of livelihood to the people living in adjoining communities. Several solutions have been proffered to these challenges but none has been sustainable and resources are prone to be used. For any solution to be sustainable, it should be able to provide alternative livelihood to the local inhabitants on sustainable basis. It was on this basis that at the inception of most conservation areas, the inhabitants, especially the local hunters were employed as game guards and rangers who had known the various ranges and tracts in the conservation areas.

For protection, the local communities should be involved, participate and benefit from the Ecotourism activities. Ecotourism when properly planned, managed and monitored provides more jobs and various sources of revenue and benefits to the inhabitants, which will then make them concerned. Communities put more efforts through communal legislation to ensure that the protected areas are provided with full protection.

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