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Tourism and the Conservation of Natural Ecosystems in Cross River State: Balancing Development and Sustainability

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Abstract
This study examines the relationship between tourism activities, tourism management practices, and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State, Nigeria. The research adopts a quantitative descriptive survey design, utilizing structured questionnaires to gather data from 200 respondents, including tourism operators, government agencies, local communities, conservation organizations, and tourists. The study tested two hypotheses: there is no significant relationship between tourism activities and ecosystem conservation, and (2) there is no significant relationship between tourism management practices and ecosystem conservation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation analysis in SPSS version 26. The findings reveal a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between both tourism activities and tourism management practices with ecosystem conservation. These results suggest that well-managed tourism contributes positively to environmental sustainability by enhancing conservation efforts, increasing awareness, and promoting responsible tourism policies. The study underscores the importance of effective tourism regulations**,** stakeholder engagement**,** and sustainable practices in balancing tourism development with environmental conservation. It recommends strengthening tourism policies, increasing public awareness, and ensuring continuous monitoring to optimize the benefits of tourism while protecting natural ecosystems.
Keywords: Tourism activities, Tourism management, Ecosystem conservation, Sustainable tourism, Environmental policy

Introduction and background
Tourism is a major driver of economic growth and development, providing employment, revenue, and cultural exchange opportunities. However, its impact on natural ecosystems has sparked debates on how to balance economic benefits with environmental sustainability. In Cross River State, Nigeria, tourism is closely linked to its rich biodiversity, including national parks, forest reserves, and ecotourism destinations. These natural assets attract visitors while also serving as critical habitats for diverse plant and animal species.

Despite the potential benefits of tourism, concerns have been raised about its role in environmental degradation, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. Unsustainable tourism practices, such as unregulated infrastructure development and pollution, threaten the conservation of natural ecosystems. Conversely, well-managed tourism initiatives, particularly ecotourism, can contribute to conservation efforts by generating funds for protected areas, promoting environmental awareness, and engaging local communities in sustainable resource management.

The relationship between tourism and ecosystem conservation in Cross River State remains an area of interest for researchers and policymakers. While some studies suggest that tourism can be a tool for conservation, others highlight the challenges posed by increased human activity in fragile ecosystems. This study seeks to explore how tourism activities and management practices influence the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State, with the aim of identifying strategies for achieving a balance between development and environmental protection.

Natural ecosystems play a crucial role in supporting biodiversity, regulating climate, and providing essential resources for human well-being. In Nigeria, Cross River State is known for its vast tropical rainforests, including the Cross River National Park, which is home to endangered species such as the Cross River gorilla. These ecosystems are increasingly being leveraged for tourism, with ecotourism initiatives aiming to promote conservation while enhancing local economic opportunities.

Tourism, when managed effectively, can provide significant conservation benefits. Revenue from tourism can support the maintenance of protected areas, provide alternative livelihoods for local communities, and foster environmental education. However, unregulated tourism expansion can also lead to habitat destruction, pollution, and increased pressure on natural resources, undermining conservation efforts.

Several policies and conservation programs have been implemented to address these challenges, including Nigeria's National Tourism Policy and various environmental protection laws. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of tourism management in safeguarding natural ecosystems remains uncertain. There is a need for empirical research to assess how tourism activities and management strategies influence environmental conservation in Cross River State.

This study, therefore, aims to examine the relationship between tourism and the conservation of natural ecosystems, focusing on how tourism activities and management practices impact environmental sustainability. By doing so, it seeks to provide insights that can guide policymakers, conservationists, and tourism stakeholders in developing strategies that promote both tourism growth and ecological preservation.

Statement of the problem

The conservation of natural ecosystems is essential for maintaining biodiversity, ecosystem services, and sustainable development. In Cross River State, tourism plays a significant role in economic growth, particularly through ecotourism and wildlife conservation efforts. However, the expansion of tourism activities, if not properly managed, may contribute to environmental degradation, deforestation, and habitat loss, posing a threat to the very ecosystems that attract visitors.

