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Exploring the Potential of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes for Rural Tourism Development in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract
The study explored the untapped potential of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes for rural tourism development in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. In evaluating the natural, cultural, and socio-economic attributes of these lakes and their environs, the research employed field surveys, geospatial analysis, and questionnaire administration was utilized. Findings revealed significant tourism potential, with the lakes boasting unique ecological features and cultural heritage related to salt production. The study emphasized the socio-economic benefits of cultural tourism, including income generation, employment opportunities, and improved infrastructure. Identified challenges encompass inadequate infrastructure, limited accessibility, environmental concerns, and the need for community capacity building. Recommendations for harnessing these potentials and mitigating challenges include comprehensive rural tourism planning, infrastructure improvement, community involvement, sustainable resource management, and effective marketing strategies.

Key words*:* Mapping, Uburu and Okposi, Salt Lakes, Rural tourism, Untapped potentials Nigeria.

Introduction
Nigeria possesses a diverse range of tourism facilities, making it suitable for ecotourism, cultural tourism, food tourism, festivals, carnivals, and religious tourism. Despite the existence of a National Tourism Master Plan, the development of tourism in Nigeria faces various

challenges. A major issue is the absence of well-structured development plans for many tourism destinations and attractions, resulting in a deficiency in the six A's of tourism: attraction, accommodation, amenities, accountability, activities, and affordability. This lack of a comprehensive tourism development plan particularly impedes rural tourism in Ebonyi State. The Uburu Salt Lake, a natural ecosystem with significant potential for rural tourism, has received minimal attention from development organizations. Rural tourism in Uburu revolves around assets that may not be as important to local residents but appeal to outsiders. Despite the value that the natural ecosystem, including the salt lakes, brings to the local people, there has been no investment from the government and concerned organizations to develop these resources for commercial purposes.

Uburu is endowed with four salt lakes, containing saline water known as "Mmahi." While the Salt Lake has been a significant source of revenue and livelihood for the local population for generations, cultural restrictions govern its use and management. These restrictions include the belief that only women who have reached menopause can participate in salt harvesting, making salt production a woman's occupation limited to those in the menopause stage. The process of becoming a salt maker is labor-intensive and demanding, posing challenges for interested women due to the substantial time and physical energy investment required, despite the goal of improving their socio-economic status.

Salt Lakes as Tourism Destinations

Scholarly literature underscores the significance of diverse natural and cultural resources as fundamental to tourism destinations (Akeh, 2022; Obong et al., 2020). The development of these resources can result in the creation of employment opportunities (Obong et al., 2017). An illustration of such natural assets contributing to tourism is exemplified by salt lakes, as demonstrated by Tuz (2017). Salt Lake destinations not only provide tourists with various opportunities for relaxation and recreation but also serve as natural attractions and habitats for endemic species, emphasizing the importance of sustainable destination management (Williams, 2002). Through effective tourism planning that takes ecological elements into account, the region can be consciously preserved as an appealing element for alternative tourism (Obong et al, 2012; Akeh, 2022; Ohlan, 2017).

Salt lakes, like those in the Eastern Rift Valley in Central Africa and the western United States of America, attract large numbers of birds and other wildlife, making them popular tourist destinations globally. Pascal's (2019) research in Germany explores the touristic potential of European saline lakes, transformed from salt production facilities to diverse tourist

destinations. These salt landscapes offer a spectrum of experiences, from health and wellness to heritage, education, and environmental friendliness, appealing to various tourist market segments (Uchenna, 2020).

Historically, salt production sites have been transformed into tourist attractions or integrated into tourism offerings. The tourism industry leverages sea salt production's preservation of natural habitats to promote activities like bird watching and environmental expeditions. Many destinations are reshaping their saline tourist scapes to keep up with changing tourist trends. Despite the rich history and potential of salt works and environments, tourism scholars have given limited attention to their attraction, visitor motivation, and marketing. However, the salt therapy business's growth indicates high touristic potential for salt lakes. Considering various approaches and aspects, these unique landscapes can become valuable assets and pull factors for destinations.

Challenges facing salt lakes for rural tourism have been extensively studied and documented. One major issue is the adverse impact of various factors on the lakes, such as secondary salinization and mining activities. Global climate change affects the water balance of endorheic lakes, leading to decreased water levels. Excessive evaporation due to unrestricted water withdrawals and the effects of global warming poses significant challenges. Efforts are being made to address the shrinkage of saline lakes, including partial restoration through constructing barriers or increasing water inflows.

