

**PERCEIVED IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM AND RESIDENTS
SUPPORT FOR POTENTIAL ECOTOURISM
DEVELOPMENT IN IMO STATE**

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ABSTRACT: This study appraised the perceived impact of ecotourism on residents' support for potential ecotourism development in Imo state. Data for the study were obtained with a set of 360 Likert scale semi-structured questionnaire design by Lankford and Howard (2004). The questionnaires were administered to the households in the purposively selected communities using random sampling techniques. Data for the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency count, percentage, mean, standard deviation and cross tabulation while correlation was used to test the relationship. The finding of the study confirmed the existence of four tourism impact constructs pertaining to economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts. The economic, cultural and environmental impacts are positively associated with the total tourism impacts while social impacts negatively affect the total impact. Though the residents perceived that ecotourism development creates some negative social impacts, the total impact to enhance potential ecotourism development was positive with a mean of 4.21. Therefore, the local communities are likely to support the harnessing of ecotourism potentials for the development of the state. The study recommended that government and other stakeholders should pay adequate attention to perceived impacts of potential ecotourism development by the resident communities which would in turn assist in achieving sustainable development of such projects in the state.

Keywords: Perceived Impacts, Potential, Ecotourism Development, Residents Support, Imo State.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is one of the sub sectors of tourism which depends very much on quality natural environment as much as it equally does on the specific culture and society of the local inhabitants (Komla & Veirier, 2006). According Bolnick (2013), ecotourism is a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local people. Residents' support for potential ecotourism development depends on the perceived impact of such project on the people.

Thus, it is recognized that the perceived impacts of potential ecotourism development determine the total tourism impact and hence, residents' support for potential ecotourism development (UNESCO, 1999; WTO, 2004). Therefore, it is assumed that if residents perceive the impact from ecotourism development to be positive, they will have a favourable disposition towards potential ecotourism project in their area. Likewise, if the perceived ecotourism impacts create more problems than benefits, residents will not support potential ecotourism project.

Recently, as the host resident population support has become a key element for the successful tourism business in the tourist destinations, more researchers have focused on explaining the nature of residents' perception of tourism impacts using different theories (Jafari, 2015; Long, Perdue, & Allen, 2012; AP 2012; Lankjard, 2014; Lindberg & Johnson, 2006).

These researchers have shown the major impacts of tourism on residents to include, socio-economic and cultural issues and other relate variables. In most tourism destinations in the developing world, there is little understanding why respondents respond to impacts of tourism the way they do and under what conditions they respond to those impacts (AP, 2012).

In order to clarify the relationship between the impacts of tourism and resident host community support for potential tourism development, several theories have been developed. The most influential amongst them is Doxey's Irridex Theory (1975), which suggests that residents' attitude toward tourism may pass through a series of stages from euphoria, through apathy to irritation leading to antagonism as perceived cost exceeds the expected benefit. This was corroborated in a similar research conducted by Long, Perdue, & Allen (2012). Mason and Cheyne (2016), suggested that resident reaction toward tourism contained a sense of homogeneity in a related study. However, this motion was challenged by some researchers who reported heterogeneity in community response and diverse residents' attitude simultaneously existing in a community (Lius & Var, 1996; Pertdue, Long & Allen, 2011; Prentice 2013; Mc Cool & Martin, 2014).

Butler (1975), developed a more complex theory which suggested that both negative and positive attitudes could be held by residents' in a community simultaneously and expressed through active or passive support or opposition. Although the theory addressed the complexity of residents' attitudes toward tourism, researchers still lacked theories explaining relationship between residents' attitude and perceived tourism impact on support for tourism development until AP (2012) applied social exchange theory to tourism.

According to the theory, exchange would initiate when asymmetrical inaction forms. AP(2012) opined that residents evaluate tourism in terms of social exchange, that is, evaluation in terms of expected benefits or costs obtained in return for the services rendered. He concluded that when exchange of resources is high for the host actors in either the balanced or unbalanced exchange relation, tourism impacts are viewed positively, while tourism impacts are viewed negatively if exchange of resources is low. Social exchange theory has been examined as a theoretical framework by researchers to describe residents' support towards perceived tourism impacts (Caneday & Zeiger, 2011; Akis, Peristianis & Warner, 2016).

