

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF ECO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES OF CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

Offiong, Agnes Edet Asuquo· Miebaka Nabiebu Ph.D, FICMC, Agatha Umo Egbe-John, Glory James Okon, **Kujoh Jude Ubuh**, Joseph Ekpe Edet, Ime Edet Sam, Peter Kutjon, Josephine Ngozi Morah, Eke Chinenye Justina,
Osam, Ejukwa, Lazarus Bassey Abonor

Environmental Education Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.
Department of Jurisprudence and International Law, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
Continuing Education and Development Studies Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Environmental Education Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.
Department of Jurisprudence and International Law, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Environmental Education Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria
Curriculum and Teaching Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.
Arts and Social Science Education Department, Chukwuemeka Udumegwu Ojugwu University, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Arts and Social Science Education Department, Chukwuemeka Udumegwu Ojugwu University, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Social Work Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
Social Work Department, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

agnesoffiong04@gmail.com
nmiebaka@yahoo.com,
agathaegbe14@gmail.com,
gokon004@gmail.com.
judekujoh123@gmail.com

joeyedet@gmail.com
imesam12@yahoo.com
kutjonpeter@gmail.com
jn.morah@coou.edu.ng
cj.eke@coou.edu.ng
ejuks@hotmail.com
abonor.laz@gmail.com

Offiong, Agnes Edet Asuquo
Environmental Education Department
University of Calabar, Calabar.
agnesoffiong04@gmail.com
(Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This study investigated the influence of socio-economic determinant on ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State, Nigeria. Two research hypotheses were tested and a descriptive research design was adopted. The population comprised of 47,483, and multi-stage procedure approach was adopted for the sample size of 1,040 respondents. Data were collected using “Socio Economic Factors and Ecotourism Development in Rural Communities Questionnaire” (SEFEDRCQ) structured by researchers and further validated by three experts, two from Educational Foundation department, while one from Tourism Studies department of the University of Calabar, Calabar. The reliability coefficient of .83 to .89 was determined using Cronbach Alpha. The data collected were analyzed using Simple Linear Regression, the result revealed that there is a significant influence of Job creation and income generation on ecotourism development. Ultimately, the research concluded that job creation and income generation serve as the primary catalysts for ecotourism development in the rural communities.

Keywords: Rural Communities, Determinant, Development, Eco-tourism Socio-economic, Cross River State.

Introduction

Tourism encompasses the act and process of spending time away from home for recreation, relaxation, medical purposes, and pleasure, use commercially provided services. Tourism entails transient travel from one’s domicile, necessitating services such as lodging, ticket acquisitions, and transportation. It is a vast social, cultural and economic phenomenon that includes domestic and international travel, driven by factors like leisure, cultural experiences, and business needs. The tourism industry generates significant global economic activities, provides employment, and offers a wide array of experiences, though it also presents challenges related to environmental and cultural preservation (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2021).

Nigeria's tourism sector is exceptionally vibrant and appealing to international visitors; its climate, vegetation, quality airspace, abundant sunshine, stunning landscapes, rock formations, waterfalls, enchanting beaches, diverse cuisines, historical artefacts, rich cultural diversity, hospitable populace, and wildlife constitute Nigeria's tourism assets. Nigeria is a premier tourism destination in Africa (Eneji, et al, 2016). Ecotourism in Nigeria has been recognised as a possible catalyst for economic growth and conservation, leveraging the nation's abundant biodiversity and cultural history to foster development (Umar, 2022).

Ecotourism is a nature-focused tourism model designed to aid in the preservation of the natural environment, characterized by low damage and encompassing both conservation contributions and environmental education. Ecotourism primarily involves engagement with the biotic components of natural ecosystems, whereas agrotourism pertains to geological aspects. Unlike nature tourism and sustainable tourism broadly, ecotourism typically aims to enhance tourists' appreciation of natural environments, the risks they face, and local culture (Buckley, 2019). Eco-tourism facilitates revenue production. Communities situated near significant attractions, such as national parks, reserves, and archaeological or historic sites, should have the chance to engage in ecotourism activities. These communities can offer hotels, restaurants, retail establishments, transportation, and tour services; they may also be engaged in managerial and operational functions. A crucial method to engage communities and secure their support in tourism is by generating local employment opportunities. Employment in ecotourism is predominantly characterized by unskilled and semiskilled positions, frequently associated with low quality and inadequate remuneration (Ofre, Bassey & Inyokwe 2017).