In Utah's Salt Lake City, air quality is a pressing challenge, requiring attention across the entire Wasatch Front. Homelessness and education are also significant concerns, necessitating investment in housing and schools to assist the homeless population. Education is managed by the Salt Lake City School District, which has an elected board for rebuilding schools in affected areas.

Methodology

The research utilized a robust mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative participatory appraisal, quantitative research design, and geospatial techniques. Qualitative data were gathered using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods, such as focus group discussions, while quantitative research employed questionnaire surveys to discern the drivers and pressures of sustainable rural tourism in the Uburu and Okposi salt lakes. Geospatial data, including a continuous 20-year span of satellite imagery, were also collected to conduct a thorough analysis of the outcomes.

The collected data encompassed information on the drivers and pressures of rural tourism, the environmental condition of the salt lakes, the impact of sustainable tourism on the environment, and the responses of local communities to the growing impacts of rural tourism. Qualitative data, using nominal data scales, were incorporated to complement the quantitative findings.

Data for the study were derived from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through questionnaire surveys, while secondary data included existing statistics, publications, journals, articles, theses, books, conference papers, and reports from reputable organizations.

For sampling, a purposive sampling technique, specifically the maximum variation approach, was employed. The sample comprised 1,000 respondents from diverse social groups within the Uburu and Okposi communities. The data collection procedure involved segregating community members into different social groups and utilizing a simple random sampling technique to select respondents. The Hermeneutic Phenomenological Interview Technique (HPIT) was employed for qualitative data collection, enabling researchers to comprehend the perceptions and experiences of the respondents.

One of the development challenges of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes which directly affects rural tourism in the region is the absence of a readily accessible map. Communities surrounding the lakes were identified and a map was produced as shown in Figure 3. The communities that surround the Salt Lakes includes: Umuchima, Umuarum, Umuagwu, Ihenu, Urobo, Ogwu, Umuobuna, etc for Uburu Salt Lake; while Okposi Okwu, Oblozara, Ameanu, Umuka, Mebi-Owua, Mgbom, Mgbom-Achara, Amenu, Amachi communities, etc for Okposi Salt Lake.

Annual trend in patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes

The annual trend in the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes from 2000 to 2020 is shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. The trend and annual variability in the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes showed that in 2000, the annual patronage to the Lakes was 711 persons; this value decreased by 33.2% after 10 years to 475 persons in 2010 and thereafter, it slightly increased to 506 persons in 2015. And in 2020, the patronage level decreased further to 440 persons. The annual patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes thereafter oscillated with obvious pattern of variability and in 2020, the patronage level decreased by 13% from 2015 to 440 persons. Increase in the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes was experienced in 2000, 2018, 2001, 2017 and 2003 with the level of patronage greater than 580 persons, while decrease in

the level of patronage was experienced in 2020, 2015, 2009 and 2002 with the level of patronage below 520 persons.

Furthermore, the information presented in Table 2 and Figure 2 showed that from 2000 – 2020, the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes showed an apparent decreasing trend due to the yearly variability in the level of patronage. The pattern over time also revealed that for the period under review (from 2000 to 2020), patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes decreased by 38.1%. The trend in the patronage indicated that the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes showed yearly variability with 2000 being the most patronized year followed by 2018 and then 2001. The result therefore identifies 2000 and 2018 as the most patronized years, while 2020 and 2015 had the lowest patronage (Table 1). In all, the information shown in Figure 1 shows that from 2000 – 2020; the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes shows a downward trend as a result of the decrease in the level of patronage in the later years.

Table 1: Yearly patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes from 2000 to 2020

Year	Patronage
2000	711
2001	609
2002	514
2003	587
2004	548
2005	540
2006	578
2007	586
2008	591
2009	511
2010	475
2011	544
2012	556
2013	561
2014	524
2015	506
2016	541
2017	602
2018	664
2019	544
2020	440

Source: Community records, 2022.