In response to the call for establishing standardized instrumentation for use in tourism impact research, Crompton (1997), Lankford and Howard (2004) developed The Tourism Impact Assessment Scale (TIAS) which enabled researchers to measure residents' perceived impacts towards tourism in different contexts; it has been used by various tourism setting over the past decades (Lankford, 2004; King, Pizam & Milman 2014; Khwanruthai, 2013). The result of the studies has proven TIAS to be the most reliable and valued instrument to measure the perceived tourism impact and residents support for tourism development. Hence, the theory becomes cornerstone of this research investigating the perceived impacts of ecotourism and resident support for potential ecotourism development in Imo State.

Statement of the Problem and Objectives

Ecotourism has been discovered as one of the most important economic sectors that have enormous potential for sustainable socio-economic development and poverty reduction, even though the state is not evenly endowed with ecotourism resources. Nevertheless, the roles of local people seem to be neglected by tourism planners. In Fact, the perceived impacts of potential ecotourism development on the local people are usually assumed than researched (Tram, 2016).

The perceived impact of ecotourism projects by residents of the host communities can negatively or positively affect their support for the development of such project, but these are not usually considered especially in the developing nations like Nigeria. The consequence is that the limited understanding of the context may lead to incompatibility between tourism developers, tourists and local residents (Singh & Singh, 2004; Marcus, 2018). Therefore, in order to avoid misleading tourists in the host communities and garner support for sustainable ecotourism development, it becomes very imperative to understand local residents' perception towards such tourism projects. Hence, this research investigates into the perceived impacts of ecotourism projects and the resident host communities support for potential ecotourism development.

The objectives of the study include:

- i. Identify the perceived environmental impact of ecotourism by resident host communities and their support for potential ecotourism development.
- ii. Assess the perceived social impact of ecotourism by resident host communities and support for potential ecotourism development.
- iii. Examine the perceived economic impact of ecotourism by resident host communities and support for potential ecotourism development.
- iv. Find out the perceived cultural impact of ecotourism and host community support for potential ecotourism development.

Ho: Perceived impacts have no influence on residents' support for potential ecotourism development

Methodology

The study was carried out in Imo State which is located between latitudes 4°45'N and 7°15'N, and longitudes 6°50'E and 7°25'E. The state has a total population of 4.8 million people (National Population Commission, 2010), with a total land area of about 5136.052km² and an average population density of 760 people/km². It is bordered by Abia State on the East, by the River Niger and Delta State on the west, Anambra State to the north and Rivers State to the south. The state is rich in nature, history and culture which make it a favourite destination for various tourists.

