

## **ECOTOURISM POTENTIAL OF EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA: ASSESSING ECOLOGICAL SITES, CULTURAL RESOURCES AND ATTITUDES OF HOST-COMMUNITIES**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study was undertaken to assess ecotourism potential of Ebonyi State, South East Nigeria. Twenty-four (24) ecological sites across the 3 ecological zones of the State and the local communities were purposively selected for the study. Twenty (20) community opinion leaders were purposively selected from each local community making 300 respondents. Focus Group Discussions were also held among various groups of adult males, females and youths. Primary data were collected by the use of interview schedule while secondary data were sourced from publications of the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Ebonyi State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy. Data were analyzed by the use of descriptive and inferential statistics including mean scores from 4-point Likert-type scales and probit analysis. Result shows that ecological attractions in the State range from salt and fresh water lakes to beaches, waterfalls, hills, rock formations, caves and forests. There are also 20 identifiable fun-filled festivals celebrated all year round in the State. Furthermore, the socio-cultural environments of host communities were found to be supportive of ecotourism development and various host communities were willing to cooperate to develop ecotourism cluster. Governments at state and local levels are advised to ensure availability and functionality of socio-economic infrastructure in host communities. NGOs and Community Development Associations (CDAs) should strengthen advocacy to dismantle some cultural barriers that tend to exclude women from participation in some aspects of ecotourism development.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ecotourism, Ecological sites, Host-communities, Cultural festivals, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Travel and tourism rank among the world's fastest growing industries and major sources of foreign exchange for many developing and developed countries (UNWTO, 2010; Madzara, 2011; WTTC, 2012; Barry, 2012; UNDP/ITC/ICTSD, 2012; UNWTO, 2015). Tourism is considered as an export industry since foreign tourists who travel abroad purchase goods and services with money from their home countries (UNCTAD 2010). Tourism services are covered by GATS under Tourism and Travel-Related Services, which include hotels and restaurants, travel agencies and tour operators, tour guides and other services (UNCTAD 2010). Many services linked closely to tourism are classified under different sectors such as business, financial and recreation services (UNCTAD 2010). According to the UNWTO (2012), "one of the most crucial aspects of international tourism is the cross-border movement of consumers". This permits even unskilled workers in remote areas to become services exporters, for instance, by selling craft items, performing in cultural shows, or working in a tourism lodge (UNWTO, 2012). Tourism can develop in poor and marginal areas with other opportunities and

diversification options. It can bring non-material benefits such as pride to local culture and adds value to the surrounding natural environment in the eyes of local communities (Ijeomah, 2007; UNWTO, 2002; Wang, Zhong, Zhang and Zhou, 2014). Tourism is a promising source of income for developing countries because it provides an effective transfer of income from developed to developing economies. According to UNWTO (2014; 2015), developing country destinations have grown faster in recent years than destinations in developed countries. By 2030, arrivals in countries with emerging economies are expected to account for 57% of the expected 1.8 billion worldwide (UNWTO, 2015).

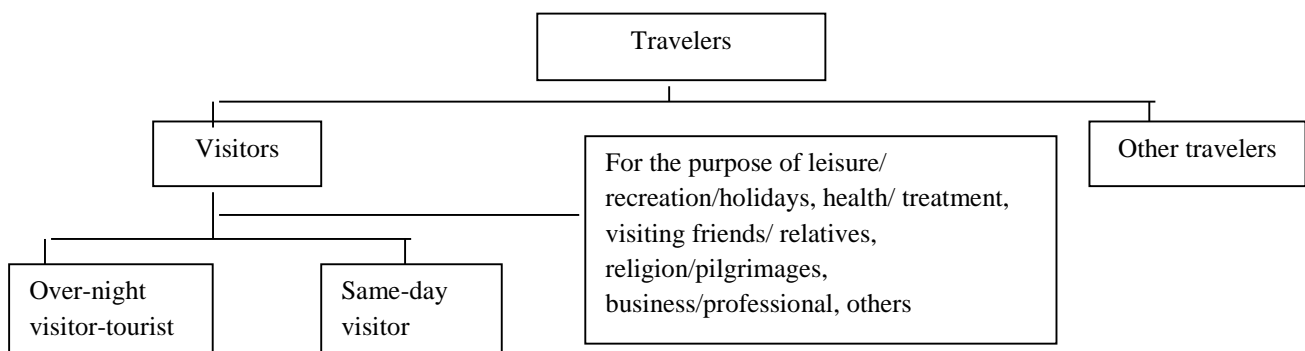
In many developing countries, tourism is an important source of domestic earning. Cambodia, for example, derives 18 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from travel and tourism, with the sector employing 14 per cent of the country's labour force (WEF, 2011). In Malaysia, using a value-chain analysis, the Tourism Planning Research Group (TPRG) has found that economic benefits received by local people account, on average, for 34 per cent of total income generated by tourism (TPRG, 2009). This relatively high income generating capacity of tourism for the local economy reflects why various countries strive to involve locals in tourism business operations (Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015b; Onyeabor, Nwahia and Okereke, 2015; Onyeabor and Nwahia, 2015; Onyeabor, 2016a). Tourism has been identified as a priority sector for development in 90 per cent of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and found to becoming a significant industry for many LDCs, with a direct link to poverty eradication (Enhanced Integrated Framework, EIF, 2012; Francis, 2012). Notably, tourism has enabled developing countries such as Botswana, Cape Verde and Maldives to transition out of the LDC category (Orga, 2010).