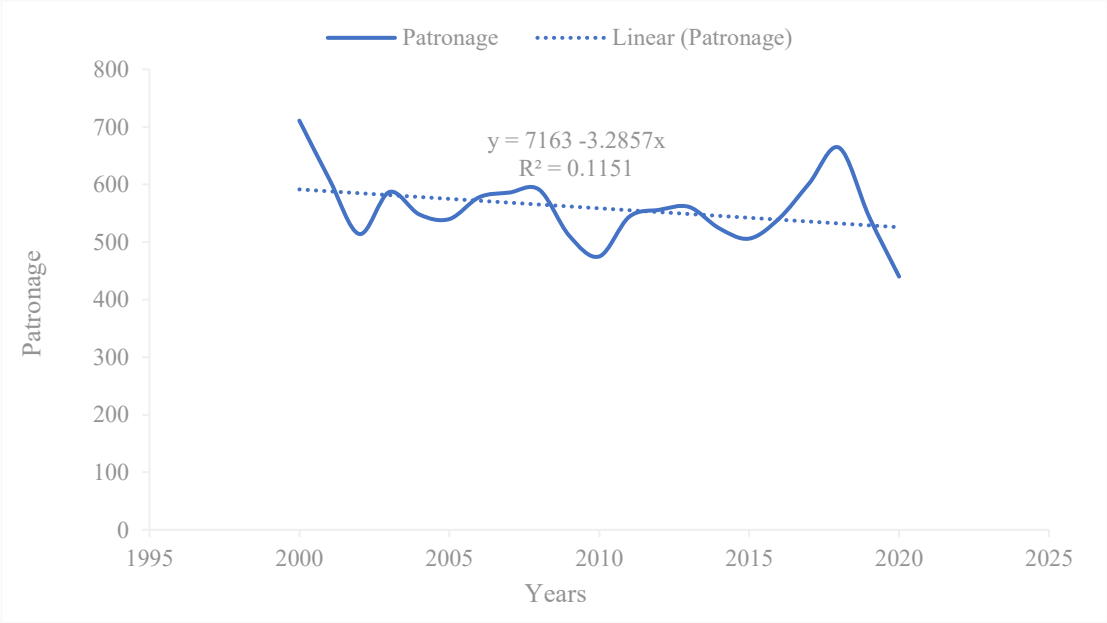

FIG. 1: Annual patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes from 2000 to 2020
Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2022.

However, indicates there is a significant decrease in the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes; this is so as the level of patronage to the Lakes decreased by 38.1%.

Mean monthly patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes

The patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes usually takes place at directly time of the month. For some obvious reasons such as festivals and Christmas celebrations, more persons are expected to patronize certain recreational centres and zoos as well as other natural landscapes like the Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes. The information in Table 20 showed that the months of June, December and March recorded the highest level of patronage, while reduced patronage levels were recorded in July, October, and November. The months of June, December and March mark the peak in the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes, while July and October show a deep drop in the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes.

The information in figure 1 clearly shows monthly variability in the patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes with June as the most patronized month followed by December and March, while the month with the lowest patronage was July closely followed October and November.

The study therefore identifies June as the most patronized month, and July as the month with the lowest level of patronage.

Table 2: Monthly patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes from 2000 to 2020

Months	Patronage
Jan	851
Feb	871
March	934
April	891
May	844
June	2174
July	809
Aug	814
Sept	881
Oct	829
Nov	841
Dec	993

Source: Community records, 2022; Researcher's Fieldwork, 2022.

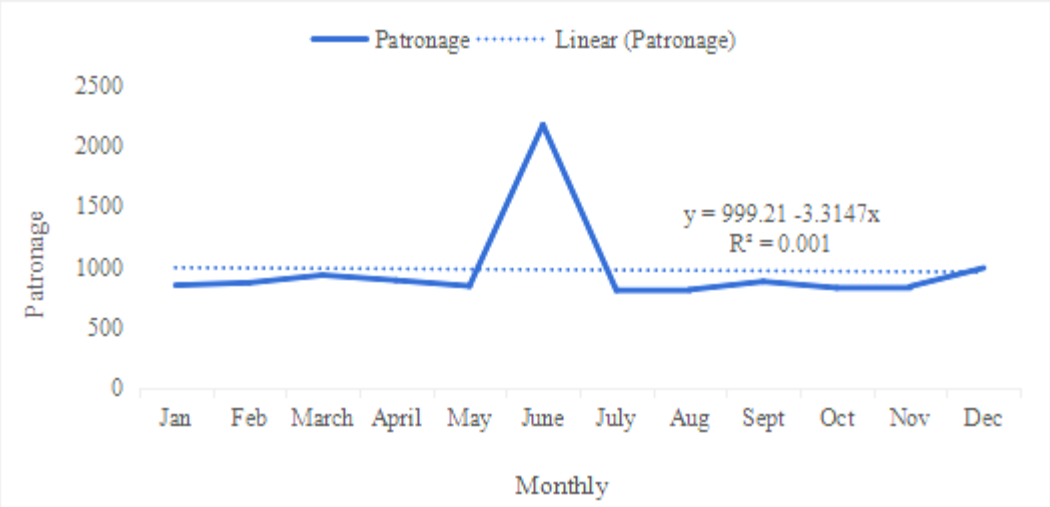

FIG. 2: Monthly patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes from 2000 to 2020

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2022.