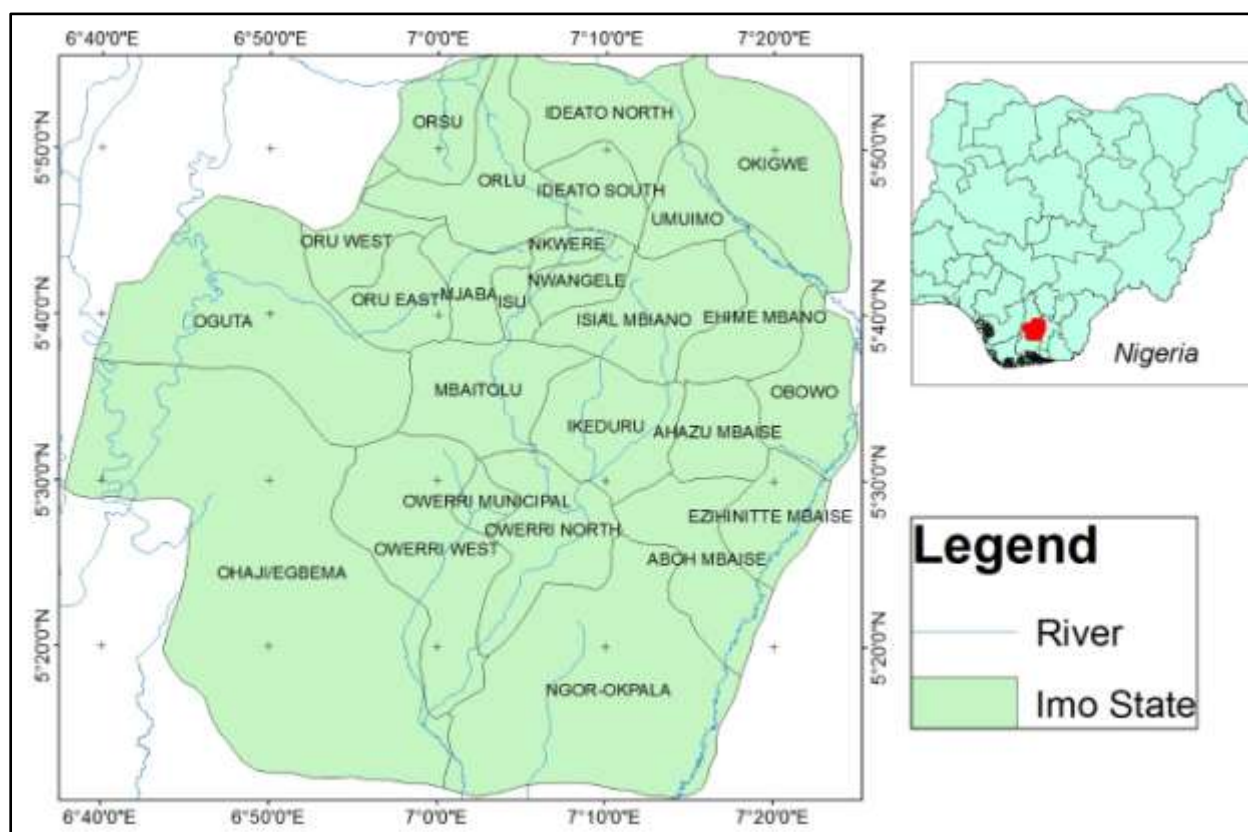


Figure 1: Location of the Study Area

All the households in Imo State from 18 years and above constituted the target population of the study. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select respondents. The first stage involved the delineation of the study area into the 3 geo-political zones which are Orlu, Okigwe and Owerri zones. The second stage was the purposive selection of 3 local governments from each of the 3 senatorial zones and third involved the selection of 2 communities each from each of the 3 local governments and 2 villages from each of the communities. Finally, was the selection of 10 respondents from each of the villages, giving a total sample size of 360 respondents.

A set 360 structured questionnaire was used to elicit information from the respondents. Three hundred and sixteen respondents correctly filled the questionnaire used for the study. Information in the questionnaire were analyzed using a 4-point Likert type summated rating scale of agreement (Strongly disagree=4, Disagree=3, Agree=2 and Strongly agree=1. The mean was calculated thus $4+3+2+1 = 10/4 = 2.5$ and this forms the benchmark for accepting any item in the study area. The perceived tourism impacts were collected using adjusted Tourism Impact Assessment Scale (TIAS) developed by Lankford and Howard (2004) for measuring the perceived tourism impact on resident community support for potential ecotourism development

Data for the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency count, percentage, mean, standard deviation and cross tabulation while correlation was used to test the relationship.

