Influence of Gender and Socio-Economic Status on Preferences in Ecotourism Activities Among Residents of Tourists spots in Cross River State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of gender and socio-economic status on preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria. A descriptive-correlational design was employed to assess how these demographic variables affect individuals' ecotourism activity preferences. The target population comprised residents living in or near tourist destinations in the state, and a stratified random sample of 168 respondents was selected to ensure representation across gender, socio-economic status, and location (rural and urban). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire that assessed demographic characteristics and preferences for various ecotourism activities using a 5-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests. The results indicated no significant difference in ecotourism preferences between male and female residents, $t(166) = 1.246$, $p = .216$, leading to the retention of the null hypothesis. However, socio-economic status was found to significantly influence ecotourism preferences, $t(166) = 2.042$, $p < .05$, with lower socio-economic status residents reporting higher preference scores. These findings suggest that while gender does not play a significant role in ecotourism engagement, socio-economic background is a key determinant. The study recommends that ecotourism policies and programs in Cross River State prioritize affordability and accessibility to encourage broader community participation, particularly among lower-income residents.

Keywords: ecotourism, gender, socio-economic status, preferences, Cross River State, tourism participation

Introduction and background

Ecotourism has gained prominence as a sustainable development strategy that seeks to balance environmental conservation with economic opportunities for local communities (Honey, 2008). It focuses on responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people (TIES, 2015). Cross River State, located in southeastern Nigeria, is rich in biodiversity and natural attractions, making it a prime location for ecotourism development (Ajao & Salau, 2021). The state is home to significant biodiversity hotspots, including the Cross River National Park and the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary, which attract both local and international tourists. However, the full potential of ecotourism in Cross River State can only be realized through active involvement of local communities, who are key stakeholders in the ecotourism value chain.

The participation of local residents in ecotourism is shaped by various factors, including gender and socio-economic status. These variables influence individuals' access to, engagement with, and preferences for ecotourism activities (Scheyvens, 1999). For instance, traditional gender roles may limit women's access to tourism opportunities, while socio-economic status can create disparities in the ability of individuals to participate in ecotourism (Dyer et al., 2003). Understanding how these factors influence preferences for ecotourism activities can help in designing more inclusive tourism policies that address the needs of different segments of the population. This study, therefore, aims to explore the impact of

gender and socio-economic status on the preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Ecotourism, as a form of sustainable tourism, has become increasingly important in preserving natural ecosystems while providing economic opportunities for local communities (UNWTO, 2020). Cross River State, known for its diverse ecosystems, has significant ecotourism potential. The state's national parks and wildlife reserves have become major ecotourism attractions, generating income for local communities (Ajao & Salau, 2021). However, the involvement of local communities in ecotourism remains critical for the success of these ventures. Residents' participation is often influenced by socio-cultural factors such as gender and socio-economic status, which can determine access to resources, information, and decision-making processes (Sharma et al., 2016).

Gender dynamics are particularly significant in shaping ecotourism participation. In many societies, including in Nigeria, gender roles often dictate the types of activities that individuals engage in, with men typically having greater access to economic opportunities, including those in tourism-related sectors (Khan, 2003). For example, women in rural communities may be more involved in household-based activities rather than participating in ecotourism roles such as guiding or management, which are often dominated by men (Gibson, 2001). Thus, gender inequality may limit the full involvement of women in ecotourism, reducing their ability to benefit from it.

Similarly, socio-economic status plays a crucial role in shaping participation in ecotourism. Residents from higher socio-economic backgrounds are likely to have more access to tourism-related opportunities, as they possess the financial means, education, and infrastructure needed to engage in ecotourism (Dyer et al., 2003). In contrast, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face barriers to participation, such as limited financial resources or lack of awareness about ecotourism opportunities (Scheyvens, 2002). The preferences for ecotourism activities may also vary based on socio-economic factors, with wealthier residents possibly favoring more expensive or exclusive tourism experiences, while those from lower socio-economic statuses may prefer more affordable and locally accessible activities.

