

POTENTIALS OF COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM IN IKO ESAI COMMUNITY OF CROSS RIVER STATE, SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Community Based Ecotourism is a form of tourism where local communities have substantial control over, and involvement in ecotourism development and management with a major proportion of the benefits accruing to the community. The study sought to access the potentials of Community Based Ecotourism in Iko-Esai Community of Cross River State in Nigeria. Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. Questionnaires and interviews were applied to collect primary data using a multistage method while secondary data were from relevant documents from CERCOPAN (an NGO operating in the area) as well as other past studies. A total of one hundred and forty-six (146) questionnaires were administered to respondents in two (2) selected wards in the community. Data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. The research results revealed that CERCOPAN is the major body, assisting in Community Based Ecotourism in the Community. There are enormous ecotourism assets in the study area, including the rich tropical forests, wildlife species and cultural heritage of the people. Other sites yet to be developed are Ikpibitoi, Bagamukum, Agorom Epkun and Owai. Ecotourism in the area was reported to have registered significant positive impact on the natural environment and the people of the area through active participation in all aspects of tourism development while benefits from ecotourism are accrued to the community. The community has good potentials of being organized and eager to see tourism and biodiversity conservation play a vital role in its economy. The elders in the area are also well respected which is critical in Community Based Tourism development.

KEYWORDS: *CERCOPAN, Economy, Community Based Ecotourism, Participation*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the world's largest industry and accounts for more than 10% of total employment and 11% of global GDP. The total tourist trips have been predicted to increase to 1.6 billion by 2010 (The Mountain Institute, 2000). Tourism associated with natural and protected areas (ecotourism) has been and continues to be a growing sector in the global tourism industry. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimated that regional tourism will increase by 52% in Northeast Asia, 103% in Southeast Asia, 119% in South Asia and 44% in Oceania between 1997 and 2007, while about \$55 billion dollars was estimated as receipts from tourism in the third world countries with a significant proportion in ecotourism (Whelan, 1991; Brandon, 1996). Conservation through the growth in demand for Ecotourism was estimated to range from 10% - 15%, while more optimistic forecasts were up to 30% (WWF, 2001). environment and humans even

though there are positive impacts to the economy.

In an attempt to differentiate between forms of ecotourism that advance the needs and concerns of local communities, and those that simply take place in natural areas and in a search for more effective strategies for conservation and development, several researchers began to employ the term “community-based ecotourism”, which recognizes the need to promote both the quality of life of the rural people and the conservation of resources (Belsky, 1999; Fitton, 1996; Timothy and White, 1999; Denman, 2001; Scheyvans, 1999). WWF (2001) defined community-based ecotourism as a form of ecotourism where the local community has substantial control over its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain in the community. It is a visitor-host interaction that has meaningful participation by both, and generates economic and conservation benefits for local communities and the natural environment offering the possibility of greater local control and participation. These help to offer solutions to potential limitations, including problems associated with defining the community, overcoming existing inequalities and gaining community consensus (Murphy, 1985; WWF, 2001).

Culturally, the value of community-based ecotourism development stems from the emphasis placed on local traditions and values while enabling social cohesion, harmony and cooperation, which enhances individual self-reliance, pride and hope for the future.

Community-based ecotourism is a new concept of ecotourism project initiative where business enterprises are owned and managed by the community. It also involves a higher intensity of community participation to provide widespread economic benefits and decision-making power to their communities themselves. This is emerging as a more effective strategy to salvage the problems of eco-tourism, but its potentials are not fully comprehended and its prospects not clearly envisaged. Thus, in most communities where community-based ecotourism has been initiated or is in the process of initiation, several areas are left out of the market because they are either not discovered or have not been properly designed for the market. This has caused the reduction in the possibility of generating optimum economic and social benefits from this form of land use.

This study will therefore assess the potentials of community-based ecotourism in Iko-Esai community of Akamkpa local government area in Cross River State.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Iko-Esai community is located in the South-eastern part of Nigeria in Akamkpa Local Government Area of Cross River State. It is 90 kilometers North of Calabar with a total land mass of about 21,000 hectares (sources).