Table 3: Monthly patronage of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes from 2000 to 2020

Months	Patronage
Jan	851
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Source: Community records, 2022; Researcher's Fieldwork, 2022.

To produce a map of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes, for rural tourism, addressing the development challenge of the absence of an accessible map for these lakes, coordinate location of the communities was generated (Table 4). The map was produced by identifying the surrounding communities, as depicted in figure 2. For Uburu aSalt Lake, the communities around it include Umuchima, Umuarum, Umuagwu, Ihenu, Urobo, Ugwu, Umuobuna, and others. Similarly, Okposi Lake is surrounded by communities such as Okposi Okwu, Oblozara, Ameanu, Umuka, Mebi-Owua, Mgbom, Mgbom-Achara, Amenu, Amachi, and others.

Table 4: Communities of Oburu and Okposi

S/N	Community	Latitudes	Longitudes
1	Urobo	$6^0$4'46.414"N	$7^0$43'28.7"E
2	Ihenu	$6^0$2'45.088"N	$7^0$41'57.131"E
3	Umuchima	$6^0$3'5.631"N	$7^0$44'29.428"E
4	Umuarum	$6^0$2'47.72"N	$7^0$44'42.912"E
5	Umuagwu	$6^0$2' 38.842"N	$7^0$45'23.259"E
6	Obiozara	$6^0$3'32.766"N	$7^0$46'5.705"E
7	Ameanu	$6^0$2'43.505"N	$7^0$46'41.663"E
8	Okposi Okwu	$6^0$2'50.458"N	$7^0$48'22.467"E
9	Mebi-Owa	$6^0$1'29.93"N	$7^0$50'1.219"E
10	Umuka	$6^0$2'8.177"N	$7^0$50'57.148"E

11	Ogwu	$6^0$1'26.965"N	$7^0$44'36.377"E
12	Umuobuna	$6^0$1'2.331"N	$7^0$44'52.115"E
13	Amachi	$6^0$0'6.634"N	$7^0$47'38.02"E
14	Mgbom-Achara	$6^0$0'15.752"N	$7^0$48'45.208"E
15	Amenu	$5^0$59'20.042"N	$7^0$51'35.586"E
16	Okposi Okwu Salt Lake	$6^0$2'21.301"N	$7^0$48'22.531"E
17	Uburu Salt Lake	$6^0$3'14.654"N	$7^0$44'51.811"E
18	Eneagu	$6^0$5'5.066"N	$7^0$48'40.096"E*
19	Ezza South	$6^0$3'2.226"N	$7^0$52'42.338"E*
20	Afikpo South	$5^0$56'33.669"N	$7^0$48'25.526"E*
21	Enugu State	$5^0$59'14.154"N	$7^0$41'8.35"E*

*Boarder community/State
Source: Field survey, 2022

Challenges of salt lakes operations and management

Patronage of attractions is often attended by challenges (Uchenna, 2020), challenging managers to planning and proactive planning (Uzun, 2012). for exaample, vehicular ownership of visitors leads to parking and security concerns (Williams, 2002; Wu, Xie, and Tsai, 2015). Increase in vehicular ownership is increase in problems auch as parking spaces and security (Tuz, 2017). prevalaent cases of parking and security of vehicles have become regular concerns in airports, shopping malls, recreational centers, resorts, among others.

Lack of accessible parking facilities can negatively impact local businesses, reduce patronage, while on the other hand, it can boost the growth of businesses and industries that benefit from tourism demands.

During focus group discussion aimed at exploring the socio-economic potential of Ohaozara Local Government Area (LGA) resulting from salt production at the Salt Lakes, the women's viewpoint was solicited. It emerged that the LGA possesses vibrant cultural potential, notably through the "Iri Nmahi festival," which draws visitors from diverse backgrounds to partake in the traditions of the Ohaozara people. This festival not only allows visitors to explore the salt lakes but also learn about their historical significance to the southeastern people of Nigeria, particularly during the civil war period of 1967-1970. Festive periods were reported to present very lively atmosphere for Ohaozara people around the salt lakes.