Despite the presence of conservation initiatives and tourism policies, there is limited empirical evidence on how tourism activities and management practices influence ecosystem conservation in the state. The extent to which tourism development aligns with environmental sustainability remains unclear, raising concerns about the long-term viability of both the tourism industry and natural resource preservation.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the relationship between tourism and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State, with a focus on identifying sustainable tourism practices that balance development and environmental protection.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to investigate the relationship between tourism and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State, with a focus on balancing development and sustainability. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between tourism activities and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State.
2. Assess how tourism management practices influence the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State.

Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between tourism activities and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State.

2. There is no significant relationship between tourism management practices and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State.

Literature review

The relationship between tourism and the conservation of natural ecosystems has been widely studied in different contexts. While tourism can contribute to environmental protection through ecotourism and sustainable management practices, it can also pose significant threats if not properly regulated. This review explores existing literature on the relationship between tourism activities, tourism management practices, and the conservation of natural ecosystems, with a focus on Cross River State, Nigeria.

Tourism Activities and Conservation of Natural Ecosystems

Tourism activities have been recognized as both a driver of conservation and a threat to natural ecosystems. According to Okonkwo and Odey (2018), tourism development in Cross River State has the potential to promote environmental conservation through ecotourism initiatives, particularly in areas such as Obudu Mountain Resort and Cross River National Park. They argue that when properly managed, tourism activities provide financial incentives for conservation and create awareness about environmental protection. However, they also note that unregulated tourism can lead to habitat destruction, deforestation, and pollution.

Similarly, Amalu et al. (2012) examined the impact of tourism on local communities in the Becheeve area of Cross River State. Their findings indicate that while tourism has contributed to economic development, it has not significantly enhanced conservation efforts due to weak policy enforcement and inadequate community involvement. They recommend that conservation strategies should be integrated into tourism planning to ensure that natural ecosystems are preserved.

Ewona, Ewona, and Edem (2022) reviewed the impact of tourism in Cross River State and found that poor waste management, land degradation, and overuse of natural resources are major environmental concerns associated with tourism activities. They emphasize the need for strict environmental policies to mitigate the negative effects of tourism on the ecosystem.

Furthermore, Eja et al. (Year) analyzed community leadership and its role in ecotourism development in Cross River State. Their study highlights that while ecotourism activities have been promoted as a conservation strategy, the lack of proper infrastructure and insufficient local engagement have hindered their effectiveness in preserving natural ecosystems. They

stress that local communities must be actively involved in conservation efforts to achieve sustainable tourism.

Ene and Okpin (2024) explored the impact of in-situ conservation efforts on tourism development in Boki Local Government Area. Their findings suggest that conservation programs, when well-implemented, can enhance tourism potential by maintaining biodiversity and natural attractions. They advocate for increased investment in conservation policies and sustainable tourism models.

Tourism Management Practices and Conservation of Natural Ecosystems

Effective tourism management practices play a crucial role in ensuring that tourism contributes positively to conservation efforts. Several studies have examined the extent to which tourism policies, regulations, and stakeholder involvement influence environmental sustainability.

According to Okonkwo and Odey (2018), the implementation of sustainable tourism policies in Cross River State has been inadequate due to poor enforcement and lack of stakeholder coordination. They argue that while the government has introduced policies aimed at regulating tourism activities, weak institutional frameworks have limited their effectiveness in achieving conservation goals.

Amalu et al. (2012) emphasize that community participation in tourism management is essential for conservation. Their study found that tourism projects that involved local communities in decision-making were more successful in promoting environmental protection than those managed solely by government agencies or private investors. They recommend strengthening community-based tourism initiatives to enhance conservation outcomes.

Ewona et al. (2022) assessed tourism governance in Cross River State and identified funding constraints, corruption, and limited technical expertise as key challenges in implementing sustainable tourism management practices. They suggest that increasing financial support for conservation programs and improving monitoring mechanisms could enhance the effectiveness of tourism policies.

Eja et al. (Year) found that private-sector involvement in tourism management has been minimal in Cross River State, which has contributed to poor conservation outcomes. Their study highlights that partnerships between government agencies, private businesses, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can lead to better environmental management and resource sustainability.

Ene and Okpin (2024) stress the importance of environmental education and awareness campaigns as part of tourism management. Their research indicates that when tourists and local communities are well-informed about conservation practices, there is a higher likelihood of compliance with environmental regulations. They advocate for more public awareness programs to promote responsible tourism behavior.