The temperature of Iko-Esai community ranges from 23-37°C with a relative humidity of 90-100% in the rainy season and 70-80% in the dry season. The area is characterized by high rainfall with an average of 3,000mm per annum being recorded, while the dry season, last for up to four (4) months (December to March).

Iko-Esai community consists of a moist tropical lowland forest in its natural state. The area has about 12,000 hectares of community forest which is managed by the community and CERCOPAN including 400 hectares curbed out as core area for intensive protection, 4000hectares as research area co-managed by CERCOPAN and the community and 3000hectares as farmlands. The soil is deep and well drained with high humus content.

The area consists of a rich diversity of wildlife species ranging from the small Primates including gallagoes and Potos to medium size monkeys of the genus *Cercopithecus* and *Cercocercus* species to large primates which includes chimpanzees and lowland gorillas. The area also consists of a wide variety of ungulates species like duikers as well as golden cats, elephants, buffalos, countless species of birds and numerous butterfly species.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Both primary and secondary sources were used to obtain data for the study. A multi-method research approach was adopted in the collection of primary data for the study (Garci, 2008). This involved collecting data across the entire study area through direct observation by the researcher (Levine et. al., 1980) through the administration of standard questionnaires and interviews from key persons (stake holders). Direct observations provided the researcher with opportunities of building an inventory of tourism assets in the study area. Key informant interviews were used to obtain information on some specific issues in the study area. Two (2) of the interviews were conducted each on the two (2) selected wards while one (1) interview was conducted with the representative of CERCOPAN in the study area.

Results from data collected were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics such as mean and percentages (SAS, 2002). Secondary data was from relevant documents in CERCOPAN Office as well as past studies. Two wards – Eyeyeng and Okoyong were purposely chosen for the study and one hundred and forty-six (146) questionnaires were administered.

RESULTS

Presence of Ecotourism Assets in the Area

Many potential tourism assets in the study area were documented. Assets that were identified were classified into four (4) main categories.

- Natural tourist attractions
- Cultural tourist attractions
- Religious and archeological attractions
- Skills

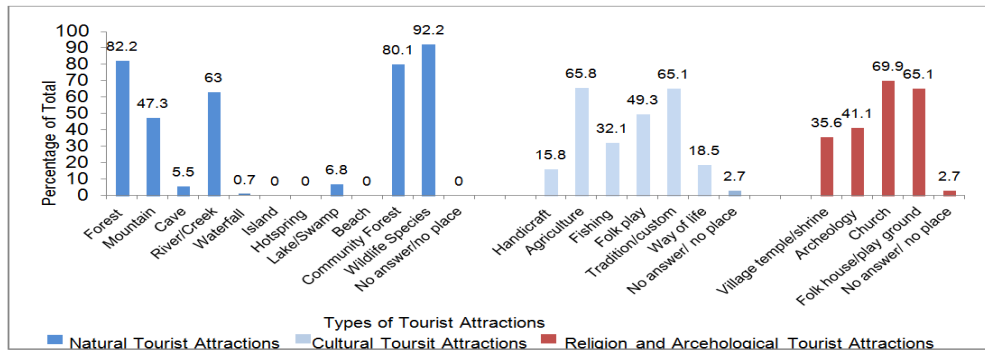
Details of this classification is shown in Table 1 and figure 1 below.