Against this background, the management of wildlife, wild mass areas and other attractions for tourism have become a global business as many nations, states, communities and private sectors are eager to get their own share of tourism benefits (UNWTO, 2002; Buchsbaum, 2004; Drumm and Moore, 2005; Ezebilo, Mattsson and Afolami, 2010; Aref, Hussein and Awees, 2015). The viability of tourism business among other factors is seriously affected by the availability of tourism potentials and level of development of tourism facilities and sites (Chami and Semboja, 2005; Mugunda, 2009; Nwahia, Omonona, Onyeabor and Balogun, 2012; Doohyun et al., 2014). The perceptions, expectations and experiences of visitors are also functions of the management and marketing of inherent potentials of ecological sites (Bhatia, 2001; Chami and Semboja, 2005; Ijeoma, 2007). Nations and communities have been popularized, which were before unknown, due to tourism when age-old abandoned or less valued local cultures and ecological resources were revisited and managed for the attractions of tourists who crave for unique experiences (Ijeoma, 2007; Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015a). Nigeria's tourism industry has been estimated to worth in excess of one trillion naira with a revenue yield close to 200 billion naira and employment for about 5 million people (Federation of Tourism Associations of Nigeria, 2011). Ebonyi State in South Eastern Nigeria occupies a land area of 5,935 square kilometers situated between latitude  $5^{\circ}40'N$  and  $6^{\circ}45'N$  and longitude  $7^{\circ}30'W$  and  $8^{\circ}30'W$ . Lying in the less wet, humid tropics with vegetation mostly derived savannah and forested stretches in the wetter South, Ebonyi State has notable ecological sites which include salt and fresh water lakes, beaches, caves, rolling hills, waterfalls, forests and rock formations (SEEDS, 2004; Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2005). In addition, old slave routes and markets, and varieties of festivals and cultural events present the State as a potentially unbeatable ecotourism destination in Nigeria.

## Theoretical Underpinning

### What is tourism?

A close consideration of the tourism phenomenon reveals basically, that tourism arises from the movement of people to and from their stay in various destinations, and that the journey and stay, which should take place outside their normal place of residence and work, must be of a temporary character with the intention to return within a few hours, days or months not exceeding one year (UNWTO, 1995, 1997; Likorish and Jenkins, 1997; Gosh, 2000; Okpoko and Okpoko, 2000). Also, the destinations are visited for purposes other than taking up permanent residence (UNWTO, 1995, 1997; Likorish and Jenkins, 1997). Based on these features, the International Conference on Travel and Tourism Statistics (UNWTO, 1995) adopted the resolution that 'tourism is the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes'. The purpose or purposes of traveling however must not be related to the exercise of any activity remunerated from within the place visited (UNWTO, 1997).

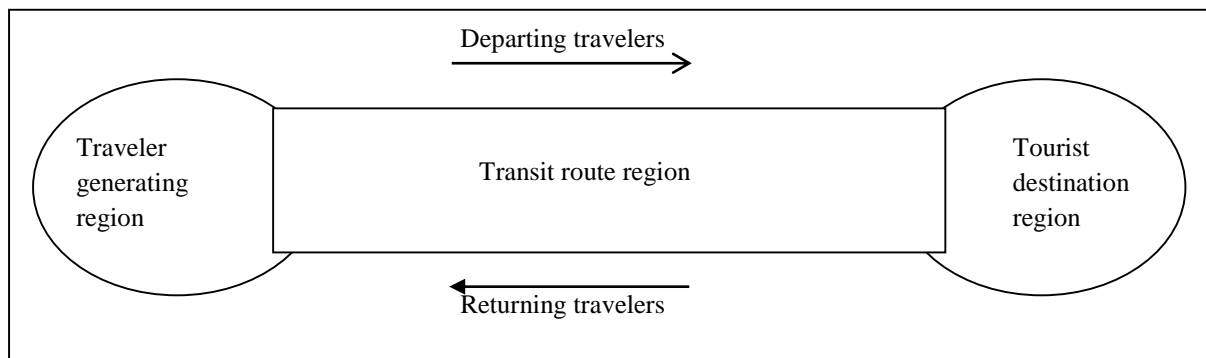


**Figure 1: Visitors and other travelers. Source: World Tourism Organization (1995) p. 22**

Tourism spans travels for leisure and recreation, health, education, family, meetings, religion, business and other purposes plus the provision of goods and services incidental to accomplishing them. Tourism is multidimensional and multidisciplinary- touching all aspects of social, economic, political and environmental life of man (UNWTO, 1995, 1997; Likorish and Jenkins, 1997; Gosh, 2000; Okpoko and Okpoko, 2000).

### The Tourism Industry

Lei per (in Gosh, 2000), suggested a tourism model that contains three basic elements, namely: the tourist, the geographical element and the tourism industry. According to Lei per, the tourist is the actor in the tourism spectrum. He experiences tourism. In demanding for tourism, the tourist exercises discretionary use of time and money and recreation is often the main purpose. The geographical element is discernible in Lei per's model of tourism; the traveler-generating region, the transits-route region and the tourist-destination region.