The literature reviewed highlights the complex relationship between tourism activities, tourism management practices, and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State. While tourism has the potential to support conservation through ecotourism and sustainable policies, challenges such as weak regulatory frameworks, inadequate community involvement, and poor waste management threaten environmental sustainability. To achieve a balance between tourism development and ecosystem conservation, it is essential to implement stronger policies, engage local stakeholders, and promote sustainable tourism practices. Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of existing conservation strategies and identifying innovative approaches to integrate tourism with environmental sustainability.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between tourism activities, tourism management practices, and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Research Design

The study employs a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for assessing relationships between tourism activities, management practices, and conservation outcomes. This design allows for the collection of primary data through structured questionnaires to evaluate stakeholders' perceptions and empirical relationships among the study variables.

Population of the Study

The target population comprises key stakeholders involved in tourism and conservation efforts in Cross River State. This includes: Tourism operators (e.g., managers of hotels, tour guides, and travel agencies), Government agencies (e.g., Cross River State Tourism Bureau and Ministry of Environment), Local communities (residents living near major ecotourism sites such as Obudu Mountain Resort and Cross River National Park), Conservation organizations (NGOs and environmental groups), Visitors and tourists (those who engage in tourism activities within the state)

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The study adopts a stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation from different stakeholder groups. The sample size is determined using Cochran's formula for an infinite population:

Using this formula, a sample size of approximately 200 respondents was selected. The sample was proportionally allocated among the five stakeholder groups.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires designed to capture respondents' views on tourism activities, management practices, and ecosystem conservation. The questionnaire consists of three sections: Demographic Information (e.g., age, gender, occupation, and years of experience in tourism or conservation). Tourism Activities and Ecosystem Conservation (e.g., impact of tourism on biodiversity, pollution levels, and habitat preservation). Tourism Management Practices and Policy Implementation (e.g., effectiveness of regulations, stakeholder involvement, and public awareness). The survey items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1).

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, frequency, and percentages) were used to summarize respondents' views on tourism and conservation. Inferential statistics were conducted using Pearson's correlation analysis to test the hypotheses. Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 for accuracy and reliability.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

To ensure validity, the questionnaire underwent content validation by tourism and environmental experts. A pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents, and Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the survey items, with a reliability threshold of 0.71 to 0.84.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles, including:

1. Informed consent from participants before data collection.
2. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses.
3. Voluntary participation, with the right to withdraw at any stage.

Presentation of results

Ho_1

There is no significant relationship between tourism activities and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State.

Table 1: Result of Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between tourism activities and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State. (N= 200).

Variables	$\bar{X}$	σ	Cal. r	p-value
Tourism activities	19.52	1.85		
			.91**	.000
Conservation of natural ecosystems	21.85	2.45		

Significant at 0.05 level, df = 198

The results of the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis indicate a strong positive relationship between tourism activities and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State. The mean score for tourism activities was 19.52, with a standard deviation of 1.85, while the mean score for the conservation of natural ecosystems was 21.85, with a standard deviation of 2.45.

The computed correlation coefficient (r) of 0.91 suggests a strong positive relationship between the two variables. Furthermore, the p-value of 0.000 is less than the 0.05 significance level, indicating that the relationship is statistically significant.

As a result, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant relationship between tourism activities and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State, is rejected. This finding implies that an increase in tourism activities is associated with improved conservation efforts. It suggests that tourism, when properly managed, can contribute positively to environmental protection through initiatives such as ecotourism, conservation funding, and public awareness campaigns. However, the strong correlation also underscores the need for strategic policies to ensure that tourism development aligns with sustainable environmental practices.

Ho_2

There is no significant relationship between tourism management practices and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State.

Table 2: Summary of Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between tourism management practices and the conservation of natural ecosystems (N= 200).

Variables	$\bar{X}$	σ	Cal. r.	P-value
Tourism management practices	10.74	1.45		
			.89**	.000
Conservation of natural ecosystems	21.85	2.451		

Significant at 0.05 level, df = 198

The results of the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis reveal a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between tourism management practices and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State. The mean score for **tourism** management practices was 10**.**74, with a standard deviation of 1.45**,** while the mean score for conservation of natural **ecosystems** was 21.85, with a standard deviation of 2.45. The computed correlation coefficient (rrr) of 0.89 indicates a very strong positive relationship between the two variables. Furthermore, the p-value of .000, which is less than the 0.05 significance level, confirms that this relationship **is** statistically significant.