The UNWTO (2021) disclosed that a significant portion of individuals in wealthy nations, along with a growing proportion in developing countries, engage in tourism at some point in their lives. Tourism has transitioned from being the privilege of a select few to an integral and anticipated aspect of the lifestyle for an increasing population. Tourism holds substantial economic and social importance, as around 270 million tourists expend \$92 billion (US) each year in foreign destinations. This is among the most substantial commodities in global foreign trade. Global tourist arrivals are increasing at an annual pace of around 6 percent, making tourism one of the most rapidly expanding economic sectors. It constitutes the paramount export sector and generator of foreign currency in several nations. Examining the advantages and significance of tourism reveals its economic importance, as revenues from international tourism may serve as a crucial source of income for both developed and developing nations. Visitor expenditures create revenue for both public and private sectors, in addition to influencing wages and employment prospects (Offiong, Ojong & Oyamo, 2022)

Ecotourism aims to balance intergenerational equity with the objectives of economic development, environmental conservation, and social justice. It acknowledges the necessity for equity among local individuals and groups, as well as between hosts and guests. Currently, ecotourism serves as a significant driver of economic growth and employment creation in most nations worldwide. In Plateau State, there exists a substantial array of essential natural and anthropogenic capital assets (tourist attractions) necessary for the cultivation of any sustainable tourism product, including scenic tours, cultural tourism, mountain climbing, biking and trekking, ecotourism, religious or spiritual tourism, and sports/recreational tourism, among others (Ayodele, 2022).

Numerous scholars contend that ecotourism has recently been validated as a stimulus for sustainable social, economic, and environmental development in urban and rural areas globally. This indicates that ecotourism sites possess the ability to enhance the socio-economic factors of any civilisation. The presence of Agbokim Waterfalls, Kwafalls, Becheve Nature Reserve, Ikom Monoliths, Drill Monkey Ranch, Cross River National Park, Afi Mountain Sanctuary, and Obudu

Cattle Ranch as ecotourism sites in Cross River State ought to have been central to socio-economic advancement in Nigeria (Nyong et al., 2018).

According to (Prakash, 2023), ecotourism is a strategic tourism model designed to minimize negative impacts on the environment and showcase local cultures while actively contributing to the economic and social development. The ultimate goals of ecotourism development all over the world are the processes of planning, and growing a sustainable tourism industry that conserves and protects natural resources and cultural heritage sites, ecosystems, and biodiversity so that both present and future generation can make effective use of natural resources for economic, social, cultural and ecological development for person's quality of life and overall well-being. The survival of people, not only in local communities but also in urban communities, largely depends directly or indirectly on the sustainability of biodiversity and services provided by healthy ecosystems within the communities (Birdlife International, 2015). Recently, there has been a growing recognition of the need to understand the ecotourism development factors that influence socio economic in rural communities, such as, job creation, income generation, infrastructural developments etc. Numerous exemplary ecotourism initiatives are present globally. For instance, the non-governmental organization Conservation International implements numerous ecotourism initiatives that fulfil economic requirements and enhance the biodiversity of vital habitats globally. Examples of their initiatives encompass Cross River National Park in Cross River State, Yankari Game Reserve in Bauchi State, Okonu National Park in Edo State, Gashaka Gumti National Park in Taraba State, and Chad Basin National Park spanning multiple states, among others.

Ecotourism's capacity to fulfil socio-economic and sustainability goals renders it a feasible alternative for forest communities, private enterprises, and the state government in Cross River State, Nigeria. Initiatives that integrate economic, social, and ecological requirements are especially encouraged in this Nigerian state. Many scholars contend that this partnership must prioritise the employment of rural community members as managers or workers in protected areas, thereby enhancing their quality of life through the provision of healthcare services, education, and economic development, while also empowering communities to manage their resources efficiently. Beatrust & Solomon (2024) discovered that in ecotourism development, the majority of local community members can achieve self-employment by offering various services or can be employed by established tourism agencies in roles such as traders, transporters, tour guides, hotel staff, security personnel, and attendants in food, beverages, artefacts, and cultural shops, among others. Ecotourism offers alternative sources of livelihood and opportunities for local individuals to secure gainful employment and sustain their lives (Aniah et al., 2019; Spencer and Nsiah, 2017; Muriithi, 2016).