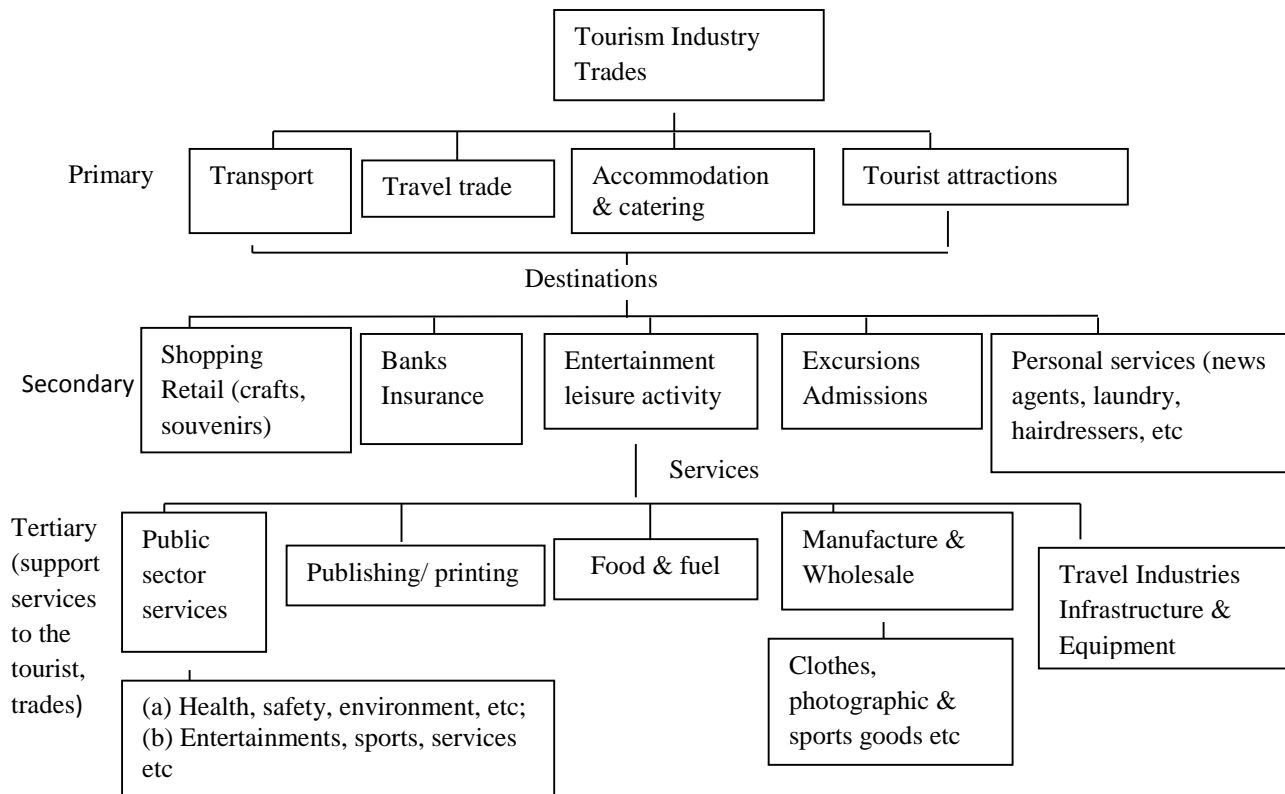


**Figure 2: Tourism Model by Lei Per. Source: Gosh (2000) p. 5**

The author (Lei Per in Gosh, 2000) explained that the traveler-generating region represents the generating market for tourism. The region provides the push to stimulate and motivate travel. It is here that the tourist searches for information, makes the booking and makes the departure. The tourist destination region according to Lei per, represents the end of tourism. The main attraction is situated here, planning and management strategies are implemented and the full impact of tourism felt. The author further explained that the pull to visit destinations energizes the whole tourism system and creates demand for travel in the generating region. Therefore, it is at the destination where the most noticeable and dramatic consequences of the system occur. The transit route region represents not only the short period of travel to reach the destination but also the intermediate places which may be visited en route (Lei Per in Gosh, 2000). The third element of Lei per's model is the tourism industry which consists of those firms, organizations and facilities which are intended to serve the specific needs and wants of tourists. These are the range of businesses involved in delivering the tourism product. According to the Lei per's model, the travel agents and tour operators are predominantly found in the traveler-generating region, attraction and the hospitality are found in the destination region, while the transport industry is located in the transit route region (Lei per in Gosh, 2000).

### Structure of the Tourism Industry

Tourism consists of many different types of companies and organizations. In a particular destination, the services these companies offer combine to provide each tourist with a single touristic experience (UNWTO, 1997; Chami and Semboja, 2005; Aref, Hussein and Awees, 2015). It has been argued however, that tourism does not exist as an industry since it comprises a large number of independent sectors, many of which are not significantly dependent on tourists or their movements for their existence (Likorish and Jenkins, 1997; Page and Connell, 2007). Rather than an industry, it is argued that tourism is best viewed through an appraisal of the demand-side and the way in which the tourist's spend is spread throughout a wide range of primary, secondary and tertiary industries and services as the tourist travels round (Likorish and Jenkins, 1997; Page and Connell, 2007).



**Figure 3: Tourism Industry Trades. Source: Likorish and Jenkins (1997).**

UNWTO (1997) further presented a simplification of the tourism industry, listing the main sub-industries or sectors to include lodging (hotels, motels, resorts, bed-and-breakfast establishments), food service (restaurants, institutional food service contractors), passenger transportation (air lines, ground tour operators, car rental firms, cruise lines), channelers (travel agents, tour wholesalers), tourist activities (attractions, gaming, recreation, entertainment, shopping establishments) and tourism organizations (national tourism administrations, local government tourism offices, tourism travel associations).

