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**COMMUNITY PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ECOTOURISM  
DEVELOPMENT AT THE TOURISM CORRIDOR SITES OF EKITI STATE, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

Ecotourism is a nature based tourism that enlightens the local community to support protection and conservation efforts which eventually lead to its developments. The local residents act as stewards of the site, their support is essential, which emphasizes a need to understand the perception and attitude of local communities towards ecotourism development. This study examined the community perception, support and attitudes towards ecotourism development at the tourism corridor sites of Ekiti State. Questionnaires survey and Interviews were the main means of inquiries employed in this study and the data obtained was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Results revealed that tourism-related benefits have been limited thus far as indicated by 35% and residents have had to cope with reduced access to resources since the site was established. Nevertheless, community residents generally support conservation and are optimistic that tourism growth at the sites will generate economic benefits for the communities.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism Development, Perception, Attitude, Tourism Corridors, Resident

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**Introduction**

In the face of increasing environmental destruction, ecosystem degradation, habitat disappearance and biodiversity decline, most nations have made efforts to protect some portion of their remaining natural spaces (Woodley, 1999). At the same time, competition for often scarce resources is making it increasingly difficult for governments to rationalize the allocation of large areas of land and water for protection. Additionally, there have been widespread government financial constraints with environment-related programmes and initiatives often being the first to be chopped off. Government-run conservation agencies are now facing budget constraints in many places (Loon and Polakow, 2001).

In the world, various countries are looking for alternative means of sustaining their economy to reduce the level of poverty, and environmental degradation as the population increases Nigeria is solely dependent on her petroleum resource for revenue,

thus a need to find alternatives to pull Nigeria from its economic problems; tourism is one of such alternatives. The subject of tourism in Nigeria is believed by some that it can help alleviate the problem of conservation and development, that it is capable of yielding sustainable local earning and yield needed foreign exchange the tourism industry is one of the main sectors of the world's economy, accounting for nearly 11% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is growing at an average rate of 4 % per year; given its scale it is not surprising that tourism's effect on the environment, underestimated in the past are now receiving attention (United Nations Environment Programme, 1999). Lindberg, (1991) estimated that 55 billion, in tourism revenue is accumulated by developing countries annually, and that nature tourism brought in 20% of this revenue. Tourism in Africa continent is yet to reach its full economic maturity (Nwosu, 2002).

Despite the recognition of considerable inclusion of the local community in tourism development, there has been no consensus about their roles as these have attracted some debates and emotive controversies. Godfrey and Clarke (2000) noted that communities form a basic element in modern tourism as they are the focal point for the supply of accommodation, catering, information, transport facilities and services; their local natural environment, buildings and institutions, their people, culture and history, all form the core elements of what the tourists come to see; and whether as towns, villages or cities, every community has tourism at one level or the other and is affected by the growth and development of the industry. Literature has widely acknowledged that local people's support for conservation is imperative for sustainable ecotourism programs and management of protected areas (Holmes, 2013; Bookbinder *et al*, 1998). According to Holmes, (2013) local people can be a direct threat to protected areas when they fail to cooperate with protected area authorities or participate in conservation initiatives such as ecotourism. Deeper understanding of local people perception of ecotourism as a conservation strategy in protected areas and factors that shape these perceptions are therefore crucial steps in devising appropriate strategies that will elicit the widespread local support for biodiversity conservation and ecotourism management (Ninan, 2007; Szell & Hallett, 2013)

The representation of interests of the local communities in the tourism development agenda is a complex issue that needs to be addressed carefully. There is an unclear description of the local communities' roles and how their views are incorporated in the whole planning and development process. Although a number of roles local communities could take in tourism development has been suggested (Tosun, 2006), little emphasis has so far been given as to how local communities themselves feel about these imposed roles. This creates a knowledge gap regarding what communities think of their role(s) in tourism development as opposed to the imposed roles. This is a crucial step in the development of better and holistic plans for sustainable tourism destinations. Tourism development can be linked and explained better using two concepts: sustainable tourism and sustainable development. Sustainable tourism is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support system (TES, 2002). While sustainable development implies meeting the needs of the present tourist and host region without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs. Therefore, tourism development can be meaningless if its socio-economic and environmental benefits do not trickle down to the local communities. Likewise, the sustainability of nature-based tourism

development in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in a way lies in the hands of local communities.