The socio-economic effects of tourism development on local communities are intricate and varied. Tourism can yield substantial economic advantages, job creation, and cultural conservation; nevertheless, it may also result in environmental deterioration, cultural commodification, and social displacement. Despite the potentials of ecotourism to contribute to economic development, environmental conservation and cultural preservation in rural communities, the interplay of socioeconomic factors often hinders sustainable ecotourism development, (Mihaila & Mihaila

2019) In many rural communities, limited community involvement, inadequate infrastructure, lack of financial resources and management expertise, poor marketing strategies and inconsistent regulations, which hinder economic benefits to local population, and can lead to environmental degradation, pose significant challenges to leveraging ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development. Socio-cultural issues include, community alienation and lack of participation, leading to potential conflicts. Environmental challenges arise from over-tourism and resource degradation. Understanding the socio-economic dynamics influencing eco-tourism in these contexts is crucial for fostering sustainable practices that balance economic benefits with environmental and cultural conservation Offiong, Ojong & Oyamo, 2022).

Though a good number of empirical research have been carried out in an attempt to bridging the gap surrounding the study in question, it is still perceived that high level of degradation of natural resources including forests, water, and land, loss of biodiversity devastating socio-economic impacts on rural communities leading to decreased economic opportunities, reduced quality of life and threatening their sources of income, food and health is still prevalent in many areas in the state. Against this context, the study seeks to examine the relationship between socio-economic determinants and eco-tourism development in rural communities of Cross River State, Nigeria.

Specifically, the study seeks to test the following null hypotheses:

Ho1: Job creation does not significantly influence eco-tourism development in rural communities of Cross River State.

Ho2: There is no significant influence of income generation and on-tourism development in rural communities of Cross River State.

Literature Review

Job creation and ecotourism development in rural communities

A communal viewpoint. Rachim (2022) did research on local employment inside tourism attractions. The involvement of local communities is widely recognized as a crucial factor for the development and sustainability of all tourism types. Local employment serves as a method of recruitment frequently utilized by tourism destinations. Nonetheless, augmenting local involvement in tourism frequently generates tension between tourist sites and inhabitants. This study seeks to examine local engagement in The Lodge Maribaya, a prominent tourist destination in Bandung, West Java, by analyzing the elements that affect community support for local employment in the region. Data was gathered through a standardized questionnaire administered to 59 local employees. Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess the construct validity and reliability of the model. Concurrently, Partial Least Squares (PLS) modelling was utilized to evaluate the interrelationship among the variables. This study has revealed that community affiliation and perceived advantages significantly influence the community's support for The Lodge Maribaya about their involvement in local employment. The robust community ties and the significant advantages recognized by the community are considered the primary reasons contributing to The Lodge Maribaya's success in hiring local employees. This study aims to

elucidate methods for enhancing local employment participation and to identify potential obstacles to this process.

Income generation and eco-tourism development in rural communities

Ijeomah and Ayodele (2019) conducted a study evaluating revenue generation avenues in ecotourism destinations in Plateau State, Nigeria. They highlighted that the insufficiency of information regarding marketable tourism items for each ecotourism destination has resulted in the erroneous packaging of unviable products at several tourism sites in Nigeria. The revenue generation avenues in the ecotourism locations of Plateau State, Nigeria, were analyzed using data collected from structured questionnaires, field surveys, and administrative records. A collection of structured questionnaires was randomly distributed to 50% of tourism officials at Rayfield Resort (RR), Naraguta Tourist Village (NTV), Jos Wildlife Park (JWLP), Jos National Museum and Zoo (JNMZ), Assop Falls (AF), and Pandam Wildlife Park (PWLP). A total of 268 officials were sampled. The acquired data underwent descriptive analysis, shown as percentages, graphs, and frequency counts. The insufficiency of facilities constrains revenue creation in PWLP (60.0%), JNMZ (60.0%), RR (60.9%), and NTV (58.6%). Revenue from gate fees in JNMZ peaked in 2003, followed by 2002 and 2004, although JWLP experienced its highest revenue in 2002, influenced by seasonality. From 1999 to 2004, December experienced comparatively elevated income attributed to celebrations. This study pertains to the current research as it investigates income generating within the community.

Research Method

Ethical Considerations

Primarily, the researchers sought and obtained approval from the research and ethics committee of the University of Calabar, to execute the study. They further obtained a formal letter from the Research and linkages Unit, University of Calabar, to the Director of Tourism Bureau, who is in charge of workers and tourism business owners in Cross River State, Nigeria. The purpose of the research was clearly explained to the participants, and they were further assured of strict confidentiality and anonymity.