Results and Discussion

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Result of the socio-economic characteristics of respondents was presented on Table 1

Table 1: Social-Economic Characteristic of Respondent of the Study Area

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	221	70
	Female	95	30
	Total	316	100.00
Age structure	18-30	82	26
	31-45	172	54
	46-60	32	10
	>60	30	9
	Total	316	100.00
Marital status	Single	113	38
	Married	185	56
	Widow/Divorced	19	6
	Total	316	100.00
Educational Status	F.S.L.C	95	30
	W.A.S.C	84	27
	OND/NCE	60	19
	B.SC/HND	53	17
	PG	18	6
	Total	316	100.00
Occupation	Student	28	9
	Farming	164	52
	Civil service	57	18
	Business	46	14
	Others	21	7
	Total	316	100.00
Income	₦20,000 or less	115	36
	₦ 21,000-50,000	109	34
	₦ 51, 000-100,000	48	15
	₦ 101,000-200,000	29	9
	₦ 201,000 and above	15	3
	Total	316	100.00

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Gender and age are important demographic variables and the primary basis of demographic classification. Table 1 above (gender) shows the distribution of interviewed respondents by gender at the time of survey. There is the preponderance of males over females. Thus approximately 70% of the respondents were males while 30% were females. The dominance of male stems from the fact that males are the heads of household and could not be there while females attend to issues like this. Hence there were more male than female that

participated in the survey. This is in line with the findings of other researchers on demographic and socio economic characteristic of the study area (Nwaonu, 2016; Nzekwe 2004).

In terms of age structure of the respondents, Table 1 also revealed that there are more people between the ages of 31-45 (54%) followed by those between ages 46-60(10%) and those between 18-30 (26%) rank third, while above 60 (9%) ranked least. As a matter of fact, the age range 31-60 are more economically active in every society and can partake more in viable business ventures like ecotourism. The study of Okoro (2014) indicated similar age composition of 30-60 in a related work. This was also corroborated by the research conducted by Jurowski, Uysal, and Williams (2007). Their research established that this age group are very supportive in tourism development. This might not be unconnected with the interest of this age group in exploring business opportunities that would enhance their standard of living.

Table 1 further showed that 59% of respondents were married, while 35% were single and 6% were either widowed or divorced. The predominance of married people as respondents may be as a result of the fact that marriage is one of the primary indicators of being a responsible person in the society and that makes them partake in opportunities that will improve their family life and well-being and hence their willingness to take part in tourism activities.

The respondents' religion from Table1 indicated that Christians constituted a larger percentage (95%) of the respondents; this is because the study area is mainly dominated by Christians, followed by other religions (4%) while Islamic religion (1%) is the least. Lankford (2004) and Jurowski, Uysal, and Williams (2007) in their research established that religious has no influence in tourism development.

The result of the educational status as shown in Table 1 equally indicated that about 30% of the respondents had First School Leaving Certificate (FLSC) and 267% obtained West African School Certificate (WASC), 19% had either Ordinary National Diploma (OND) or National Certificate of Education (NCE). The remaining 167% and 6% obtained Higher National Diploma (HND) or Bachelor's degree (B.Sc /A/ED) and above Bachelor's degree respectively. This implies that majority of the respondents were literates since they can read and write.

Table1 further revealed that more than half of the respondents (52%) were farmers, 18% were civil servants while 14% had business as their occupation. Students constituted 9% of the respondents' occupation while 7% engaged in other forms of occupation. This result is in agreement with the finding of Ayoola (2011), Nwaiwu (2013) and Ukoha (2016) who reported farming as the major occupation of the people of Imo State in their research.

Finally, from table 1,the average monthly income of respondents in the study area showed that a higher percentage of the respondents lived on a monthly income less than N20,000 (36%), 21000-50000 (34%), 51000-100000 (14%) and 100000-200000 (9%)while few had monthly income range of N200,000.00 and above. This was corroborated by Howard (2004) in his study. Income defines the concerns of social cost of tourism pursuit and also the possible economic cost in term of opportunity to invest in tourism related businesses. Income is also considered as one of the most fundamental parameters of embarking on tourism adventure and hence exchange of resources will enhance tourism development.