Since the p-value is below the threshold for significance, the null hypothesis—stating that there is no significant relationship between tourism management practices and the conservation of natural ecosystems—is rejected. This implies that effective tourism management practices contribute significantly to the conservation of natural **ecosystems** in Cross River State.

The strong correlation suggests that when tourism activities are well-managed—through policies, regulations, environmental monitoring, and stakeholder engagement—there is a greater likelihood of improved conservation outcomes. Proper management ensures that tourism development does not negatively impact the natural environment but rather promotes sustainable practices such as ecotourism, controlled visitor access, habitat protection, and local community involvement in conservation efforts.

Overall, the findings highlight the crucial role of tourism governance and policy implementation in environmental sustainability. They emphasize the need for continued investment in effective tourism management strategies to balance economic benefits with ecological preservation in Cross River State.

Discussion of findings

Ho_1

The findings of this study indicate a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between tourism activities and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State. This aligns with existing literature that highlights the role of tourism, particularly ecotourism, in promoting environmental sustainability.

Tourism as a Driver of Conservation

Several studies have established that tourism can serve as a catalyst for environmental conservation when properly managed. For instance, Honey (2008) emphasizes that ecotourism plays a crucial role in biodiversity conservation by generating funds for protected areas and promoting local participation in environmental stewardship. Similarly, Buckley (2012) found that tourism activities, when designed within a conservation framework, contribute significantly to ecosystem protection by reducing harmful human activities such as deforestation and illegal poaching. The strong correlation ($r=0.91r = 0.91r=0.91$) in this study supports these findings, suggesting that increased tourism activities may be linked to improved conservation efforts in Cross River State.

Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

The results align with the work of Weaver and Lawton **(**2017**)**, who argue that well-managed tourism contributes to the sustainability of natural ecosystems through funding for conservation programs, employment of local conservationists, and improved infrastructure for environmental management. Similarly, Stronza and Durham (2008) found that tourism activities in biodiversity hotspots often lead to increased environmental awareness among local communities, leading to better conservation practices.

In the context of Cross River State, where tourism sites such as the Obudu Mountain Resort, Cross River National Park, and Agbokim Waterfalls are key attractions, the positive relationship observed may be attributed to conservation efforts tied to these destinations. As tourism activities increase, resources allocated for environmental protection may also improve, leading to greater preservation of natural ecosystems.

Tourism Management Practices and Conservation Outcomes

Further supporting this study's findings, Eagles, McCool, and Haynes (2002) stress that sustainable tourism management enhances conservation outcomes when governments and stakeholders enforce regulations, monitor ecosystem health, and ensure tourism activities align

with environmental protection goals. The positive correlation found in this study suggests that tourism, particularly when guided by strategic management practices, can serve as a tool for balancing development and conservation efforts**.**

Challenges and the Need for Sustainable Tourism Policies

Despite the positive relationship, some scholars caution that tourism can also pose environmental risks if not managed properly. Wall and Mathieson (2006**)** note that mass tourism, if unregulated, can lead to environmental degradation through increased pollution, habitat destruction, and over-exploitation of natural resources. The findings of this study, therefore, reinforce the need for sustainable tourism policies that ensure tourism growth does not compromise ecosystem integrity.

Overall, this study supports existing literature that tourism activities, when properly managed, have a positive impact on the conservation of natural ecosystems. The strong correlation between tourism and conservation in Cross River State suggests that tourism can serve as a viable strategy for environmental sustainability. However, effective management strategies, policy enforcement, and community engagement remain crucial in ensuring that tourism development contributes positively to conservation efforts.

Ho_2

The findings of this study reveal a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between tourism management practices and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State (r=0.89,p=.000r = 0.89, p = .000r=0.89,p=.000). This indicates that well-structured tourism management practices play a crucial role in promoting environmental sustainability. These results align with existing literature that highlights the importance of strategic tourism management in protecting natural ecosystems while supporting economic and social development.