Ekiti State, Nigeria is blessed with many tourist sites some of which are a product of the solid geology and processes of geomorphology- rocks, inselbergs, mountain ranges, undulating terrain of old plains formed by a network of rivers which take their origin and courses through this high ground, for example the Efon ridge is the watershed of Rivers Oni, Olua and Owena; wide range of biodiversity- unique plants, forest reserves etc) Many of these tourist sites are yet to be explored and developed (Kayode,2009) thus, the perception of some residents are being determined due to the ignorance of the benefits and the poor development state of these potentials. However, the state government believes that the sustainable development of the tourism potentials is capable of generating revenues to the tune of billions of Naira for the state annually, create employment opportunities and alleviate poverty at the grassroots. Thus, government has decided to partner with the private sector to fully develop the tourism potentials of the state. This can only be successfully achieved through local community support.

### **Methodology**

The study was carried out in Ekiti State (Fig. 4) which is situated in the heart of the tropics. It is located between longitudes 4°45' to 5°45' east of the Greenwich Meridian and latitudes 7°45' to 8°5' north of the equator. It shares boundaries with the south of Kwara and Kogi States, the east of Osun State, the west of Edo State and north of Ondo State. It was carved out of the old Ondo State on the 1st October 1996 with its administrative headquarters at Ado-Ekiti. Shotuyo (2011) emphasized the importance of reliable and adequate data collection for policy formulation and planning for the purpose of sustainable use and biodiversity conservation. Six hundred (600) copies of four different types of questionnaire were prepared for use to collect information on the level of local community participation and to determine the social acceptability of the tourism corridor among the people. Opinions of the local people and business owners were needed in the assessment of the development and conservation of the tourism sites. Three hundred (300) copies of the first type of questionnaire were administered to members of the three purposively selected communities that make up the Ekiti tourism corridor according to their population as follows: one hundred (100), seventy (70) and one hundred and thirty (130) among the local residents aged between 18 and above, randomly selected in Ikogosi, Ipole-Iloro and Efon Alaye communities respectively. The second type of questionnaire was administered to the business owners of the three communities. The data collected from the questionnaires were subjected to analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics included; frequency analysis, cross tabulation, percentages mean and standard deviation; while the inferential statistics included; Chi-square, and regression analyses which were done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-PC software 17.0), with the level of significance value at  $\alpha=0.01$  where necessary. The focus group discussions were recorded on audio tapes and were later transcribed by noting and penning down the key points. The result was used to supplement the information on community perception, knowledge and attitudes towards conservation of natural resources.

## Results

### Socioeconomics characteristics of communities' members

Tables 1 show results of the Socioeconomics characteristics of communities' members based on sex, educational status, marital status, age and religion. of the respondents in the sampled community. The result of the study revealed that male respondents were more in number across the sampled communities with, 55.7% while the percentage of female respondent were 44.3%. The marital status of the respondents revealed that 23.0%, 66.8%, 3.4%and 6.8% were single, married, divorced and widowed respectively in the sampled communities. Educational attainments of the respondents showed that 15.3% had no formal education; 17.9% had primary education; 34.9% had secondary education while 31.9% had tertiary education. The younger generation were the dominant group in sampled communities. The result obtained indicated that 29.8% of the respondents had age of less than 30years while 20.9%, 20.9%, 11.9 and 16.2%had age between 31-40years, 41-50years, and 51-60years and above 60years respectively The respondents were mainly Christians with 67.7%, while 27.2% were Muslims with the remaining 2.6% as other religions in the sampled in communities.

**Table1: Socioeconomics characteristics of communities' members**

Variables	Frequency N= 235	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Name of community:				
Ikogosi				
Ipole-Iloro	66	28.1	28.1	28.1
Efon-Alaaye	53	22.6	22.6	22.6
Gender:	116	49.4	49.4	49.4
Male				
Female	131	55.7	55.7	55.7
Marital status:	104	44.3	44.3	44.3
Single				
Married	54	23.0	23.0	23.0
Divorce	157	66.8	66.8	89.8
Widow	8	3.4	3.4	93.2
Educational level:	16	6.8	6.8	100.
None formal	36	15.3	15.3	15.3
Primary	42	17.9	17.9	33.2
Secondary	82	34.9	34.9	68.1
Tertiary	75	31.9	31.9	100
Age:				
<30	70	29.8	29.8	29.9
31-40	49	20.9	20.9	50.9
41-50	49	20.9	20.9	71.8
51-60	28	11.9	12.0	83.8
60>	38	16.2	16.2	100
M.S.	1			
Religion:	159	0.4	69.4	69.4
Christianity	64	67.7	27.9	27.9
Islamic	6	27.2	2.6	2.6