### **Economic Benefits of the Tourism Industry**

Globally, tourism benefit in two main ways – trade and redistribution. Tourism stimulates international trade as some tourist's needs may have to be imported from other nations e.g. planes, hotel and hostel facilities, foods and drinks (Likorish and Jenkins, 1997; Page and Connell, 2007). Also most international tourists move from high income countries and spend their discretionary income in low income countries. Tourism therefore, makes a significant contribution to a nation's Gross National Product (GNP) since international visitors are a valuable source of foreign currency (Madzara, 2011; WTTC, 2012; Barry, 2012; UNDP/ITC/ICTSD, 2012; UNWTO, 2015). This is realized by the sale of services and related goods. Kenya is an example of a developing country where significant percentage of gross receipts (as high as 90 percent in 1989) comes from tourism (Chami and Semboja, 2005). Tourism industry has comparatively low capacity investments relative to the income flow potential. This is because the products sold are mainly services such as good weather, national beauty and existing historical sites (Kweka, 2001; Onyeabor, 2014). Tourism is a tool for the



development of other industries, example, art and craft. Tourism acquires 44 percent of its inputs from other sectors – far above an average of 21 percent for all other sectors (Kweka, 2001; Chami and Semboja, 2005). Tourism also has high and most evenly distributed backward and forward linkages (Kweka, 2001). Tourism is more labour intensive than other industries, implying that a given level of revenue or capacity investment creates more jobs in tourism than in agriculture or manufacturing (Chami and Semboja, 2005).

Tourism facilitates physical development. It stimulates the development of such infrastructures that are incidental to development such as communication and other auxiliary services (Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015a). In this way and also in creating alternative source of livelihood (to agriculture) in rural areas, tourism helps to reduce rural-urban migration (Onyeabor, 2016a). Tourism is an expanding market. International tourist arrivals rose nearly forty-fold from 25 million in 1950 to 980 million in 2011 and reached 1 billion in 2012 (UNWTO, 2012). Despite daunting global challenges of economic downturn, diseases and terrorism, international tourism grew at the rate of 4.4% to reach a record 1.135 billion in 2014 (UNWTO, 2015). It is projected to reach 1.8 billion by 2020 (2015). Ecological tourism (ecotourism) or sustainable tourism is a veritable way of conserving the environment – forests, wild life and other scenic environments (UNWTO, 2002; Wang, Zhong, Zhang and Zhou, 2014; Onyeabor, 2016a). Tourism is a workable and effective tool of public policy for creating social and cultural communication and integration (Gosh, 2000; Nnamani, 2014; Nzubechi, 2013; Ogunwusi, 2014).

### **Ecotourism**

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015) defined ecotourism as ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education’. Though many other definitions exist which include other elements or exclude some included in the preceding definition by TIES, literature appear to hold a consensus on some necessary ground rules and objectives for ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1993; Honey, 1999; Weaver, 2001; Stem 2003; Buchsbaum, 2004; Drumm and Moore, 2005; Srinivas, 2006). Honey (1999) enunciated such ground rules to include: ecotourism development should not destroy the resource upon which it is based; its development should be of sound ecological and cultural nature, meeting the needs of host communities with regard to improving the standard of living for the majority in both the short and long time; and the needs and demands of actual and potential tourists must also be satisfied in order for the industry to develop. In addition, ecotourism must have educational value.

Ecotourism therefore, is responsible tourism, which is ecologically and culturally sensitive (UNWTO, 2002; Buchsbaum, 2004; Drumm and Moore, 2005; Onyeabor, 2014). It encourages use of indigenous guides and local products (Lui, 1994; DFID, 1999; Honey, 1999; WWF, 2001). It combines environmental education with minimal travel comforts, helps protect local flora and fauna and provides local people with economic incentives to safeguard their environment (Ayodele, 1991; Mugunda, 2009; Nwahia, Omonona, Onyeabor and Balogun, 2012; Mawere and Mubaya, 2012; Doohyun et al., 2014; Ezeudji, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). The ecotourist makes non-consumptive use of wildlife and natural resources and contributes to the visited area through labour or financial means aimed at directly benefiting the conservation of the site (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1993; Lindberg et al, 1998; Honey, 1999; Madzara, 2011; Barry, 2012). Properly implemented, ecotourism can integrate conservation and rural development or poverty reduction by helping to protect valuable natural resources through tourism expenditures and providing jobs and markets for locals (Lui, 1994; DFID, 1999; Honey, 1999;

WWF, 2001; UNWTO, 2002; Buchsbaum, 2004; Drumm and Moore, 2005; Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015a).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### The Study Area

The study area was Ebonyi State, South East of Nigeria. The State occupies a land area of 5,935 square kilometers situated between latitude 5°40'N and 6°45'N and longitude 7°30'W and 8°30'W. The area is bounded to the north and south by Benue and Abia States and to the east and west by Enugu and Cross River States, all in Nigeria (State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, SEEDS, 2004). Ebonyi State belongs to the South-East geopolitical zone but lies entirely in the Cross River plains. It occupies an area of moderate relief (between 125 and 245 meters above sea level), consisting of mainly broad clayey and shady basins fringed by narrow outcrops of sand-stones, limestone and other rock formations. Towards the South-East border, the landscape abuts into the hilly country of Okigwe-Arochuku axis (SEEDS, 2004). Ebonyi state is divided into three major senatorial zones and thirteen Local Government Areas (LGAs). These zones and their constituent LGAs include: Ebonyi South Senatorial Zone comprising of Afikpo North, Afikpo South, Ivo, Ohaozara and Onicha LGAs; Ebonyi Central Senatorial Zone made up of Ikwo, Ezza North and Ezza South LGAs; and Ebonyi North Senatorial Zone comprising of Abakaliki, Ebonyi, Ishielu, Izzi and Ohaukwu LGAs (SEEDS, 2004). The state capital and the biggest city is Abakaliki in the north of the State. Afikpo is the second biggest town in the State and is located in the Southern border with Cross River State. Other notable towns include: Ishiagu, Edda, Onueke, Nkalagu, Amasiri, Uburu, Okposi and Onicha. Ecologically, Ebonyi State lies in the less wet humid tropics with a marked rainy season from April to October, and dry season from November to March. The vegetation is mostly derived savannah with forested stretches in the wetter South. Some notable ecological sites in the state include: salt and fresh water lakes, beaches, caves, rolling hills, waterfalls, forests and rock formations (SEEDS, 2004). Old slave routes and markets are located in the state. The State is also the proud home of the world-famous Nkwa Umuagbogho Cultural Dance Troupe.

