ECO-TOURISM AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES AMONG TERTIARY EDUCATION STUDENTS IN CROSS RIVER STATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PROMOTION

ACHADU MARTINS EDIDIONG

Email: achaduedidiong@gmail.com

Department of Environmental Education, University of Calabar, Nigeria.

Abstract

This study examined eco-tourism awareness and attitudes among tertiary education students in Cross River State, Nigeria, with a focus on their academic discipline and the relationship between awareness and attitudinal disposition. Guided by two hypotheses, the study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to collect data from a stratified random sample of 400 undergraduate students across public tertiary institutions in the state. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire that assessed both eco-tourism awareness and attitudes toward eco-tourism. Results from the independent samples t-test indicated a statistically significant difference in eco-tourism awareness based on academic discipline, with students in environmental-related disciplines reporting higher levels of awareness than those in other fields. Additionally, Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis revealed a moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationship between students' eco-tourism awareness and their attitudes toward eco-tourism. These findings suggest that academic exposure and environmental education significantly shape students' eco-tourism consciousness and that positive attitudes are strongly associated with greater awareness. The study recommends integrating eco-tourism education into broader academic curricula and promoting experiential learning as key strategies for advancing sustainable tourism among youth populations.

Keywords: Eco-tourism, student awareness, attitudes, academic discipline, sustainable tourism, tertiary education, Cross River State

Introduction and Background

Tourism remains one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, playing a critical role in the socio-economic development of many countries, including Nigeria. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on sustainable tourism practices that not only generate economic benefits but also promote environmental conservation and cultural preservation. Eco-tourism, as a subset of sustainable tourism, is particularly focused on responsible travel to natural areas, minimizing environmental impact, and fostering environmental and cultural understanding (The International Ecotourism Society [TIES], 2015).

Cross River State, located in the southeastern region of Nigeria, is widely recognized as a hub for eco-tourism due to its rich biodiversity, unique cultural heritage, and well-preserved natural attractions such as the Cross River National Park, Agbokim Waterfalls, and the Obudu Mountain Resort (Ojugbo, Ogar, Njoku & Atu 2024). Despite the region's eco-tourism potential, there remains a concern about the level of public awareness and the attitudes of key stakeholders, particularly youth and students in tertiary institutions, toward eco-tourism and its role in sustainable development.

Tertiary education students represent a critical demographic in shaping future societal values and environmental stewardship. Their knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes toward eco-tourism can significantly influence the effectiveness of sustainable tourism initiatives. Studies have shown that awareness and positive attitudes toward environmental issues among young people are linked to greater participation in sustainable practices (Piscitelli & D'Uggento, 2022). However, there is limited empirical evidence in the Nigerian context, particularly within Cross River State, regarding the extent to which tertiary students are aware of and support eco-tourism principles.

This study, therefore, seeks to assess the level of eco-tourism awareness and attitudes among tertiary education students in Cross River State and to explore how these factors may influence the promotion of sustainable tourism in the region. By identifying gaps in awareness and attitudinal patterns, the study aims to provide practical insights for educational policy, tourism development, and environmental sustainability strategies.

Statement of the problem

Despite the vast eco-tourism potential of Cross River State, evidenced by its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and natural attractions, the region continues to face challenges in fully harnessing eco-tourism as a tool for sustainable development. One critical factor contributing to this gap is the limited public awareness and inconsistent attitudes toward eco-tourism, particularly among the youth and student population. Tertiary education students, as future policymakers, educators, entrepreneurs, and community leaders, play a pivotal role in shaping societal values and driving sustainable practices. However, there is growing concern that many students lack adequate knowledge of eco-tourism principles and the necessary positive attitudes to support its promotion and implementation.