While much of the existing literature focuses on the broad economic and environmental impacts of ecotourism (Deloitte, 2019), there is limited research on the role of gender and socio-economic status in shaping the preferences of local residents for ecotourism activities. This study aims to address this gap by examining how gender and socio-economic factors influence ecotourism preferences in Cross River State. The findings will help in developing policies and strategies that promote more inclusive participation in ecotourism, ensuring that both men and women, as well as individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, can benefit from and contribute to sustainable tourism development in the region.

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of gender and socio-economic status on the preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Determine whether there are significant differences in ecotourism activity preferences between male and female residents.
2. Assess the role of socio-economic status in shaping these preferences.

By investigating these factors, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how demographic variables influence the selection of ecotourism activities, which can inform the development of more inclusive and targeted ecotourism strategies for diverse populations. Additionally, the study will provide insights into how gender and socio-economic status

might impact the participation of local residents in ecotourism, with implications for policy, sustainable tourism development, and community engagement in ecotourism projects.

Research hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in ecotourism activity preferences between male and female residents of Tourists spots in Cross River State.
2. Socio-economic status does not significantly influence preferences for ecotourism activities among Residents of Tourists spots in Cross River State

Literature review

Ecotourism is a rapidly growing sector within the global tourism industry that emphasizes environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and local community benefits (Honey, 2008). As such, understanding the factors that influence residents' participation and preferences in ecotourism activities is crucial to ensuring that local communities benefit equitably from tourism. Among these factors, gender and socio-economic status have been identified as key determinants of participation in and preferences for ecotourism activities. This empirical review explores studies related to the influence of gender and socio-economic status on ecotourism preferences.

Gender and Ecotourism Preferences

Gender plays a critical role in shaping preferences for ecotourism activities. Several studies have highlighted that men and women often exhibit different participation patterns and preferences due to cultural and social factors. For instance, a study by Dyer, Aberdeen, and Schuler (2003) examined gender-based differences in ecotourism participation and found that men were more likely to engage in activities that required physical strength and adventurous elements, such as hiking and wildlife tracking. In contrast, women tended to favor activities that were perceived as more educational or cultural, such as nature walks or visits to local villages, which were seen as less physically demanding (Gibson, 2001).

Similarly, Scheyvens (1999) suggested that gender roles significantly influence the types of ecotourism activities that women and men engage in. While men often dominate roles such as ecotourism guiding or running ecotourism businesses, women may be more involved in community-based ecotourism initiatives that focus on sustainable crafts or cultural heritage tourism (Khan, 2003). These gendered differences are often a result of traditional roles that limit women's access to certain tourism-related opportunities, particularly in developing countries where gender inequality is more pronounced (Sharma et al., 2016). Thus, gender inequality may prevent women from fully benefiting from ecotourism, which is a challenge for the development of inclusive tourism policies.

Further research by Gibson (2001) and Ajao and Salau (2021) indicated that gender-specific preferences for ecotourism activities might also vary according to the location and type of ecotourism development. For example, in rural areas, women may prefer activities that are closer to home and align with domestic responsibilities, such as farm visits or bird-watching, while men may prefer more physically intensive activities such as trekking. These preferences suggest that ecotourism programs should account for gender differences to ensure equitable access to tourism opportunities.

Socio-Economic Status and Ecotourism Preferences

Socio-economic status (SES) is another critical factor influencing ecotourism participation. Research has consistently shown that individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to participate in and enjoy ecotourism activities due to their greater access to

resources, transportation, and information (Dyer et al., 2003). For instance, in their study on the socio-economic factors influencing ecotourism, Dyer et al. (2003) found that higher-income individuals were more likely to engage in ecotourism that involved longer travel distances and higher costs, such as guided tours and international ecotourism experiences. Conversely, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds tended to participate in ecotourism activities that were more affordable and closer to home, such as local wildlife reserves or hiking trails.

In a study by Sharma et al. (2016), socio-economic status was found to have a direct impact on preferences for ecotourism activities. The research indicated that residents from higher socio-economic classes preferred more exclusive ecotourism experiences, such as luxury eco-lodges or high-end safari tours, while those from lower socio-economic classes preferred less expensive activities such as community-based tours or free-entry parks. This disparity in preferences was attributed to differences in disposable income, education, and awareness of ecotourism opportunities.