The basic occupation of the people of Ebonyi is farming (SEEDS, 2004). Ebonyi State is a major national rice market and processing centre. Other crops cultivated in the State include: cassava, oil palm and groundnut. Animals including poultry, goats, and sheep, are also produced in the State. Modern industries established are few in the state. Given its geology, the state has great potentials for solid mineral. The best known traditional crafts are the superb pottery products of Ishiagu. Mat making is also an important craft in Ishielu and Oshiri. The language of the people is Igbo and the Christianity is dominant religion. Prominent among the cultural festivals held in Ebonyi State is *Iri ji* (New-yam Festivals) held by the various communities between end of July and late September each year.

### Sampling Techniques

All 24 documented ecological sites (SEEDS, 2004; Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2005) and the respective local communities across the three ecological zones and 13 Local Government Areas of the State were used for the study. Twenty (20) opinion leaders were purposively selected from each of the 16 local or host communities to make up a total of 320. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also held in each local community among three distinct groups made of adult males, adult females and youths (males and females) respectively. All 21

documented cultural festivals of the State, the old slave route and the old slave market (SEED, 2004; Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2005) were studied.

### Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were collected using direct observations, interview schedule and focus group discussions. Secondary data were sourced from the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS, 2004) document and Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2005) publication of cultural festivals and tourism sites in Nigeria. Collected data were analyzed using mean scores derived from 4-point Likert-type scale and probit analysis.

### Model Specifications

#### Mean score

Mean score analysis derived from a 4-point Likert-type scale is used to assess and quantify respondents' perceptions of socio-cultural attributes of the local communities that may affect ecotourism development. The technique is also used to assess respondents' perceptions of factors that may facilitate or hinder cooperation among host-communities in ecotourism development.

The mean scores are gotten from the formula:

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum fx}{n}$$

Where;

$\bar{X}$  = Likert value

$\sum$  = Summation

f = Frequency of respondents

x = Mean score of each response item

n = Number of respondents which is also the total sample size.

Decision point:  $4 + 3 + 2 + 1 = 10 / 4 = 2.5$

Decision rule: Factors that score 2.5 and above are regarded as strong factors and accepted while those that score below 2.5 are regarded as weak factors and therefore, rejected.

### Probit Analysis

Probit analysis is used to determine the possible influence of socio-cultural attributes of local communities on ecotourism development in the study area.

The implicit function of the model is expressed as:



$$Y = f(X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, X_5, X_6, X_7, X_8, X_9, X_{10}, X_{11})$$

The explicit form of the model is written thus:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + b_4X_4 + b_5X_5 + b_6X_6 + b_7X_7 + b_8X_8 + b_9X_9 + b_{10}X_{10} + b_{11}X_{11} + et$$

Where;

Y = Ecotourism development (Yes = 1, no = 2).

x<sub>1</sub> = Respect for visitors (yes = 1, no = 0)

x<sub>2</sub> = Inclusion of women (yes = 1, no = 0)

x<sub>3</sub> = Involvement of youth (yes = 1, no = 0)

x<sub>4</sub> = Awareness of benefits of ecotourism (yes = 1, no = 0)

x<sub>5</sub> = Availability of other tour sites (yes = 1, no = 2)

x<sub>6</sub> = Willingness to swap present use/integrate ecotourism (yes = 1, no = 0)

x<sub>7</sub> = Availability of functional social facilities (mean score from Likert-type scale)

x<sub>8</sub> = Security of lives and properties (mean score from Likert-type scale)

x<sub>9</sub> = Cohesiveness of community (mean score from Likert-type scale)

x<sub>10</sub> = Conflict status of community (yes = 1, no = 0)

x<sub>11</sub> = Openness to development (yes = 1, no = 0)

b<sub>1</sub>- b<sub>11</sub> = Probit coefficients

b<sub>0</sub> = intercept.

### Test of Hypothesis

One null hypothesis which states that socio-cultural attributes of the host-communities would have no significant influence on ecotourism development in the study area is tested at 0.05 level of significance using chi-square.

## RESULTS

### Ecological Sites in Ebonyi State

Result shows that there is a preponderance of unique ecological sites in the study area. Some notable ones among them are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Notable ecological sites in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

Ecological site	Community	Local Government Area	Zone
Uburu Salt Lake	Uburu	Ohaozara	South
Okposi Salt Lake	Okposi	Ohaozara	
Unwana Golden Sand Beach	Unwana-Afikpo	Afikpo North	North
Ndibe Golden Sand Beach	Ndibe-Afikpo	Afikpo North	
Oziza Golden Sand Beach	Oziza-Afikpo	Afikpo North	
Akpoha Perching Rocks	Akpoha	Afikpo North	
Mkpuruken Rock	Afikpo	Afikpo North	
Ogwuiké Cave	Afikpo	Afikpo North	
Ehoma and Iyike Lake	Afikpo	Afikpo North	
Ekwengwu Waterfall	Afikpo	Afikpo North	
Itim Edda Rolling Hills	Itim-Edda	Afikpo South	
Libolo Valleys	Itim-Edda	Afikpo South	
Ishinweze Waterfalls	Itim-Edda	Afikpo South	South
Amanchor Long Cave	Amanchor-Edda	Afikpo South	
Ugwuchime Quarry Site	Ishiagu	Ivo	

Oferekpe Golden Sand Beach	Ikwo	Ikwo	Central
Oferekpe waterfall	Ikwo	Ikwo	
Mkpume Ekwaoku Rock	Izzi	Izzi	
Otagbara Rock	Izzi	Izzi	
Oguzooronweya forest reserve	Igbeagu-Izzi	Izzi	
Green lake	Abakaliki	Abakaliki	
Abakaliki Golf Course	Abakaliki	Abakaliki	
Juju Hills	Abakaliki	Abakaliki	
Ezillo Lake	Ezilo	Ezilo	North

Source: SEEDS, 2004.