While various environmental and tourism initiatives have been introduced in Cross River State, the level of student engagement and their perceptions of eco-tourism remain largely underexplored. There is a paucity of empirical data on how students' academic backgrounds, exposure to environmental education, and personal attitudes influence their awareness and support for eco-tourism. Without a clear understanding of these factors, efforts to promote sustainable tourism may fall short, leading to continued environmental degradation, underutilization of natural resources, and missed opportunities for community empowerment.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating the awareness and attitudes of tertiary education students toward eco-tourism in Cross River State. It aims to provide insights into how educational institutions and tourism stakeholders can enhance student involvement in sustainable tourism practices, thereby contributing to the long-term environmental and economic sustainability of the region.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the level of awareness and attitudes toward eco-tourism among tertiary education students in Cross River State and to explore the implications of these factors for promoting sustainable tourism in the region. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. identify variations in eco-tourism awareness across academic disciplines.
2. assess the relationship between students' attitudes and their awareness levels, and provide recommendations for integrating eco-tourism education into tertiary curricula.

Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

1. There is no significant difference in eco-tourism awareness among tertiary education students in Cross River State based on their academic discipline.
2. There is no significant relationship between students' attitudes toward eco-tourism and their level of eco-tourism awareness in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.

Literature review

Eco-tourism Awareness Among Tertiary Education Students Based on Their Academic Discipline

The development of eco-tourism awareness among students can be understood through the lens of environmental education theory, which suggests that academic disciplines are pivotal in shaping individuals' environmental literacy. Hungerford and Volk (1990) emphasize that students acquire environmental knowledge and develop values through educational experiences that are closely aligned with their field of study. As such, the level of eco-tourism awareness among students may vary significantly across disciplines, with those in environmental sciences, geography, and tourism-related programs typically possessing higher levels of knowledge.

Several studies have demonstrated that academic discipline influences students' awareness of eco-tourism. Gursoy and Rutherford (2004) argue that students enrolled in tourism and hospitality programs possess greater awareness of eco-tourism principles, largely due to the focus of their curricula on sustainable practices in tourism. Similarly, Akintola and Oduwaye (2021) found that students in environmental science and geography departments in Nigerian universities displayed a stronger understanding of eco-tourism than those studying in unrelated disciplines. These findings suggest that exposure to courses specifically designed to teach sustainability concepts enhances awareness of eco-tourism, which is a key component of sustainable tourism.

In another study, Zheng, Xu and Kong (2017) examined the relationship between academic background and eco-tourism knowledge among students in Turkey. They discovered that students in tourism programs had significantly more knowledge of eco-tourism compared to students in non-tourism disciplines. This reinforces the idea that curriculum content and academic focus shape students' awareness of eco-tourism. Additionally, it highlights the role of tertiary institutions in promoting sustainability through discipline-specific courses that emphasize the importance of eco-tourism for local and global conservation efforts.

In contrast, a study by **Hall, Gössling and Scott, (2015)** found that non-tourism students, although not as knowledgeable about eco-tourism, were more likely to adopt sustainable practices if exposed to interdisciplinary educational experiences. This suggests that eco-tourism awareness could be enhanced in non-specialized disciplines through interdisciplinary collaboration and the integration of eco-tourism topics into various fields of study.

Students' Attitudes Toward Eco-tourism and Their Level of Eco-tourism Awareness in Tertiary Institutions

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991) is particularly relevant for understanding how students' attitudes toward eco-tourism influence their engagement with it. According to this theory, individuals are

more likely to engage in behaviors, such as supporting eco-tourism, when they have favorable attitudes toward it. Awareness plays a critical role in attitude formation—students who are aware of eco-tourism principles are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward sustainable tourism practices. Furthermore, value-belief-norm theory (Stern, 2000) suggests that individuals are more likely to act in pro-environmental ways if they perceive the benefits of such actions (e.g., environmental conservation, community development) and feel a moral obligation to protect natural resources.

Empirical studies have shown a positive correlation between eco-tourism awareness and attitudes toward eco-tourism among students. For instance, Ahn and Byun (2007) found that students with higher levels of environmental awareness also held more positive attitudes toward eco-tourism, which in turn influenced their willingness to participate in eco-tourism activities. This is consistent with the findings of Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), who emphasized that environmental awareness enhances pro-environmental behaviors, including those related to eco-tourism, as individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors that align with their environmental values.

