

Community-Based Eco-Tourism Education and Capacity Building: Enhancing Local Participation in Sustainable Tourism Development in Cross River State

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between community-based eco-tourism education, capacity building, and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State, Nigeria. Guided by two hypotheses, the study examined whether community-based eco-tourism education and capacity building significantly influence local participation in sustainable tourism activities. A correlational research design was employed, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis. The quantitative component involved a sample of 280 respondents drawn from eco-tourism communities using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings revealed a strong positive and statistically significant correlation between community-based eco-tourism education and local participation ($r = .654, p < .05$), as well as a moderate but significant correlation between capacity building and local participation ($r = .523, p < .05$). These results suggest that enhancing eco-tourism education and implementing effective capacity-building initiatives significantly increase local community involvement in sustainable tourism development. The findings align with theories of participatory development, empowerment, social capital, and human capital, as well as previous empirical studies emphasizing the importance of education and skill development in community-driven tourism. Based on these outcomes, the study recommends the expansion of community-based education and capacity-building programs to strengthen local participation and ensure the long-term sustainability of eco-tourism in Cross River State.

Keywords: eco-tourism education, capacity building, sustainable tourism development, local participation, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Keywords:

Introduction and Background

Sustainable tourism development has become a central focus globally as a strategy to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and cultural preservation. Eco-tourism, a branch of sustainable tourism, is recognized for its potential to contribute to environmental conservation and provide economic benefits to local communities while minimizing negative environmental impacts (Honey, 2008). As such, eco-tourism has become a focal point for developing countries seeking to harness their natural and cultural resources for sustainable development. In Cross River State, Nigeria, the region's rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and unique natural landscapes present significant opportunities for the growth of eco-tourism. The state is home to pristine rainforests, waterfalls, and wildlife sanctuaries, which attract both domestic and international tourists. Despite these valuable assets, local communities have not fully

capitalized on the potential benefits of eco-tourism, particularly in terms of active participation and leadership in tourism development initiatives.

One of the primary challenges hindering the growth of community-led sustainable tourism in Cross River State is the lack of comprehensive community-based eco-tourism education and capacity-building programs. According to Tosun (2000), community involvement is a fundamental aspect of sustainable tourism development, as it allows for the equitable distribution of tourism benefits and promotes long-term environmental stewardship. Without the necessary education and training, local populations may lack the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to engage in and manage eco-tourism initiatives effectively. Community-based eco-tourism education plays a crucial role in equipping local communities with the information needed to understand sustainable tourism principles, such as environmental conservation, responsible tourism practices, and cultural preservation (Liu, 2014). Furthermore, capacity building is vital for strengthening local leadership and enhancing the ability of communities to manage eco-tourism ventures, making them more resilient to external pressures and better positioned to ensure the sustainability of tourism initiatives (Sharpley, 2006).

In Cross River State, although some eco-tourism projects have been initiated, local participation remains limited, and the full potential of these projects has not been realized. This gap in local engagement can be attributed to the insufficient availability of targeted eco-tourism education and capacity-building initiatives for community members. As a result, communities are not equipped to take an active role in decision-making processes, nor do they fully benefit from the economic opportunities eco-tourism offers. The lack of participation not only limits the effectiveness of eco-tourism as a sustainable development tool but also undermines the potential for communities to influence the way tourism impacts their environment and livelihoods (Mowforth & Munt, 2009).

The importance of local involvement in sustainable tourism is well-documented. According to Dredge (2010), local participation enhances the legitimacy and success of tourism initiatives by fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members. Furthermore, involving local communities in tourism planning and management ensures that the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism are aligned with their needs and values. However, to achieve these outcomes, it is essential to provide communities with the necessary education and resources. Therefore, this study seeks to assess the role of community-based eco-tourism education and capacity building in enhancing local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State.

The goal of this research is to explore how eco-tourism education and capacity-building programs influence local involvement in tourism development. By investigating the impact of these interventions, the study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on sustainable tourism development in Nigeria, particularly with regard to how local communities can actively participate and benefit from eco-tourism initiatives. Ultimately, the findings of this study may inform policies and practices that support the development of community-led eco-tourism projects, thereby enhancing local economic development and environmental sustainability in Cross River State.