Table 1 presents the notable ecological sites in the various communities, Local Government Areas and ecological zones of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The sites range from salt and fresh water lakes to beaches, waterfalls, hills, rock formations, caves and forests. There are 24 notable ecological sites in the State, 15 of which are located in 10 communities in 4 Local Government Areas in the Southern Zone of the State. The Central Ecological Zone of the State has 8 sites spread across 5 communities in 3 Local Government Areas while only one ecological site is located in Ezilo community in Ezilo Local Government Area of the Northern Ecological Zone.

### Cultural Festivals and Historical Monuments in Ebonyi State

**Table 2: Major Cultural Festivals and other Historical Monuments in Ebonyi State**

Cultural Festival	Community	Highlights	Zone	Period
<b>Mgba</b> (Wrestling festival)	All	Wrestling rituals, colourful regalia, power wrestling, dances and processions	All zones	June/August
<b>Mmahi</b> (Salt festival)	Uburu, Okposi	Maiden dances with salt molds, Presentation of new dances, merry making and exchange of gifts	South	February
<b>Aju</b> (Family life festival)	All	Dances, exchange of gifts, visits, merriments	All	December
<b>Iri ji</b> (New yam festival)	All	Sharing of old yam stocks, harvesting of new yam, presentation of gifts, exchange of visits, colourful dances and merry making	All	May to October
<b>Ogbodo/Mmonwu/Mbe</b> (Masquerade festival)	All	Masquerades processions, dance displays, presentation of new dance groups	All	June to February
<b>Okwa Nta</b> (celebration of the male child)	Oziza, Afikpo	Procession of male children of various age grades, Traditional dance, merrymaking and entertainment of visitors	South	Annual, no fixed period
<b>Ugo-ocha</b> (Cassava festival)	Amasiri	Presentation of women dances, presentation and eating of cassava and meals in various forms, masquerade dances and merrymaking	South	August
<b>Ori echa</b> (Feast of the beginning of the farming season and period of scarcity of food)	Ikwo	Preparation of cocoyam cake into porridge, exchange of gifts of firewood, camwood powder and palm oil, outing of new women dances	Central	April

<b>Aji-ereke</b> (Festival to mark end of harvest and beginning of planting season)	Ikwo Noyo clan	Masquerade performances, Traditional marriages, Ereke music and dance performances at village squares, visit to in-laws and families, merrymaking and exchange of gifts	Central	October
<b>Mbe/Isiji</b> (Initiation)	Edda	Traditional dances, processions, masquerade displays, merrymaking and entertainment	South	October
<b>Ofuafia/Ikpuiugwu</b> (Festival of initiation of young men/women to manhood/ womanhood)	Ikwo	Wrestling, dancing, procession of initiated men and women, market outing, presentation of Odabara dances, merrymaking and entertainment	Central	August
<b>Onwa esaa</b> (Marriage festival)	Nkalaha	Traditional and cultural dances, masquerades, marriage rites, exchange of gifts	North	March and April
<b>Ebembe (Celebration of In-laws)</b>	Ishiagu	Processions and traditional dances, presentation of gifts to In-laws, merrymaking and entertainment of guests	South	March
<b>Abba Ela Abba</b> (Communal marital match-making festival)	Ishiagu	Colourful dances, processions, maiden and fashion shows	South	June
<b>Nzu</b> (Youth festival)	Ishiagu	Colourful dances, wrestling, masquerades, presentations, merry making and entertainments	South	November
<b>Gbudu Gbudu</b> (Celebration of warriors)	Akaeze	Traditional wrestling, war dances, warrior masquerades, youth mobilization for community development cultural projects, outings	South	December
<b>Oke-aku, Onwa eke</b> (To mark end and beginning of new year)	Ezza Ezelima clan	Colourful processions, cultural dances, merry making and entertainment	Central	June/July
<b>Okemini</b> (Festival of peace, bumper harvest, health and wealth)	Izzicha, Edda	Masquerades, cultural war dances, etc.	Central	March
<b>Ikpuru achi</b> (Traditional rain and fishing festival)	Nkaliki, Achara Mnuhu	Showcasing of traditional rainmaking skill, showcasing of fishing skills, traditional dances and colourful fishing boat regatta	Central	April
<b>Aji Onyimonyi</b> (Festival for peace and good health)	Izzicha, Edda,	Cultural dances, masquerades, thanksgiving, ritual procession and entertainment of guests and visitors	Central	Annual, No fixed period
<b>Slave route</b>	Ezza	Relics of slave trade: shacks, chains, properly demarcated slave trade route,	North	
<b>Slave market</b>	Ezza	Slave market square, linked with the international slave market in Abia State, Nigeria, shacks, chains	North	

Sources: Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2005 and Field survey, 2014

Table 2 shows that there are 21 cultural festivals in Ebonyi State that take place between March and December each year. The *Mgba* (Wrestling), *Aju* (family), *Iri ji* (New Yam) and *Ogbodo* (Masquerade) festivals are universally celebrated in the State while the others are peculiar to

some communities spread across the three zones of the State. The festivals showcase the various aspects of the people's culture including crops grown, foods eaten, marriage, family life and values, warfare and heroism, hospitality and human relations, songs, dance, religion and history. The slave route and slave market both in Ezza North LGA in the Northern ecological zone of the State are invaluable historical monuments of universal relevance.