Coordinate locations of communities around the salt lakes was generated as presented in Table 3. A map depicting the salt lakes was produced (see figure 2), for rural tourism. It was

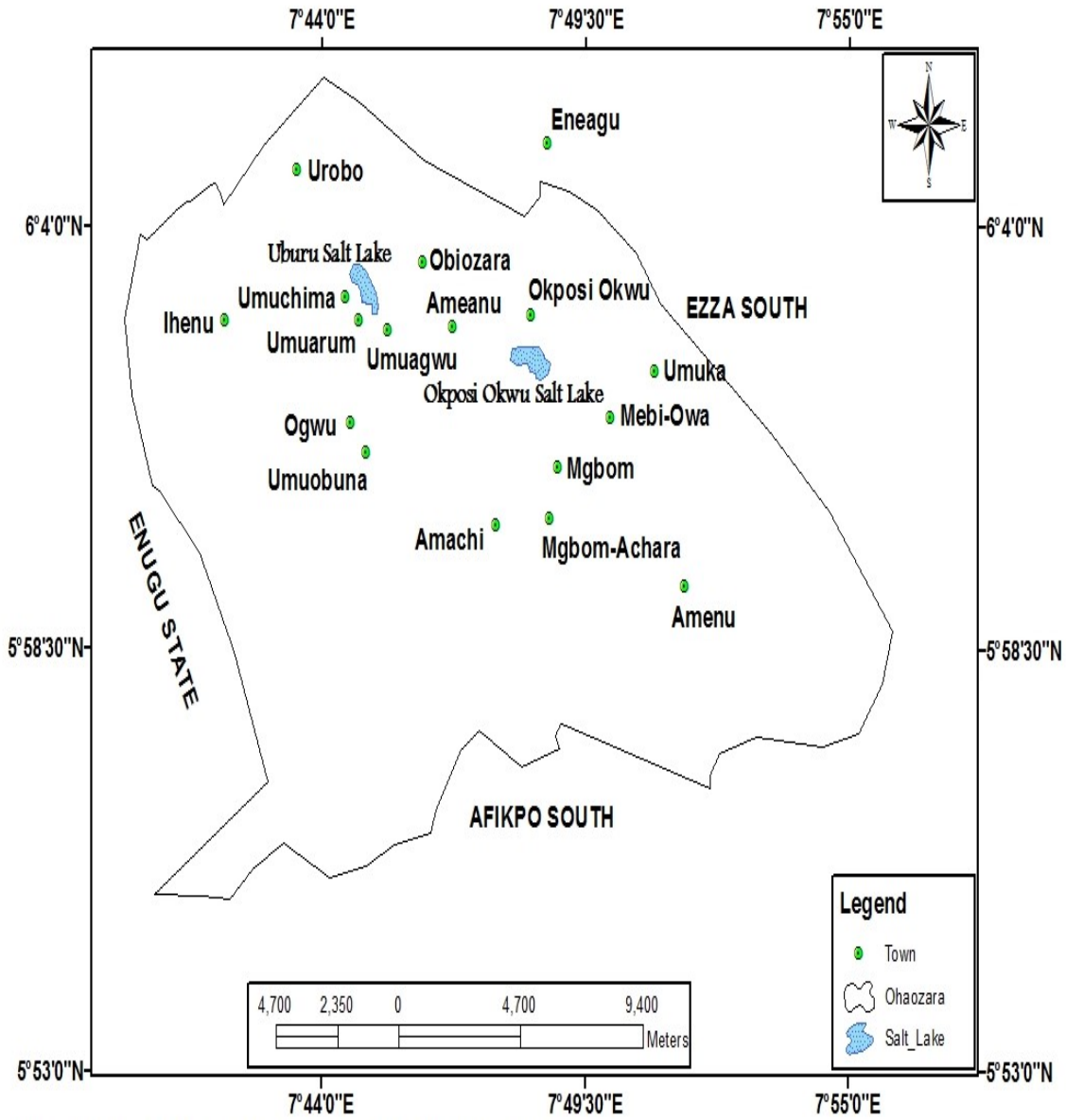

Fig. 2: Map of Ohaozara showing the Study Location

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present investigation was structured to assess the viability of Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes as catalysts for rural tourism development within the Nigerian context. The findings of the study affirm that Uburu and Okposi Salt Lakes harbor latent possibilities for the advancement

of rural tourism in Nigeria, presenting avenues for experiences rooted in nature and culture. To fully harness these potentials and fortify rural livelihoods through responsible and inclusive tourism development, strategic planning, community engagement, and sustainable practices in natural resource exploitation are deemed imperative. The realization of the socio-economic and environmental benefits inherent in these distinctive salt lake destinations necessitates ongoing research endeavors and collaborative initiatives involving pertinent stakeholders.

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