Statement of the problem

Sustainable tourism development is increasingly recognized as a key strategy for fostering environmental conservation, economic growth, and cultural preservation in developing regions. In Cross River State, eco-tourism has the potential to significantly contribute to local development. However, despite its potential, there is limited local participation in the planning and implementation of eco-tourism initiatives, often resulting in missed opportunities for community empowerment and sustainable tourism practices. The lack of effective community-based eco-tourism education and capacity-building programs has hindered the active involvement of local populations in tourism development. As such, there is a need to explore the impact of these educational and capacity-building interventions on enhancing local participation in sustainable tourism development. Addressing this gap is crucial for ensuring that eco-tourism in Cross River State contributes meaningfully to both environmental sustainability and the socio-economic wellbeing of local communities.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the role of community-based eco-tourism education and capacity building in enhancing local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Assess how community-based eco-tourism education relates with local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State.
2. Examine whether capacity-building programs relate with local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State.

Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between community-based eco-tourism education and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State.
2. There is no significant relationship between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State.

Literature review

Community-Based Eco-Tourism Education and Local Participation in Sustainable Tourism Development

Community-based eco-tourism (CBET) is a concept rooted in sustainable development and participatory approaches to tourism. It emphasizes the active involvement of local communities in tourism planning, decision-making, and management (Tosun, 2000). The theoretical underpinnings of CBET are influenced by the principles of sustainable tourism, which aim to balance environmental conservation, economic development, and cultural preservation (Honey, 2008). Eco-tourism education plays a critical role in this process, as it equips local communities with the knowledge and skills required to manage and benefit from eco-tourism activities while ensuring the protection of their natural and cultural resources.

Theories of **participatory development** and **empowerment** provide a useful lens through which to examine the relationship between CBET education and local participation in sustainable tourism

development. According to Cornwall (2008), participatory development emphasizes the importance of local knowledge and involvement in decision-making processes, recognizing that communities are best suited to address their own needs. Similarly, empowerment theory stresses the need to build the capacity of individuals and communities to take control of their resources and shape their futures (Zimmerman, 2000). In the context of CBET, eco-tourism education serves as a tool for empowerment, fostering local ownership, self-sufficiency, and a sense of responsibility towards tourism development.

Empirical research highlights the significant role of eco-tourism education in enhancing local participation. Studies have shown that when communities are provided with training and education on sustainable tourism practices, they are more likely to engage in eco-tourism initiatives and make informed decisions about the management of their natural resources (Liu, 2014; Mowforth & Munt, 2009). For example, in a study by Tovar (2015), it was found that local communities in Costa Rica who participated in eco-tourism education programs demonstrated a greater understanding of the environmental impacts of tourism and were more actively involved in the planning and management of eco-tourism ventures. This resulted in improved sustainability practices and greater economic benefits for the community.

In contrast, a lack of eco-tourism education has been shown to hinder local participation. For instance, in the Philippines, the absence of formal eco-tourism education programs led to limited community involvement in tourism development, as local people lacked the necessary skills to participate effectively (Stronza, 2001). Without adequate knowledge, communities were unable to capitalize on the opportunities eco-tourism presented, resulting in a situation where external stakeholders dominated the decision-making process.

The literature suggests that community-based eco-tourism education plays a crucial role in promoting local participation in sustainable tourism development. By providing communities with the knowledge and tools to manage eco-tourism initiatives, these educational programs foster a sense of ownership and responsibility, enabling local people to play an active role in shaping the development of tourism in their regions. However, for eco-tourism education to be effective, it must be culturally relevant, accessible, and tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the community.

Capacity Building and Local Participation in Sustainable Tourism Development

Capacity building refers to the process of enhancing the skills, knowledge, and abilities of individuals and communities to effectively engage in development processes. In the context of sustainable tourism, capacity building involves strengthening local communities' ability to manage tourism activities, make informed decisions, and ensure the long-term sustainability of tourism ventures (Rogerson, 2014). The theoretical foundations of capacity building in tourism development draw on theories of social capital and human capital.