### **Socio-cultural Attributes of Host Communities**

The socio-cultural attributes of the host communities in the study area are ascertained by the use of mean scores derived from a 4r-point Likert-type scale. Results are shown on Table 1.

**Table 3: Mean scores (from Likert-type scale) of socio-cultural attributes of local communities**

Characteristics	Mean scores	Decision
Respect for visitors	3.0	Accepted
Inclusive of women	2.4	Rejected
Involving of youths	2.7	Accepted
Aware of benefits of ecotourism	2.6	Accepted
Accessible of site	2.5	Accepted
Willing to integrate/swap present use of ecological site for tourism	2.9	Accepted
Available functional socio-economic facilities	2.3	Rejected
Security of lives and property	2.8	Accepted
Cohesive communities	2.6	Accepted
Free of community conflicts	2.3	Rejected
Open to development	2.6	Accepted

*Source: Field survey, 2014*

Mean score analysis of responses of respondents to some identified socio-cultural attributes of their communities using a four-point Lykert-type scale shows (Table 2) that respondents accepted that their communities (host communities) are cohesive, secure, receptive to visitors, open to development, aware of benefits of ecotourism development and involving of youths in community affairs. Also, results showed that the ecological sites are accessible and that the communities are willing to integrate or where necessary, swap the present use of the sites for ecotourism. On the other hand, the communities are not inclusive of women in her affairs, lacked functional socio-economic facilities and experienced conflicts.

### **Possible Effects of Host Communities' Socio-cultural Characteristics on Ecotourism Development**

Probit analysis is used to determine possible effects of socio-cultural attributes of host communities on ecotourism development in the study area. Result of the analysis is presented on Table 2.

**Table 4: Coefficient estimates of probit analysis on possible effects of host communities' socio-cultural attributes on ecotourism development.**

Variable name	Coefficient estimates	Standard error	Value
Constant (b <sub>0</sub> )	7.265	17561.932	18.188
Respect for visitors	16.870	7.848	-0.606***
Exclusion of women	-0.918	3.847	0.239***
Involvement of youths	5.205	2.070	0.431***
Awareness of benefits of ecotourism	2.046	1.206	-1.696***
Accessibility of sites	5.876	1.542	0.509***
Willingness to adopt ecotourism	12.970	2.962	-0.684***
Non-availability of functional socio-economic facilities	-2.238	0.781	0.330NS
Security of lives and properties	6.588	0.291	-1.245NS
Cohesiveness communities	10.209	5.239	-1.949***
Community conflicts	-3.558	1.591	-0.307NS
Openness to development	6.302	4.271	-1.475***

Source: Field survey, 2014.

\*\*\* = Highly significant (p= 0.01); \* = Significant (p= 0.05)

Pearson Goodness-of-Fit Test = 8887.020 (Highly Significant; p= 0.01)

Table 2 shows that socio-cultural attributes of host communities have strong influence on ecotourism development. This is justified from the z-value of 18.188 and Pearson Goodness-of-fit which is 8887.020 and statistically significant at p = 0.01. The result also indicated that nine out of eleven variables considered meet the *apriori* expectations while two do not. The overall fit for the Probit model is shown below:

$$Y = 16.870X_1 - 0.918X_2 + 5.205X_3 + 2.046X_4 + 5.87X_5 + 12.970X_6 - 2.23X_7 + 6.588X_8 + 10.209X_9 - 3.558X_{10} + 6.30X_{11}$$

(7.848)    (3.847)    (2.070)    (1.206)    (1.542)    (2.962)    (0.781)    (0.291)    (5.239)    (1.591)    (4.271)

### Possibility for Cooperation among Host-communities in Ecotourism Development

The perceptions of respondents about the opportunities and willingness for cooperation among the communities toward development of ecotourism are assessed using mean scores derived from four-point Likert-type scale. The results obtained are presented on Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 5: Mean scores on perceptions of host communities on possibility for Cooperation in ecotourism development**

Factor	Mean scores	Decision
No subsisting conflicts or 'open wounds' among the communities	2.7	Accepted
No major language barriers among the communities	2.6	Accepted
No major cultural barriers among the communities	2.9	Accepted
No political barriers among the communities	2.7	Accepted
Network of roads connect the communities	2.6	Accepted
Existing cooperation among the communities on other issues	2.8	Accepted
Communities' opinion leaders willing to cooperate in ecotourism	3.0	Accepted

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*Source: Field survey, 2014.*

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Table 3 shows the responses of respondents to some suggested constraints, facilitators and attitude of host-communities' opinion leaders to the possibility of cooperation among host-communities in the development of ecotourism. Result shows that there are no subsisting conflicts or 'open wounds' among the communities. There is also no major barrier in language, culture or politics. The communities are inter-connected by networks of motor roads. The communities are already cooperating on other issues and communities' leaders are willing to cooperate on mutual ecotourism development.