Perceived Economic Impact

The table below reveals the perceived economic impact of ecotourism in the study area

Table 2: Perceived Economic Impact (N=316)

S/N	Item	Mean	Stand. Deviation	Remark
1.	Ecotourism creates more job	3.5981	1.14081	Agree
2.	Ecotourism attracts more investments	4.0190	.99504	Agree
3.	Ecotourism leads to more spending	4.1899	.99620	Agree
4.	Increased in prices of goods and services	2.6994	1.38980	Agree
5.	Financial benefits to local people and small business	3.9310	.88396	Agree
6.	Ecotourism revenue are more important than revenue from industries for local development	4.0158	1.36501	Agree
7.	Improves the instrumental development of communities	3.8987	1.39700	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

A positive agreement was observed in table 2 between residents on the perceived economic impact of ecotourism development. It implies the resident communities believe that ecotourism will create more jobs (M=3.59), attracts more investment into their community (M=4.01), increases more spending (M=4.18), improve standard of living (m=1.85) and improve the infrastructural development (M=3.89).

Majority of the respondents were more interested in job creation, investment and infrastructural development as the major economic benefits anticipated from potential tourism development. This is an indication that the perceived economic impact in the study area is very positive and will enhance residents' support for potential ecotourism development. This is in line with related studies carried out by other researchers (Prentice, 2013; Jurowski, Uysal, & Williams, 2007; Liu & Var, 1996).

Perceived Social Impact

Table 3 shows the perceived social impacts of ecotourism development in the study area.

Table 3: Perceived social Impact (N=316)

S/N	Item	Mean	Stand. Deviation	Remark
1.	High spending tourists have negatively affect way of life	3.3291	1.50952	Agree

2.	Ecotourism provides more social amenities for local residents	4.0095	1.01883	Agree
3.	Local residents suffer from living in a tourism destination areas	2.5586	1.47844	Agree
4.	Improved public tourist facilities is a waste of tax-payers money	1.7848	1.33971	disagree
5.	Ecotourism brings negative community behaviors like prostitution , begging etc	4.2342	.70973	Agree
6.	Ecotourism increases crime rate such as stealing, deception, commoditization of cultural products etc.	3.2722	1.41712	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

Table 3, shows that ecotourism increases crime rate like stealing, deception, comodification of cultural products, and lack of authentication of cultural products (M=3.27).The residents also agreed that high spending tourists have negative effects on the way of life of respondents (M= 3.3). It was overwhelmingly agreed that ecotourism will bring negative changes in community behaviour (M=4.23), while residents suffer from living in tourism destination areas (M= 2.5), but disagreed that improving tourism facilities is a waste of tax-payers' money (M=1.7).

Perceived Cultural Impact

Table shows the perceived cultural impact of the study area.

Table 4: Perceived Cultural Impact (N=316)

S/N	Item	Mean	Stand. Deviation	Remark
1.	Ecotourism is a tool for intercultural dialogue and cross cultural understanding eg exchange of ideas , stories and objects etc.	2.9788	1.56230	Agree
2.	Ecotourism revitalizes cultural deposition and local community consciousness	3.3323	1.34532	Agree
3.	Investment in ecotourism development is a kind of economical investment diversification for community	4.3734	.57992	Agree
4.	Ecotourism can enhance community socio-cultural development through tourist movement and exchange of goods and services	4.6614	.48720	Agree

Source: Field Work, 2021

Cultural impact and local community support for ecotourism, revealed that local residents perceived ecotourism as a development that provides cultural identity and activity, cultural exchange and valuable meeting experience with tourists as shown in Table 4.

All the respondents agreed that cultural impact of ecotourism will positively influence the resident community support for ecotourism development with ecotourism as tool for intercultural dialogue (M=2.9) revitalizing of culture and community consciousness (M=3.3), economic and investment diversification (M=4.37) with enhancing community cultural development having (M=4.6).

Perceived Environmental Impacts

Table 5 reveals the perceived environmental impact by residents of the study area.