Social capital theory emphasizes the importance of networks, trust, and collective action in promoting community development (Putnam, 2000). In tourism development, social capital can facilitate collaboration among stakeholders, leading to more effective management and greater local participation. Human capital theory, on the other hand, focuses on the role of education, skills, and training in enhancing individuals' and communities' capacity to participate in development processes (Becker, 1993).

In the context of tourism, human capital development through capacity building enables communities to understand tourism dynamics, manage resources efficiently, and participate in decision-making processes.

Empirical studies have consistently shown that capacity building enhances local participation in sustainable tourism development. For example, in a study conducted by Cañada (2017) in rural communities in Mexico, capacity-building programs focused on eco-tourism management and marketing significantly increased local participation in tourism development activities. The training programs helped community members develop the necessary skills to manage eco-tourism businesses and engage in sustainable tourism practices, resulting in both economic and environmental benefits.

Similarly, in Kenya, a study by Kibet and Wanjiru (2013) found that capacity-building programs in local communities led to greater involvement in the management of wildlife tourism projects. The programs provided training on sustainable practices, business management, and marketing strategies, which empowered local people to take on leadership roles in tourism initiatives. This enhanced local ownership of the tourism development process and contributed to the long-term sustainability of the projects.

On the other hand, the lack of capacity-building initiatives has been shown to limit local participation in tourism development. In South Africa, a study by De Lange (2014) found that without adequate capacity-building programs, communities in eco-tourism areas were often excluded from decision-making processes, resulting in minimal benefits from tourism development. The study highlighted that without the necessary skills and knowledge, communities struggled to engage in tourism management and were unable to negotiate effectively with external stakeholders, such as government agencies and private investors.

The empirical evidence suggests that capacity building is a critical factor in enhancing local participation in sustainable tourism development. Through targeted training and skill-building programs, communities can acquire the knowledge and tools necessary to manage eco-tourism initiatives, make informed decisions, and ensure that tourism development is both economically and environmentally sustainable. However, effective capacity building requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both individual and collective needs, fosters trust among stakeholders, and empowers communities to take control of their tourism development processes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a correlational research design, integrating to examine the role of community-based eco-tourism education and capacity building in enhancing local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State, Nigeria. The use of this method approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by analysing the findings from both qualitative and quantitative data sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The quantitative component assessed the relationship between eco-tourism education, capacity building, and local participation, and provides in-depth insights into the experiences and perceptions of local community members and stakeholders.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Cross River State, located in southeastern Nigeria, which is known for its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and eco-tourism potential. The state is home to several eco-tourism sites, such as the Cross River National Park and the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary. This region was chosen due to its significance as an eco-tourism hub in Nigeria and the potential for sustainable tourism development to improve the livelihoods of local communities.

Target Population

The target population for this study consists of local community members, tourism managers, policy makers, and representatives from local NGOs involved in eco-tourism development in Cross River State. The study focused on rural communities in the state where eco-tourism has the potential to enhance economic development and environmental conservation.

Community Members: Local residents who are directly involved in eco-tourism activities or who have the potential to participate in future eco-tourism initiatives.

Tourism Managers and Policy Makers: Stakeholders involved in planning, managing, or implementing eco-tourism projects in the state.

NGO Representatives: Individuals from non-governmental organizations that focus on community development and eco-tourism in the region.

Sampling Techniques

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select communities within Cross River State. Communities were categorized based on their involvement in eco-tourism initiatives, and a random sample of communities from each category will be selected to ensure diversity in the sample.

For the quantitative component, simple random sampling was employed to select individual respondents from the identified communities. A sample size of 280 respondents was targeted to ensure statistical validity and power, based on a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%.