### **Test of Hypothesis**

Result shows that  $X^2$ -calculated (10.00) >  $X^2$ -tabulated (3.841), hence, the null hypothesis that socio-cultural attributes of host-communities would have no significant effect on ecotourism development in the area is rejected and the alternative accepted.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Suitability of Identified Ecological Sites and Cultural Resources for Ecotourism**

Ecological sites in the State are found to be diverse and include salt and fresh water Lakes, Beaches, Waterfalls, Hills, Valleys, Rock formations, Caves, Forests, Gulf Course, Forests, hence fulfilling the basic condition for ecotourism development as generally observed by researchers (Honey, 1999; UNWTO, 2002; Drumm and Moore, 2005; Bauld, 2007; Wang, Zhong, Zhang and Zhou, 2014). Some ecological sites in the State are located in rural communities while some are in semi-urban and urban towns. The natural preference of nature seekers for the rural and semi-rural ambience has been acknowledged by researchers (Buchsbaum, 2004; Drumm and Moore, 2005; Bauld, 2007; Madzara, 2011; Barry, 2012; Wang, Zhong, Zhang and Zhou, 2014). All but two of the identified sites, namely, the Abakaliki Gulf Course and the Abakaliki Green Lake, are communally-owned and managed open access ecological resources. The Gulf Course and the Green Lake are managed by Non-governmental Organization and Ebonyi State Government respectively. Community ownership and management of ecological resources are precursor to the development of community based ecotourism in which more socio-economic benefits are retained by the host-communities as observed by WWF (2001), Drumm and Moore (2005) and Onyeabor (2016a).

Apart from ecological features, the State is also found to be famously rich in cultural capital including cultural festivals, dances and historical monuments. Ecotourism, as has been observed by numerous investigators, inherently combine the use of physical and cultural resources of the environment to produce great touristic effects (UNWTO, 1997; Honey, 1999; WWF, 2001; UNEP, 2002; UNWTO, 2002; Madzara, 2011). The unique ecological features, songs, dances, the slave market and slave routes present unique educational resources in ecology, geology, culture, history and the general environment. The sites also provide ample environment for variety of recreational activities including picnics, relaxation, hiking, sun-bathing, swimming, sport-fishing, canoe racing, skiing, yachting, bird watching, gambling, meditative activities, partying and other social adventures. The remarkable concentrations of 15 of the most diverse ecological attractions in the Southern Zone of the State, and 8 sites in the Central Zone- areas that can be circumferenced within an hour of driving respectively, provide great opportunities for development of tourism clusters to maximize tourists'



satisfaction and benefits to local communities. This fact is supported by evidences from South-East Europe (Fodor, 2009), Bulgaria (Hawkins, 2004), Malasia (Marker, Blanco, Lokanathan, and Verma, 2008) and Sothern Africa (Flyman, 2003).

### **Socio-cultural Attributes of Host-communities and Possibility of Ecotourism Development in the State**

The study demonstrates the friendly disposition of host-communities' socio-cultural environment to visitors or would-be visitors. There is also the indication that this attitude would strongly positively influence ecotourism development in the State. The communities are shown to be progressive in their outlook with indicators of significant positive influences on ecotourism development of identified attributes of cohesiveness, openness to new developments, inclusiveness of youths, awareness of potential benefits of tourism and willingness to swap or integrate tourism with present strategies being used in the management of their ecological resources. These community attributes have all been documented in earlier researches in Kenya (WWF, 2001), Spain (Drumm and Moore, 2005), Cambodia (WWF, 2007), Obudu area in South-South Nigeria (Nwahia, Omonona, Balogun and Onyeabor, 2012) and in South-East zone of Nigeria (Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015b) as facilitators of ecotourism development.

However, result indicates that non-availability of functional social and economic infrastructures in the host communities will have a negative, though not-significant consequence on ecotourism development. This result is explained by the observed concentration of social and economic amenities in the urban communities of Abakaliki and Afikpo among the host-communities, and the dearth of these facilities in the rural communities where some of the most exciting sites are located. Basic rural infrastructure has been found to positively influence ecotourism development in another research in South East Nigeria (Onyeabor and Alimba, 2015b). Furthermore, ecotourism development may be significantly deterred by identified cultural exclusion of women, who theoretically form the bulk of ecotourism services providers (WWF, 2001; Onyeabor, 2016a), from decision making by the host-communities. Onyeabor and Alimba (2016) and Onyeabor (2016b) have reported negative influence of women exclusion from ecotourism in the South-East of Nigeria. Overall, results corroborate the hypothesis that socio-cultural attributes of host communities will have significant effect on ecotourism development in the area.

### **Host-communities' Willingness to Cooperate in Ecotourism Development**

The study shows that there exist positive indications for cooperation of host-communities in the development of ecotourism on ecological sites in their domains. Result shows that there are no subsisting conflicts or 'open wounds' among the communities. This is an opportunity for cooperation among host-communities as also found out by Ayumba (2003) in a study of indigenous Stakeholders conflicts as a barrier to potential ecotourism development in Limpopo Province of South Africa. Result also shows that there are no major barriers in language, culture and politics among the host-communities which are expected to boost cooperation and cluster development. This is in line with Fodor (2009) who inferred from a study of the development of ecotourism cluster model in the territory of the Belso Somogy ecological network that there must be a close co-operation and participants should have common values, goals and ongoing dialogues between them based on mutual trust. The host-communities in the case of Ebonyi State do not only share cultural values but are also found, in line with Fodor (2009), to be interconnected by networks of motor roads and other infrastructures. The communities are also

found to have already been cooperating on other issues of common interest like mining of mineral resources, and communities' leaders are found to be willing to cooperate also on mutual ecotourism development.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study conclusively demonstrates that Ebonyi State has potential for ecotourism development in terms of variety of ecological and cultural resources, and attitudinal dispositions of host-communities. It is recommended that relevant government and non-governmental agencies should embark on advocacy to re-orient host-communities to imbibe inclusion of women as facilitator for ecotourism development. In addition, state and local governments through their relevant agencies and departments, and Community Development Associations (CDA) should demonstrate political will for ecotourism development in particular, and rural development in general by providing and maintaining functional socioeconomic infrastructures in host-communities.

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