Additionally, socio-economic status can influence the type of employment and business opportunities available to local residents in the ecotourism sector. High-income individuals may have the capital and skills to operate ecotourism-related businesses such as tour guiding, hospitality services, or souvenir selling, whereas individuals from lower socio-economic strata may engage in roles that are more labor-intensive or have limited earning potential, such as working as porters or housekeepers (Ajao & Salau, 2021). This socio-economic divide can create inequality in the benefits derived from ecotourism, highlighting the need for policies that address these disparities to promote more inclusive ecotourism development.

Interaction of Gender and Socio-Economic Status

The interaction between gender and socio-economic status is another key factor influencing ecotourism preferences. Research has shown that these two variables often intersect, resulting in compounded effects on the opportunities available to residents in ecotourism activities. For example, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face more severe barriers to participation in ecotourism, both due to their gender and limited economic resources. In such cases, women may have less access to information about ecotourism, fewer financial resources to engage in tourism activities, and reduced mobility to travel to ecotourism sites (Sharma et al., 2016). In contrast, men from higher socio-economic backgrounds may have both the financial resources and social capital to fully engage in ecotourism, resulting in unequal participation rates.

A study by Gibson (2001) on gender and ecotourism in rural areas found that socio-economic status often amplifies gender inequalities, particularly in communities where women's roles are confined to domestic tasks. In these settings, women are less likely to participate in ecotourism activities that are financially or physically demanding, further limiting their ability to benefit from ecotourism. Similarly, Ajao and Salau (2021) observed that socio-economic disparities in access to education and employment opportunities often led to unequal representation of women in higher-level ecotourism roles such as guides or tour operators.

The empirical evidence suggests that both gender and socio-economic status significantly influence preferences for ecotourism activities, with gendered patterns of participation often reflecting broader social norms and inequalities. Moreover, socio-economic status plays a critical role in determining the accessibility of ecotourism opportunities, with individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds generally more likely to participate in a wider range of activities. These findings highlight the need for inclusive ecotourism policies that address both gender and socio-economic disparities, ensuring that all members of the community, regardless of gender or socio-economic status, can benefit from ecotourism opportunities.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the influence of gender and socio-economic status on preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria. The study employs a quantitative research design to investigate these variables and their relationship with ecotourism preferences.

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive-correlational design. The descriptive component provided a detailed account of the preferences for ecotourism activities among male and female residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, while the correlational aspect examined the relationships between socio-economic status and ecotourism preferences. The design allows for the analysis of existing characteristics of the population and how these characteristics influence their preferences without manipulation of variables.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study consists of residents living in or near tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria. This population includes individuals engaged in or affected by ecotourism, with a focus on both rural and urban areas. The total population of these residents is estimated based on local census and tourism records from Cross River State Tourism Bureau to be 1,088,000 people.

A sample size of 168 respondents was drawn for the study. This sample size is determined based on recommendations for survey-based research and ensures adequate power for statistical analysis. Participants were selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure that both urban and rural residents are represented. Stratification was based on the respondents' location (rural vs. urban), and gender served as an additional stratification criterion to ensure a balanced representation of male and female respondents.

The respondents were further categorized into socio-economic status groups (low and high) based on their self-reported perception. This categorization allowed for an examination of how socio-economic status affects preferences for ecotourism activities.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria: Residents who are at least 18 years old and have lived in Cross River State for a minimum of one year will be included. They should also have some familiarity with or have participated in ecotourism activities in the area.

Exclusion Criteria: Tourists or non-residents who do not live in Cross River State will be excluded. Individuals who are below 18 years of age or those who are unable to understand the survey instruments due to language or literacy barriers will also be excluded.