Data Collection Methods

A structured survey questionnaire was designed to collect data on community-based eco-tourism education, capacity-building initiatives, and the level of local participation in eco-tourism development. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions to measure the extent to which respondents believe eco-tourism education and capacity building impact local participation. The questionnaire was pre-tested in a similar community to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity before administration.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected through the survey questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages, and means) to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and assess respondents' views on eco-tourism education, capacity building, and local participation. Inferential statistics, including correlation analysis, was used to test the relationships between the independent variables (eco-tourism education and capacity building) and the dependent variable (local participation in sustainable tourism development). The data will be analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study. Participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the study, and their participation were voluntary. Written informed consent were obtained from all participants before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The study also ensured that the findings are reported in a manner that respects the privacy and rights of the participants.

Limitations

While this study aims to provide valuable insights into the role of eco-tourism education and capacity building in local participation, there are several limitations. First, the findings may not be generalizable beyond Cross River State due to the context-specific nature of the study. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability bias. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between eco-tourism education, capacity building, and local participation.

Presentation of results

Hypothesis one

There is no significant relationship between community-based eco-tourism education and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between community-based eco-tourism education and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State. Results from Table 1 indicate a strong positive correlation between community-based eco-tourism education and local participation in sustainable tourism development ($r = .654$, $p < .05$, $df = 278$). This suggests that as the level of eco-tourism education increases within communities, there is a corresponding increase in the level of local participation in sustainable tourism initiatives. The correlation was statistically significant at the .05 level, indicating that the observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

TABLE 1: Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the relationship between community-based eco-tourism education and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State (N=280).

Variables	$\bar{x}$	SD	r-cal	p-value
Community-based eco-tourism education	16.9429	1.63418		
			.654**	.000
Local participation in sustainable tourism development	33.9143	1.79200		

* Significant at .05 level, df = 278

Hypothesis two

There is no significant relationship between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State. The second hypothesis, which stated that there is no significant relationship between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State, was tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. As shown in Table 2, the analysis revealed a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism development ($r = .523$, $p < .05$, $N = 280$). This indicates that as capacity building efforts increase, there is a corresponding increase in local participation in sustainable tourism activities. Given the statistically significant p-value (.000), the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State.

TABLE 2: There is no significant relationship between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State (N=280)

Variables	$\bar{x}$	SD	r-cal	p-value
Capacity building	16.8143	1.35512		
			.523**	.000
Participation in sustainable tourism development	33.9143	1.79200		

* Significant at .05 level

Discussion of findings

Hypothesis one

The findings from the analysis of Hypothesis One provide strong empirical support for the existence of a significant and positive relationship between community-based eco-tourism education and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = .654$, $p < .05$) indicates a robust positive relationship, suggesting that higher levels of eco-tourism education within local communities are associated with increased involvement in sustainable tourism initiatives. This outcome affirms the critical role that education plays in fostering informed, active community engagement in tourism development efforts.

These results are consistent with the existing literature and theoretical frameworks that underpin community-based eco-tourism (CBET). As emphasized by Tosun (2000), CBET is grounded in participatory approaches that prioritize the inclusion of local stakeholders in all aspects of tourism development. This perspective is further supported by Honey (2008), who underscores the importance of balancing environmental, economic, and cultural goals through sustainable tourism practices—objectives that are more achievable when communities are educated and empowered to participate meaningfully.

The findings also align with theories of participatory development and empowerment. Cornwall (2008) argues that effective development must involve local knowledge and active participation, while Zimmerman (2000) highlights the role of empowerment in enabling communities to gain control over their resources and futures. In the context of this study, eco-tourism education functions as a mechanism for empowerment, providing community members with the tools to engage responsibly and effectively in tourism-related decisions and activities.

Moreover, empirical studies support the notion that eco-tourism education enhances local participation. Liu (2014) and Mowforth and Munt (2009) demonstrate that training in sustainable tourism practices leads to greater community involvement and improved management of tourism resources. Similarly, Tovar's (2015) research in Costa Rica shows that communities exposed to eco-tourism education programs not only gained environmental awareness but also increased their participation in planning and managing tourism initiatives, leading to enhanced sustainability and economic outcomes.