Table 1: Categories of Tourist Attractions in Iko-Esai Community

S/No.	Category	Assets
1	Natural tourist attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forests • Mountains • Caves • Rivers/creeks • Waterfall • Islands • Lakes and swamps • Beaches • Wildlife species

2	Cultural tourist attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handicraft • Agriculture • Fishing • Folklore • Tradition and customs
3	Religious and archeological attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Village/shrine • Archeology • Worship sites • Shrines/playground
4	Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority of the residents have local knowledge of local plants and animals • Medicinal and food value of plants and animals • Train local guides • Most residents communicate effectively • High hospitality among community members

Source: Field Survey, 2010

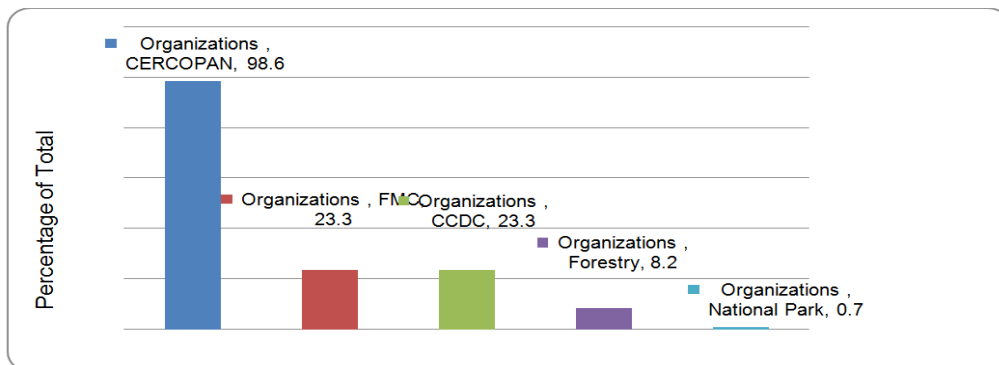


Source: Field Survey, 2010

Figure 1: Types of Tourist Attractions Present in Iko-Esai Community

ORGANIZATIONS THAT ASSIST IN ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN IKO ESAI COMMUNITY

Figure 2 below shows the organizations that help in ecotourism development in Iko-Esai community.



Source: Field Survey, 2010

Figure 2: Organizations that Assist in Ecotourism Development in Iko-Esai community

Based on the responses from administered questionnaires in fig. 2, CERCOPAN was the highest contributor in ecotourism development in the community (98.6%) followed by Forest Management Committee (FMC) and Community CERCOPAN Development Committee (CCDC) both contributing 23.3% each. The Cross River State Forestry Commission contributes 8.2%, while Cross River National Park contributes 0.7% to ecotourism development in the area.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ECOTOURISM

Figure 3 below is the reflection of the respondents on the opinion on the level of involvement by local communities in community based tourism

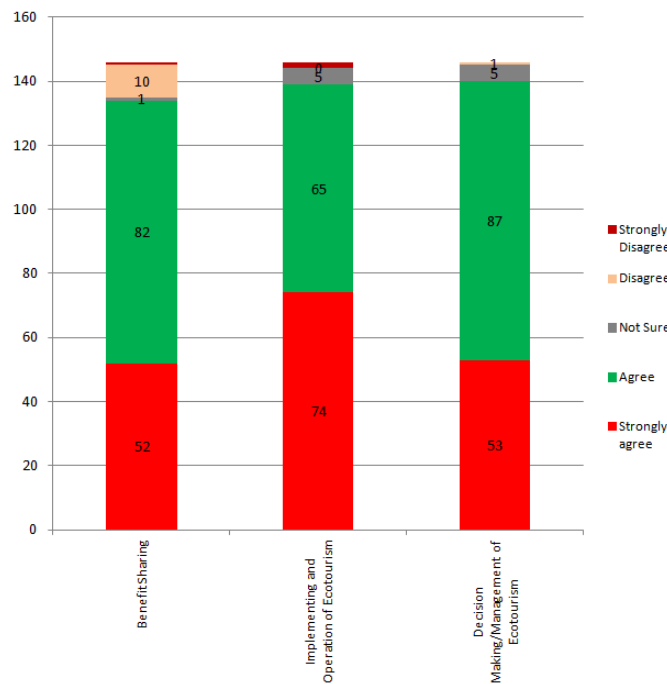


Figure 3: Involvement in Community Based Ecotourism Development

The result shows an overwhelming agreement by respondents that the community is fully involved in all the activities of tourism development in Iko-Esai including benefit sharing, decision making/management of ecotourism as well as implementing and operation of ecotourism.