Design and Procedure

The methodology employed a descriptive research design. The area of investigation is Cross River State and is a distinctive region of ecotourism in Nigeria, including numerous tourist attractions like Obudu Ranch Resort, Agbokim Waterfall, the Seven Stream Waterfall, the Canopy Waterway, the National Wildlife Park, the Ikom Monoliths, Tinapa Resort Centre, and the mansion of Mary Slessor, built in 1887, among others. Obudu Ranch Resort features one of the longest cable cars in Sub-Saharan Africa. The State also has an international airport called Margaret Ekpo International Airport as well as a seaport at Calabar and also housing an Export Processing Zone (EPZ).

The population of the study focuses on tourism workers and tourism business owners of seven (7) selected local government areas with ecotourism protected areas in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Information from Nigeria National Park Service (NNPS, 2024) reveals that, there are approximately 28 ecotourism communities within these tourism-attractive sites. The report from the bureau of statistics shows that, 47,483 tourism workers and tourism business owners spread around these 28 ecotourism communities. This makes the total population of the study 47,483 tourism workers and tourism business owners.

Selection of the study sample followed a multi-stage process involving stratified, simple random, purposive and proportionate sampling to select the LGAs, communities and respondents therein for the study. Initially, stratified sampling technique was applied to stratify the state in line with the 3 senatorial districts. Additionally, simple random sampling technique was adopted to select the LGAs in the state. Using a bowl each for the educational zones, the paper balls were mixed up and the researcher with a blindfold picked one (1) LGA from Calabar South Senatorial District, three (3) LGAs each from Calabar Central Senatorial District, and one (1) LGA from Calabar North Senatorial District with a total of nine (9) LGAs across the state. Also, purposive sampling technique was used to select five (5) accessible rural communities within each LGA. Lastly, proportionate sampling technique was used to select 10% of tourism workers and tourism business owners in the communities. The sample for the study consisted of one thousand and forty (1,040) tourism workers and tourism business owners selected from five rural communities with ecotourism attractive sites. 10% of the population were selected from five (5) rural communities across five (five) LGAs in the study area.

The instrument designated as the Socio-economic Factors and Eco-Tourism Development in Rural Communities Questionnaire (SEFEDRCQ) utilized for data collection was constructed by the researchers and validated by two experts from the Test and Measurement Unit in the Department of Educational Foundation and one expert from the Department of Tourism Studies, all at the University of Calabar, Calabar. The instrument's dependability was determined using the Cronbach Alpha technique, yielding a reliability coefficient estimate between .83 and .89. The data collection involved the researchers and three research assistants. Data analysis was conducted using Simple Linear Regression Analysis.

Results

The study results are presented as follows:

HO1: Job creation does not significantly contribute to ecotourism development in Cross River State. The result of the analysis is presented in table 1

Table1: Summary of simple regression analysis for the influence of job creation on ecotourism development in Cross River State

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R. Square	Std. error of the estimate
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1	.844	.712	.712	2.135	
Model	Sum of square	Df	mean square	F-ratio	Sig.
Regression	11599.097	1	11599.097	2545.499	.000
Residual	4693.410	1030	4.557		
Total	16292.507	1031			
Variables	Unstandardized Regression B	Std. Error	Standardized Regression B	T	Sig.
(Constant)	5.140	.195	.844	26.367	.000
Ecotourism Development	.589	.012		50.453	.000

TABLE 1 (Researchers 2026)

- a. Criterion: Ecotourism development in rural communities in Cross River State
- b. Predictors: (constant) Job creation.

Table 1 presents a regression coefficient (R) of .844 and a coefficient of determination (R^2) of .712. This indicates that job creation plays a substantial role in the overall variance in ecotourism development noted in rural communities of Cross River State, with 71.2% of the total variation in ecotourism development in protected areas of Cross River State being attributable to this factor. This link is robust and statistically significant. The outcome indicates a t-value of 50.453 ($p < .05$). This indicates that employment creation considerably influenced the difference in ecotourism growth within rural communities. The rejection of the first null hypothesis indicates that job creation considerably impacted ecotourism development in the rural communities of Cross River State.

HO2: Income generation does not significantly contribute to ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State. The result of the analysis is presented in table 2.