In conclusion, the findings of this study are in alignment with both theoretical and empirical literature. They underscore the importance of community-based eco-tourism education as a catalyst for meaningful local participation in sustainable tourism development. This suggests that policies and interventions aimed at expanding eco-tourism education could significantly enhance the sustainability and inclusiveness of tourism practices in Cross River State.

Hypothesis two

The results of the analysis for Hypothesis Two offer empirical support for a significant positive relationship between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = .523$, $p < .05$, $N = 280$) indicates a moderate but statistically significant relationship, suggesting that increased efforts in capacity building are

associated with higher levels of local community engagement in sustainable tourism initiatives. Given the p-value of .000, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that the relationship is not due to chance.

This finding aligns well with the reviewed literature and theoretical frameworks surrounding capacity building in the context of sustainable tourism. Capacity building is a multidimensional process that enhances the skills, knowledge, and competencies of individuals and communities, enabling them to actively and effectively participate in tourism development (Rogerson, 2014). In particular, theories of **social capital** (Putnam, 2000) and **human capital** (Becker, 1993) offer foundational insights into how such development occurs and why it matters.

Social capital theory emphasizes the value of networks, shared norms, and trust in facilitating coordinated community action. In tourism, this often translates into greater community cohesion and collaboration among stakeholders, which is essential for managing tourism sustainably. Human capital theory complements this by focusing on the enhancement of individual and collective capabilities through education and training. Capacity building, through this lens, equips community members with the necessary tools to understand tourism dynamics, manage eco-tourism enterprises, and participate effectively in decision-making processes.

Empirical evidence further substantiates the connection between capacity building and local participation in sustainable tourism. For instance, Cañada (2017) found that in rural Mexican communities, targeted capacity-building programs in eco-tourism management and marketing not only improved residents' tourism-related skills but also significantly increased their involvement in tourism development activities. This translated into tangible economic and environmental benefits for the communities involved.

In the context of Cross River State, these findings imply that strategic investments in capacity building—particularly in training, education, and community organization—can play a crucial role in enhancing local ownership and participation in sustainable tourism ventures. This is essential for achieving the long-term goals of sustainability, empowerment, and community-driven development in the tourism sector.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between community-based eco-tourism education, capacity building, and local participation in sustainable tourism development in Cross River State. The findings revealed statistically significant positive correlations between both community-based eco-tourism education and capacity building with local participation in sustainable tourism initiatives. These results underscore the crucial role that education and skill development play in empowering local communities to actively engage in and benefit from sustainable tourism activities.

The study aligns with existing theoretical perspectives such as participatory development, empowerment theory, human capital theory, and social capital theory. It also supports empirical evidence from previous research that highlights the effectiveness of community education and capacity-building programs in enhancing local participation in tourism development. In the context of Cross River State, the results suggest that increasing investment in community-based education and targeted capacity-building interventions can significantly improve the sustainability and inclusiveness of tourism practices.

Recommendations

1. Enhance Eco-Tourism Education Initiatives: Government agencies, NGOs, and tourism stakeholders should develop and implement community-based eco-tourism education programs. These initiatives should focus on raising awareness of sustainable tourism practices, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation.
2. Invest in Capacity Building: Targeted training programs should be provided to equip community members with practical skills in tourism management, entrepreneurship, and resource conservation. Such programs should be tailored to local needs and include continuous support and mentorship.
3. Encourage Participatory Planning: Local communities should be actively involved in tourism planning and decision-making processes. This participatory approach will foster a sense of ownership and responsibility, ensuring that tourism development aligns with community values and priorities.
4. Strengthen Partnerships and Collaboration: Multi-stakeholder partnerships involving local government, private sector, civil society, and international development agencies should be promoted to mobilize resources, share expertise, and ensure coordinated support for sustainable tourism development.
5. Monitor and Evaluate Impact: Regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to assess the effectiveness of eco-tourism education and capacity-building initiatives. This will provide valuable insights for policy refinement and strategic planning.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can foster a more inclusive and sustainable tourism sector in Cross River State—one that promotes community well-being, protects environmental and cultural resources, and contributes to local and regional development goals. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

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