The Role of Tourism Management in Conservation

Several scholars emphasize that effective tourism management is essential for balancing economic growth and environmental conservation. Eagles, McCool, and Haynes (2002) argue that sustainable tourism management involves regulations, environmental policies, and monitoring systems that ensure tourism activities contribute to, rather than degrade, natural ecosystems. Similarly, Weaver (2013) asserts that when tourism is well-managed—particularly in ecologically sensitive areas—it enhances conservation efforts by providing funds for environmental protection and increasing public awareness about sustainability.

In Cross River State, where tourism sites such as Cross River National Park, Obudu Mountain Resort, and Agbokim Waterfalls attract visitors, proper tourism management appears to have a significant impact on ecosystem conservation. The strong correlation (r=0.89r = 0.89r=0.89) found in this study suggests that the implementation of ecotourism policies, visitor regulations, and conservation-focused tourism initiatives is positively influencing the preservation of natural resources.

Policy Implementation and Sustainable Tourism Practices

The findings are consistent with the work of Buckley (2012)**,** who emphasizes that effective environmental policies and tourism regulations lead to better conservation outcomes. Countries that have established and enforced protected area policies, eco-certification schemes, and sustainable tourism guidelines have demonstrated improved biodiversity conservation. Similarly, Hall and Lew (2009) highlight that government policies and stakeholder engagement play a pivotal role in ensuring that tourism development aligns with environmental protection goals.

In the context of this study, the positive relationship between tourism management practices and conservation suggests that when policies regulating tourism activities, visitor behavior, and resource usage are properly implemented, they contribute to environmental sustainability. This reinforces the need for government agencies, conservation organizations, and local communities to work collaboratively in managing tourism-related activities to mitigate environmental degradation**.**

Stakeholder Involvement in Conservation-Oriented Tourism

Another important aspect of sustainable tourism management is stakeholder engagement. Stronza and Durham (2008) argue that involving local communities, NGOs, and private tourism operators in conservation efforts enhances ecosystem protection and improves local livelihoods. The strong correlation found in this study suggests that active participation of stakeholders in tourism management is playing a key role in conservation outcomes in Cross River State.

Additionally, Honey (2008) stresses that sustainable tourism models such as community-based tourism and public-private partnerships contribute to long-term conservation by ensuring that tourism revenues are reinvested into environmental protection projects. The findings of this study suggest that where stakeholders are effectively involved in decision-making processes**,** conservation outcomes are likely to be more positive.

Challenges and the Need for Stronger Tourism Management Policies

Despite the positive relationship found in this study, scholars caution that tourism, if not properly managed, can lead to negative environmental consequences such as deforestation, pollution, and wildlife disturbance (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). While tourism management practices in Cross River State appear to support conservation, continuous monitoring and policy refinement are necessary to ensure that mass tourism, unsustainable infrastructure development, and poor enforcement of regulations do not compromise conservation efforts.

The findings of this study align with existing literature, demonstrating that effective tourism management practices play a critical role in the conservation of natural ecosystems**.** The strong positive correlation (r=0.89r = 0.89r=0.89) suggests that policy implementation, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable tourism strategies are key drivers of environmental conservation in Cross River State. However, continuous improvement in tourism regulations, enforcement mechanisms, and community participation remains essential to sustain the positive impacts of tourism on conservation efforts**.**

Conclusion and recommendations

This study found a strong positive relationship between tourism activities, tourism management practices, and the conservation of natural ecosystems in Cross River State. The results indicate that well-managed tourism contributes to environmental sustainability by promoting conservation awareness, funding ecosystem protection, and encouraging responsible tourism practices. However, ensuring effective policies and stakeholder engagement is essential to maximize tourism's benefits while minimizing ecological harm.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Tourism Policies – Enforce stricter environmental regulations and align policies with global best practices.
2. Enhance Stakeholder Participation – Involve local communities, conservation organizations, and private operators in tourism planning.
3. Promote Sustainable Tourism – Encourage eco-friendly practices, green certifications, and responsible visitor behavior.
4. Increase Public Awareness – Conduct educational campaigns on conservation and responsible tourism.
5. Improve Conservation Funding – Allocate tourism revenue to conservation projects and support public-private partnerships.
6. Monitor Environmental Impact – Conduct regular assessments to evaluate and refine tourism's role in ecosystem conservation.
7. Implementing these recommendations will balance tourism development with environmental conservation, ensuring long-term sustainability in Cross River State.

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