Table 2: Summary of simple regression analysis for the influence of income generation on ecotourism development in Cross River State

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R. Square	Std. error of the estimate	
1	.956	.914	.712	1.117	
Model	Sum of square	Df	mean square	F-ratio	Sig.
Regression	13685.368	1	11599.097	2545.499	.000
Residual	1285.744	1030	1.248		
Total	14171.112	1031			
Variables	Unstandardized Regression B	Std. Error	Standardized Regression B	T	Sig.
(Constant)	3.560	.102	.956	34.89	.000
Ecotourism Development	.639	.006		104.706	.000

TABLE 2 (Researchers 2026)

- Criterion: Ecotourism development in rural communities in Cross River State
- Predictors: (constant) income generation).

Table 2 indicates a t-value of 104.706 ($p < .05$). This indicates that revenue generation substantially influenced the disparities in ecotourism development among rural areas. The rejection of the second null hypothesis indicates that revenue generation considerably influences ecotourism development in the rural communities of Cross River State.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the first hypothesis which stated that job creation significantly contributes to ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State. Job Creation and Capacity Building: Ecotourism creates direct employment opportunities in rural areas. Jobs range from tour guides and hotel staff to cooks and transport service providers. There is also the potential for skills development in hospitality, environmental management, and entrepreneurship. However, for these opportunities to be fully realized, targeted capacity-building programs are essential to equip the community with the necessary skills to succeed in the ecotourism industry.

The findings of this study suggest that ecotourism development can play a transformative role in both job creation and the broader socio-economic development of communities, particularly those in rural or marginalized areas. The concept of ecotourism is closely linked to the sustainable use of natural resources, where the emphasis is placed on conservation, local culture, and creating

long-term economic opportunities through responsible tourism. The implication of this result is that job creation is significantly related to ecotourism development in rural communities of Cross River State. The recent finding aligns with Rachim's (2022) assertion that employment opportunities in ecotourism sectors within local communities are frequently recognized as a crucial factor for the advancement and sustainability of various tourism modalities. Local employment serves as a recruitment method frequently utilized by tourism attractions. Nonetheless, heightened local involvement in tourism frequently generates tension between tourist sites and inhabitants.

The result of hypothesis two revealed that, there is significant relationship between income generation and ecotourism development. Cross River State is home to unique ecosystems, rainforests, and diverse wildlife, such as gorillas, elephants, and various endemic species. These natural assets are central to ecotourism initiatives. By attracting tourists to experience wildlife safaris, nature treks, and visits to protected areas, these resources can generate income for local communities. This income can come from activities like guided tours, entrance fees, accommodation, and handicraft sales. This implies that the development of ecotourism in rural communities offers an interesting and potentially sustainable approach to income generation.

This investigation corroborates the empirical findings of Beatrust & Solomon (2024), who examined the impact of ecotourism on the income of small-scale businesswomen in the Arumeru District of Tanzania. Women Development Fund (WDF); Tanzania Small-scale Business Women Empowerment Policy of 2000; and Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF) (URT, 2022; Kato and Katzer, 2023). This study evaluated the impact of ecotourism on the revenue of small-scale businesswomen in Arumeru District, Tanzania. The study specifically targeted to investigate ecotourism activities that enhance the income of small-scale businesswomen in the area of research. Consequently, ecotourism is seen as a vital approach for revenue production by small-scale businesswomen participating in eco-tourism operations in Arumeru District.

The findings align with Ogili et al. (2023), who observed that tourism is an economic activity that fosters growth, serves as a burgeoning revenue source for governments and the private sector, and provides significant income to individuals by generating diverse employment opportunities and enhancing personal welfare. He also stated that there is a necessity to initiate robust workforce development in the tourism sector, including hotels and catering, and that training courses and institutes should be formed for revenue production.

Conclusion

Following the findings of this study, it was concluded that job creation and income generation serve as the primary catalysts for ecotourism development in the rural communities of Cross River State. The data suggests that when local residents perceive tangible economic benefits; such as direct employment in conservancies or increased revenue for local small business entrepreneur, their support for environmental conservation significantly increases. Consequently, the economic viability of ecotourism is not merely a byproduct of development but a fundamental prerequisite for its long-term sustainability in the region.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Policymakers and stakeholders should develop ecotourism initiatives that promote income generation for local communities.
2. Policymakers and stakeholders should create jobs in tourism-related sectors to benefit local communities.

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