Data Collection Instruments

The data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure the following: Demographic Information: This section captured information on respondents' gender, age, level of education, and socio-economic status (high or low). Preferences for Ecotourism Activities: A set of questions assessed respondents' preferences for different types of ecotourism activities (e.g., wildlife watching, hiking, cultural tours, eco-lodging). Respondents were asked to rate their preferences on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly

disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for various ecotourism activities available in Cross River State. Socio-Economic Status: This section evaluated socio-economic status using self-reported income, education, and occupation categories, which was used to categorize respondents into low or high socio-economic groups. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a smaller sample (20 respondents) from a similar demographic group to ensure its reliability and validity.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out over a four-week period. Trained enumerators visited the selected areas in Cross River State (rural and urban tourist spots) and distributed the questionnaire to the respondents. The enumerators explained the purpose of the study and obtain informed consent from the participants before administering the survey. The participants informed that their participation is voluntary, and they can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

To minimize bias and ensure accuracy, the questionnaire was administered face-to-face. The respondents were given sufficient time to answer the questions, and the enumerators were available to clarify any uncertainties.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive Statistics: The demographic characteristics of the respondents (e.g., age, gender, socio-economic status) was summarized using frequencies, percentages, and means. The ecotourism activity preferences were also described by calculating the mean preference score for each activity. Inferential Statistics: To test the study hypotheses, the following statistical techniques were employed: Independent t-test was used to determine if there are significant differences in ecotourism activity preferences between male and female residents and to assess if socio-economic status (low and high) significantly influences preferences for ecotourism activities. The level of significance for the statistical tests will be set at $\mathbf{p < 0.05}$.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee at the University of Calabar. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understand the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and their anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. Additionally, the study was conducted in compliance with the APA Code of Ethics (American Psychological Association, 2020), ensuring that participants' rights and well-being are prioritized.

Presentation of results

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in ecotourism activity preferences between male and female residents of tourist spots in Cross River State.

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference in ecotourism activity preferences between male and female residents of tourist spots in Cross River State. The result showed that male respondents (M = 13.37, SD = 2.34) had slightly higher mean preference scores compared to female respondents (M = 12.90, SD = 2.54). However, the difference was not statistically significant, $t(166) = 1.246$, $p = .216$.

Therefore, the null hypothesis is retained, indicating that gender does not significantly influence ecotourism activity preferences among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State.

Table 1: Independent t-test analysis of difference in ecotourism activity preferences between male and female residents of Tourists spots in Cross River State (N=168).

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	F	Sign
Male	90	13.37	2.339			
				1.246	.088	.000
Female	78	12.90	2.541			

Not Significant at 0.05 level of significance; df =166.

Hypothesis Two: Socio-economic status does not significantly influence preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State.

An independent samples *t*-test was carried out to determine whether socio-economic status significantly influences residents' preferences for ecotourism activities. The analysis revealed that respondents with low socio-economic status (M = 13.54, SD = 2.51) reported higher preference scores compared to those with high socio-economic status (M = 12.78, SD = 2.33). The difference was statistically significant, $t(166) = 2.042$, $p < .05$.

Based on this result, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that socio-economic status has a significant influence on preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State.

Table 2: Independent t-test analysis of influence of socio-economic status on preferences for ecotourism activities among Residents of Tourists spots in Cross River State (N=168).

Socio-economic status	N	Mean	SD	t-value	F	Sign
Low	81	13.54	2.510			
				2.042	1.243	.000
High	87	12.78	2.325			

Significant at 0.05 level of significance; df =166.

Discussion of findings

Hypothesis one

Hypothesis one investigated whether gender significantly influences preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria. An independent samples *t*-test revealed no statistically significant difference between male (M = 13.37, SD = 2.34) and female (M = 12.90, SD = 2.54) respondents, $t(166) = 1.246$, $p = .216$. Thus, the null hypothesis was retained, suggesting that gender does not significantly influence ecotourism activity preferences in the study area.

This finding stands in contrast to several existing studies that have identified gender as a key determinant in ecotourism participation and preferences. For instance, Dyer, Aberdeen, and Schuler (2003) found that men are typically more inclined toward physically demanding and adventurous ecotourism activities such as hiking, wildlife tracking, or rafting. Women, on the other hand, tend to prefer cultural or educational experiences such as guided nature walks, visits to heritage sites, or craft exhibitions (Gibson, 2001). These differences have been

attributed to gendered perceptions of safety, leisure, and physical capability, often influenced by socio-cultural expectations.