In the Nigerian context, Lameed, Adesunloye and Christopher (2024) explored the relationship between students' attitudes and awareness of eco-tourism in southwestern Nigeria. They reported that students who had been exposed to eco-tourism education through their courses or extracurricular activities were more likely to demonstrate a positive attitude toward eco-tourism. The study highlighted that students in programs related to tourism and environmental studies showed a higher level of support for eco-tourism, suggesting that education is a key factor in fostering positive attitudes toward sustainable tourism.

Further research by Nasr, Emeagwali, Aljuhmani and Al-Geitany (2022) in another study found that university students who participated in eco-tourism-focused activities showed a significant increase in both their eco-tourism awareness and positive attitudes toward eco-tourism. The authors suggested that practical engagement, such as field trips and eco-tourism projects, was crucial in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and attitudinal change.

Additionally, Wang, Zhao,Yan, Wang, Pan and Wu (2023) conducted a study in China that demonstrated how eco-tourism awareness influences students' perceptions of tourism's environmental impact. They found that students who were more aware of eco-tourism tended to adopt sustainable travel behaviors and were more likely to advocate for eco-tourism practices in their communities. These findings corroborate the importance of combining theoretical knowledge with experiential learning to enhance both awareness and attitudes.

While eco-tourism awareness has generally been linked to more favorable attitudes, some studies have also pointed out barriers that affect students' attitudes. For instance, a study by Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) suggested that students may support eco-tourism in theory but fail to participate in sustainable travel practices due to convenience, cost, and lack of infrastructure, indicating that attitudes alone are not sufficient to drive behavior.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the eco-tourism awareness and attitudes of tertiary education students in Cross River State. The research employed a descriptive survey approach,

which is appropriate for assessing the levels of awareness and the nature of attitudes toward eco-tourism among a large group of students. The design allowed for the collection of data from a wide sample of students across multiple academic disciplines, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study consists of all undergraduate students enrolled in public tertiary institutions within Cross River State, Nigeria. These institutions include the University of Calabar, and the University of Cross River State. According to data from the National Universities Commission (NUC) for the 2024/2025 academic year, there are approximately 40,000 undergraduate students enrolled across these institutions. The study focused on students from diverse academic disciplines, including environmental sciences, education, social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, to examine the relationship between academic discipline and eco-tourism awareness.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Using stratified random sampling, the study selected students from various academic disciplines to ensure that the sample represents the diversity of programs offered in the tertiary institutions. Stratified sampling is appropriate because it ensures proportional representation of the different disciplines, which is crucial for examining how academic background affects eco-tourism awareness.

From the total student population, a sample size of 400 students was drawn, based on the sample size determination formula for large populations (Yamane, 1967). This sample size is adequate for statistical analysis and provided sufficient data to test the research hypotheses.

Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections:

Section A: Demographic Information: this section collected data on the students' demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, academic discipline, year of study, and exposure to eco-tourism-related courses or activities.

Section B: Eco-tourism Awareness and Attitudes: This section consisted of two parts: Eco-tourism Awareness: This will be measured using a series of statements designed to assess students' knowledge of eco-tourism principles, practices, and benefits. Respondents will rate their level of agreement using a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Attitudes Toward Eco-tourism: This assessed students' attitudes using statements that gauge their feelings, beliefs, and behavioral intentions toward eco-tourism. A similar Likert scale will be used to rate responses.

The questionnaire was pre-tested among a small group of students (30 students from the College of Education, Akamkpa) to check for clarity, reliability, and validity. The results from the pilot test was used to make necessary adjustments to the instrument.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to students in their respective institutions during scheduled classes, with the cooperation of faculty members who allowed for the distribution of the surveys. A trained research assistant distributed and collect the questionnaires to ensure proper handling and to clarify any doubts that respondents had during the completion of the questionnaire.

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Calabar. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, ensuring that participation is voluntary and that their responses will be treated with confidentiality. No personal identifiers were included in the survey responses.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The analysis proceeded in the following steps:

Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to describe students' demographic characteristics, levels of eco-tourism awareness, and their attitudes toward eco-tourism.

Inferential Statistics: independent T-tests was used to compare eco-tourism awareness between students from different academic disciplines (e.g., environmental sciences vs. Other disciplines).

Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between students' eco-tourism awareness and their attitudes toward eco-tourism.