DISCUSSIONS

Assets

The community harbors a substantial number of assets to sustain community based tourism as reflected in figure 1. The area also has high tropical forests with numerous species of flora and fauna which have attracted world attention (WWF, 2001).

It was also reported that there are some undiscovered ecotourism potentials in the area. Some potential ecotourism assets not yet harnessed include Bagamogum, Ikpibitoi, and other areas. If these areas are properly developed for visitors, community based tourism in the area will be enhanced.

All the respondents interviewed were of the opinion that the protection of wildlife species by the community has been given very serious attention. This has been encouraged in the community through the assistance of CERCOPAN that is engaged in private conservation.

An inventory of potential tourism products in the area has commenced by CERCOPAN. A potential tourism product is known as 'community-based tourism assets' (Mountain Institute 2000) and can range from nature-based activities and local handicrafts to cultural events (Cooper, 2004). Tourists are initially attracted to an area because of its unique features (Mitchell and Reid 2001); therefore the assessment process should include an evaluation of the characteristics that make the community unique. Cultural assets, traditions of the people and way of life, are ideally suited to become tourism products because they encompass the features that make a community unique (McKercher and Ho 2006).

CBT Opportunities in Iko-Esai Community

Iko-Esai community has untapped potential for tourism that have not been developed. Elders in the community are well respected which is critical in CBT development (Mitchell and Reid 2001). Iko-Esai has the benefits of being organized and having strong leadership. It is also a community that is eager to see tourism and biodiversity conservation play a vital role in its economy (Ives 2007). In addition, the community is situated in an area that is full of unique cultural and natural attractions with relatively undisturbed forests which is seen as fundamental to attracting tourists into the community (Mitchell and Reid 2001).

The cultural features of the community will be a good starting point for tourist development as that will not require training and expensive funding for infrastructure development. Cultural features that could be marketed include local dancing festivals, marriage ceremonies and annual festivals including the celebration of unique crops in the area.

The people of Iko-Esai are very welcoming, friendly and hospitable. They appreciate their culture and history including matters related to their environment. There are elders in the community who still know much about traditional uses of plants that can be taught to tourists visiting the community. English is not the spoken language throughout the community, but some residents speak it and others would be willing to communicate in 'pidgin english'.

With the consent of the community, some areas (400 hectares) of the forest have been upgraded to a core area for protective conservation while some portion of the remaining forest is co-managed by CERCOPAN and the community as research area.

There is a ban placed on the hunt and extraction of some wildlife species in the area. The community placed bans on indiscriminate exploitation of species in the core area to ensure that conservation is successful.

Key informant interviews were conducted with key community members. A key informant interview was conducted with community leaders who are actively involved in the CERCOPAN Project. The development of this project was assisted through funding from CERCOPAN and was aimed at providing training for some local community members. Some level of support has also been received from Cross River State Forestry Commission and Cross River National Park.

A key informant interview was conducted with the representative of CERCOPAN – a local NGO working in the community. He has worked in community development in Iko-Esai in numerous capacities. The results of the interview pointed to the fact that the elements for the success of Community Based Tourism as expressed by the NGO representative

was because of high level of participatory process, strong NGO involvement and marketing as well as the support and commitment of the local people.

There are a number of components and approaches that work well in the development of CBT that will contribute to its success (Cooper 2004). These elements and approaches include: a participatory process that is transparent and strong non-governmental organization (NGO) involvement. Tourism that is going to be community-based or community managed, needs to include the community from the onset of its development, beginning with the planning process. CBT initiatives that have employed an inclusive process from the onset of development have shown the greatest success (Cooper 2004). To ensure long-term success of the tourist destination, strong community support and participation is needed in the development process (Tosun 2000). The process should not only be participatory, but transparent as well. Transparency will aid in mitigating any conflicts that may arise (Cooper 2004). A community that is engaged in the planning and development process will simultaneously build their capacity for the tourism industry, one of the main barriers initially identified (Mitchell and Reid 2001).

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