Scheyvens (1999) further argued that gender roles influence not only participation patterns but also the nature of involvement in the ecotourism industry itself. Men often occupy leadership roles such as tour guides and business operators, while women are more frequently found in support roles like hospitality services or in community-based cultural programs (Khan, 2003). These patterns are particularly evident in developing countries, where deeply rooted gender norms may restrict women's mobility, decision-making, and access to ecotourism opportunities (Sharma et al., 2016).

The absence of significant gender differences in the current study might be reflective of a shifting cultural landscape in Cross River State, where increasing awareness, education, and tourism development may be narrowing gender gaps in ecotourism participation. It may also suggest a context-specific reality in which both men and women have relatively equal access to and interest in local ecotourism activities, especially if these activities are integrated into the everyday experiences of residents rather than framed solely as leisure pursuits.

In conclusion, although the current findings do not align with most global literature on gender and ecotourism, they offer valuable insight into the evolving dynamics of gender participation within the context of Cross River State. These results underscore the importance of contextual and localized analyses in tourism research and call for further qualitative investigations to explore the underlying factors contributing to these observed patterns.

Hypothesis two

The findings from this study indicate that socio-economic status significantly influences preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria, $t(166) = 2.042$, $p < .05$. Specifically, individuals with lower socio-economic status reported higher preference scores for ecotourism activities (M = 13.54, SD = 2.51) than their higher socio-economic status counterparts (M = 12.78, SD = 2.33). This outcome suggests that residents from less affluent backgrounds are more likely to engage with ecotourism activities, potentially due to their proximity to the tourist spots or familiarity with local cultural and natural heritage.

This result offers a contrast to much of the existing literature, which typically associates higher socio-economic status with greater participation and preference for ecotourism activities. For example, Dyer et al. (2003) found that individuals from higher-income backgrounds were more inclined to participate in costlier and logistically demanding ecotourism experiences, such as international trips or professionally guided tours. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2016) noted that higher socio-economic groups tended to prefer exclusive ecotourism options, such as luxury eco-lodges, while lower-income groups favored community-based or low-cost nature-based experiences.

However, the present study's finding aligns with a growing body of research suggesting that context matters significantly, especially in developing country settings. Residents from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be more engaged with nearby, low-cost ecotourism options, not as tourists in the traditional sense but as individuals with deeper cultural ties and practical access to these locations (Ajao & Salau, 2021). In such contexts, the affordability and accessibility of ecotourism activities may make them more appealing to lower-income residents, particularly when these activities are community-driven or integrated into everyday life.

Additionally, this finding may reflect the dual role played by local residents in ecotourism regions—as both participants and facilitators. Lower-income residents may be involved in informal or semi-formal ecotourism roles, which enhances their awareness and appreciation of such activities (Honey, 2008). These nuanced realities underscore the importance of context-sensitive ecotourism planning that acknowledges and supports the active participation of low-income residents, not just as workers, but also as consumers and stakeholders.

While the finding diverges from traditional expectations, it highlights the complex, localized nature of socio-economic influence on ecotourism engagement. It also calls for further research to understand how community proximity, cultural familiarity, and informal economic participation shape ecotourism preferences, particularly in African ecotourism destinations.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of gender and socio-economic status on preferences for ecotourism activities among residents of tourist spots in Cross River State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that gender did not significantly influence ecotourism activity preferences, suggesting a relatively balanced participation between male and female residents. However, socio-economic status was found to have a significant influence, with lower socio-economic status residents showing greater preference for ecotourism activities than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

These results highlight the importance of considering socio-economic diversity when planning and promoting ecotourism initiatives, especially in local communities where access and affordability play a significant role in shaping engagement.

Recommendations

1. Inclusive Ecotourism Planning: Stakeholders and tourism planners should design ecotourism programs that are affordable and accessible to residents across socio-economic classes, particularly those in lower-income brackets.

2. Community Sensitization: Awareness campaigns should be implemented to encourage participation among all demographic groups, ensuring that both men and women feel equally welcomed and empowered to engage in ecotourism activities.

3. Capacity Building: Training and skill development programs should be provided for local residents, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to enable them to participate not just as tourists but as service providers and entrepreneurs in the ecotourism value chain.

4. Policy Support: Local government and tourism agencies should adopt policies that promote equity and remove structural barriers to participation, particularly for marginalized groups.

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