The results of these analyses were presented in tables and were interpreted to draw conclusions about the level of eco-tourism awareness and attitudes among tertiary students in Cross River State.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations was adhered to throughout the study. The following measures were implemented to ensure ethical integrity:

Informed Consent: All participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study, and they were asked for their consent to participate.

Confidentiality: The identities of the participants remained confidential, and responses were coded to ensure anonymity.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in the study were voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

Data Storage and Access: Data will be stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

Limitations of the Study

This study may be limited by the following factors:

Geographical Limitation: The study focuses solely on tertiary institutions in Cross River State, and the findings may not be generalized to other regions of Nigeria or beyond.

Self-reported Data: The data relied on self-reported responses from students, which may be subject to bias or inaccuracies.

Cross-sectional Design: Since the study is cross-sectional, it will only provide a snapshot of students' awareness and attitudes at a particular point in time, without considering changes over time.

Presentation of results

Hypothesis one

There is no significant difference in eco-tourism awareness among tertiary education students in Cross River State based on their academic discipline.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference in eco-tourism awareness among tertiary education students in Cross River State based on their academic discipline. The results indicated that students enrolled in environmental-related disciplines (M = 32.94, SD = 2.08, n = 266) reported slightly higher levels of eco-tourism awareness compared to their counterparts in other disciplines (M = 32.55, SD = 1.79, n = 134). Although the mean difference was small, it was found to be statistically significant, t(approximately df) = 1.80, $p < .001$. Levene's test for equality of variances was significant, $F(1, 398) = 13.80$, $p < .05$, suggesting that the assumption of equal variances was violated and that Welch's correction was applied. These findings suggest that academic discipline significantly influences eco-tourism awareness among tertiary education students in the state.

TABLE 1

Independent t-test analysis of the difference in eco-tourism awareness among tertiary education students in Cross River State based on their academic discipline (N=400).

Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	F	t	*p*-value
Environmnental related deisciplines	266	32.94	2.08			
				13.8	1.8	.000
Other disciplines	134	32.55	1.79			

*Significant at 0.05 level.

Hypothesis two

There is no significant relationship between students' attitudes toward eco-tourism and their level of eco-tourism awareness in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.

A Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between students' attitudes toward eco-tourism and their level of eco-tourism awareness in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. The analysis revealed a moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationship between the two variables, $r(398) = .532$, $p < .001$. This indicates that students who demonstrated more positive attitudes toward eco-tourism were also more likely to exhibit higher levels of eco-tourism awareness. The result suggests that students' perceptions and values concerning eco-tourism are meaningfully associated with their level of knowledge and understanding of the concept.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis of the relationship between Students' students' attitudes toward eco-tourism and their level of eco-tourism awareness in tertiary institutions in Cross River State (N=400).

Variable	$\bar{X}$	SD	r-cal	Sig.
Students' students' attitudes toward eco-tourism	7.76	1.75		
			.532**	.000
level of eco-tourism awareness in tertiary institutions	15.04	1.74		

**significant at .05, df. = 398.

Discussion of findings

Hypothesis one

The finding that students enrolled in environmental-related disciplines demonstrated significantly higher levels of eco-tourism awareness compared to their peers in other academic fields aligns with existing literature and theoretical expectations. The independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference, with students in environmental-related programs (M = 32.94, SD = 2.08) scoring higher than those in other disciplines (M = 32.55, SD = 1.79), t(approx. df) = 1.80, $p < .001$. Despite the relatively small mean difference, the result supports the notion that academic discipline plays a critical role in shaping students' environmental awareness.

This outcome is consistent with environmental education theory, which posits that students' knowledge, values, and behaviors regarding the environment are heavily influenced by their academic exposure and disciplinary focus (Hungerford & Volk, 1990). Students engaged in programs that incorporate environmental content—such as geography, environmental science, and tourism—are more likely to develop a heightened awareness of sustainability issues, including eco-tourism.