Table 5: Perceived Environmental Impact (N=316)

S/N	Item	Mean	Stand. Deviation	Remark
1	Ecotourism has resulted to traffic congestion, noise and pollution	1.4272	.61548	Disagree
2	Construction of hotels and other tourist facilities can destroyed the natural environment	1.7785	.60289	Disagree
3	Ecotourism has resulted to distortion of ecosystem	4.3006	.51775	Agree
4	Ecotourism will increase environmental awareness in our community	4.5538	.56368	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

The perceived environmental impact in Table 5 suggests that local residents disagree that ecotourism development creates traffic congestion, noise and pollution like other forms of tourism (M=1.42), crowding and destruction of natural environmental (M=1.77). However, the environmental impact suggests that it has negative impact on community support for ecotourism development. Thus the lesser environmental impact resident perceived, the more support they have for potential ecotourism development.

Ecotourism can degrade the environment if the principles are not followed to the later. Though respondents agreed that ecotourism development might increase environmental awareness (M=4.5). Matheson and Wall (2012) corroborated this outcome that opportunities for conservation and preservation of natural areas are also paramount to resident communities.

Perceived Total Impact

Table 6: Perceived Total Impact (N=316)

S/N	Item	Mean	Stand. Deviation	Remark
1	Do you agree that ecotourism will enhance the perceived development of your community and hence you will support ecotourism development?	4.2152	.39495	Agree
2	Do you agree that ecotourism will hinder the perceived development of your community hence you will not support ecotourism development?	1.8386	.90285	Disagree

Source: Field Work, 2021

The goal of developing ecotourism in a community is to maximize selected positive impacts while minimizing potential negative impacts. The finding in Table 6 shows that ecotourism total perceived impact in relation to community support was very positive despite some perceived social and environmental impacts.

Respondents are still in agreement that the benefit of ecotourism are greater than the cost to the people of the state (M=4.2).

Respondents perceived that ecotourism will enhance the development of the state, hence, they would support potential ecotourism projects despite the negatively perceived social impact.

Hypothesis Testing of Perceived Tourism Impacts

The analysis in Table 7 shows there is positive relationship (0.727) between economic impact and resident support for potential ecotourism, with p-value (0.000) which is less than 0.05. There is also a positive relationship (0.817) between cultural impact and residents support with, p-value (0.001) which is less than 0.05 and environmental impact (0.522) and residents support, with p-value (0.003) revealing a positive relationship. However, there is an inverse though not significant relationship between social impact (-0.55) and resident support, with p-value (0.326).

Table 7: Correlation Results of Perceived Tourism Impact and Residents' Support for Potential Ecotourism Development

Paired	Sample Correlations	N	Correlation	sig	Decision on H ₀	Relationship IS
Pair 1	H _{0i} = economic impact and resident support	316	.727	.000	Reject	Significant
Pair 2	H _{0ii} = social impact and resident support	316	-.055	.326	Accept	Not Significant
Pair 3	H _{0iii} = cultural impact and resident support	316	.817	.001	Reject	Significant
Pair 4	H _{0iv} = environmental impact and resident support	316	.522	.003	Reject	Significant

Source: Field Work, 2021.

The perceived economic, cultural and environmental ecotourism impacts would contribute significantly to resident support for potential ecotourism development, while perceived social impact would have no significant impact on residents support for ecotourism development. Based on the above analysis, H_{0i}, H_{0iii} and H_{0iv} were rejected while H_{0ii} was accepted as not having significant impact in support for potential ecotourism development in the study area.

Conclusion

For ecotourism to be sustainable in any area, there is every need to understand the residents perceived impact of the project on the social, cultural, economic and environmental perspectives, as these determine their level of support for the ecotourism development. If the perceived benefits are more than the problem, the resident communities will have a favourable disposition toward potential ecotourism development while the reverse will be the case if the resident communities perceived more adverse effects than benefits. In most tourism destinations in the developing nations, little or no understanding exists on the perceived impact of such projects by the resident host communities. Hence the impacts are assumed than researched. This has remained one of the most important challenges influencing tourism development in the third world. Therefore, to achieve sustainable ecotourism development, there is every need to research into the perceived impacts of the project by the locals as this influences their support or objection to project. This study therefore recommends that the government at the various levels should pay greater attention to perceived impacts of potential ecotourism project and any other project to ensure resident host communities support, as this will help to achieve sustainable development of such projects.

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