Empirical research further supports these findings. Gursoy and Rutherford (2004) reported that students in tourism and hospitality programs exhibited a greater understanding of eco-tourism concepts, attributing this to curriculum content that emphasizes sustainable tourism practices. Likewise, Akintola and Oduwaye (2021) observed that students in environmental science and geography departments in Nigerian universities demonstrated more comprehensive knowledge of eco-tourism compared to students in unrelated disciplines. These studies suggest that targeted academic exposure to sustainability and environmental issues fosters greater eco-tourism awareness.

Therefore, the present finding is in alignment with the broader body of literature, reinforcing the view that academic discipline significantly influences students' environmental consciousness. It also highlights the importance of integrating eco-tourism and sustainability education across various academic programs to promote a more environmentally literate student population.

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Hypothesis two

The present study revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between students' attitudes toward eco-tourism and their level of eco-tourism awareness in tertiary institutions in Cross River State, $r(398) = .532$, $p < .001$. This finding suggests that students who hold more favorable attitudes toward eco-tourism are also more likely to demonstrate a higher level of awareness about eco-tourism concepts and practices. In other words, there is a meaningful relationship between how students perceive eco-tourism and the depth of their understanding and knowledge of the subject.

This result is consistent with prior research that has established a positive link between environmental awareness and attitudinal dispositions toward eco-tourism. For example, Ahn and Byun (2007) found that environmentally aware students were more likely to support and participate in eco-tourism activities, emphasizing the role of environmental knowledge in shaping pro-tourism attitudes. Similarly, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) posited that increased environmental awareness fosters pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors, including those associated with eco-tourism, as individuals tend to act in ways that align with their environmental values.

In the Nigerian context, Lameed, Adesunloye, and Christopher (2024) reported that students exposed to eco-tourism education—either through academic programs or extracurricular engagements—tended to

exhibit more positive attitudes toward eco-tourism. Their findings align with the current study, highlighting that awareness, often driven by education, significantly influences students' perceptions of sustainable tourism practices.

Further supporting this view, Nasr, Emeagwali, Aljuhmani, and Al-Geitany (2022) observed that university students involved in eco-tourism-focused activities, such as field trips and projects, showed notable improvements in both awareness and attitudinal outcomes. Their study underscores the importance of experiential learning in translating knowledge into value-driven attitudes.

Overall, the current finding reinforces the idea that enhancing students' awareness through education and engagement is essential for fostering positive attitudes toward eco-tourism. This supports the broader educational goal of promoting sustainability-oriented mindsets and behaviors among the next generation of environmental stewards.

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Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of academic discipline on eco-tourism awareness and examined the relationship between students' attitudes toward eco-tourism and their level of eco-tourism awareness in tertiary institutions in Cross River State, Nigeria. The findings revealed a statistically significant difference in eco-tourism awareness between students in environmental-related disciplines and those in other fields, suggesting that academic exposure plays a critical role in shaping environmental consciousness. Furthermore, the study established a moderate, positive, and significant relationship between students' attitudes and their awareness of eco-tourism. These results underscore the importance of both academic curriculum and attitudinal orientation in promoting sustainable tourism knowledge among tertiary students.

Recommendations

Integrate Eco-tourism into Non-Environmental Curricula: Tertiary institutions should consider integrating eco-tourism and environmental education content into the curricula of non-environmental disciplines. This will help bridge the awareness gap between students in different fields of study and promote a campus-wide culture of environmental responsibility.

Promote Experiential Learning Opportunities: Universities should encourage the inclusion of field trips, eco-tourism projects, and sustainability-focused extracurricular activities. Such hands-on experiences have been shown to enhance both awareness and positive attitudes toward eco-tourism.

Strengthen Environmental Education Policies: Policymakers and educational administrators should support policies that mandate the inclusion of sustainability and eco-tourism concepts in higher education. This can help produce environmentally literate graduates across disciplines.

Enhance Student Engagement through Awareness Campaigns: Environmental clubs and campus organizations should organize regular awareness campaigns, workshops, and seminars focused on eco-tourism and sustainable development, thereby fostering interest and attitudinal change among the wider student body.

Encourage Further Research:

Future studies should explore eco-tourism awareness and attitudes across more diverse student populations and geographic contexts, including longitudinal studies to assess how attitudes and awareness evolve over time and in response to educational interventions.

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