Others	6	2.6	2.6	100
M.S.		2.6		

Source: Field Survey, 2013-2015

### Communities' perception of ecotourism development in the sites

Table 5a shows that majority of the respondents agreed that ecotourism activities will increase income and quality of life in the communities with 50.2% while 0.4% strongly disagree, 2.6% undecided and 46.2% strongly agree. Also, highest percentage of the respondents agreed that ecotourism activities will generate employment opportunities to the locale with 57.0%, while 0.4% strongly disagreed, 0.4% disagreed 2.1% undecided and 40.0% strongly agree. Likewise, 0.4% disagreed, 3.8% undecided and 45.5% strongly agreed that ecotourism will increase business opportunities for locale. As for whether ecotourism activities will bring development to the community in term of good infrastructures, facilities such as road, electricity supply, school & clinic etc, or not 0.9% disagreed 12.8% undecided, 52.8% agreed and 45.5% strongly agreed.

Highest percentage of the respondent agreed that ecotourism is a means of conserving the natural and cultural resources in the sites with 53.2% while 0.4% strongly disagreed, 0.4% disagreed 3.8% undecided and 42.1% strongly agreed. Also, 5.5% undecided, 53.6% agreed and 40.9% strongly agreed that ecotourism will promote trade in local arts and crafts to the purchase as souvenir. Likewise, 6.0% strongly disagreed, 7.2% disagreed 21.7% undecided, 57.0% agreed and 8.1% strongly agree that it will create problems for local community in terms of over-crowding, crime, alcoholism & prostitution etc. Also, 0.9% disagreed 12.8% undecided, 52.8% agreed and 33.6% strongly agree that ecotourism will bring friendly relation between locale and tourists especially international tourists. Table 7 shows that highest category of respondents perception were unfavourable with 53.2%, while 46.8% were favourable.

**Table 2: Perception of host communities' members about ecotourism sites**

Questions	Responses N=235	Frequency	Percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Ecotourism activities will increase income and quality of life in the community	Strongly disagree	1	0.4	0.4
	Disagree	6	2.6	3.0
	Undecided	118	50.2	53.2
	Agree	110	46.2	100.0
	Strongly Agree			
It will generate employment opportunities to the locale	Strongly disagree	1	0.4	0.4
	Disagree	1	0.4	0.9
	Undecided	5	2.1	3.0
	Agree	134	57.0	60.0
	Strongly Agree	94	40.0	100.0

	Strongly Agree			
Ecotourism will increase business opportunities for locale	Disagree	1	0.4	0.4
	Undecided	9	3.8	4.3
	Agree	118	50.2	54.5
	Strongly Agree	107	45.5	100.0
It will bring development to the community in term of good infrastructures, facilities such as road, electricity supply , school & clinic etc	Disagree	2	0.9	0.9
	Undecided	30	12.8	13.6
	Agree	124	52.8	66.4
	Strongly Agree	79	33.6	100.

Source: Field Survey, 2013-201

**Table 2b: Perception of host communities' members about ecotourism sites**

Questions	Responses N=235	Frequency	Percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Ecotourism is a means of conserving the natural and cultural resources in the park	Strongly disagree	1	0.4	0.4
	Disagree	9	3.8	0.9
	Undecided	125	53.2	4.7
	Agree	99	42.1	57.9
	Strongly Agree			100.0
Ecotourism will promote trade in local arts and crafts to the purchase as souvenir	Undecided	13	5.5	5.5
	Agree	126	53.6	59.1
	Strongly Agree	96	40.9	100.0
It will create problems for local community in terms of over-crowding, crime, alcoholism & prostitution etc	Strongly disagree	14	6.0	6.0
	Disagree	17	7.2	13.2
	Undecided	51	21.7	34.9
	Agree	134	57.0	91.9
	Strongly Agree	19	8.1	100.0
It will bring friendly relation between locale and tourists especially international tourists	Disagree	7	3.0	3.0
	Undecided	29	12.3	15.3
	Agree	128	54.5	69.8
	Strongly Agree			

		71	30.2	100.0
It will increase the locale interest in learning English	Disagree	5	2.1	2.1
	Undecided	132	56.2	59
	Agree	80	34.0	8.3
	Strongly Agree	18	7.7	92.3

Source: Field Survey, 2013-2015

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Communities members' perception of Ecotourism site**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Communities members' perception of Ecotourism site	235	27.00	45.00	37.2340	3.48141
Valid N (list wise)	235				

RECODE Perception (Lowest thru 37.2339=0) (37.2340 thru Highest=1) INTO perclvl.  
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Source: Field Survey, 2013-2015

**Table 4: Categories of perception**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	125	53.2	53.2	53.2
Unfavourable	110	46.8	46.8	100.0
Favourable	235	100.0	100.0	
Total				

Source: Field Survey, 2013-2015

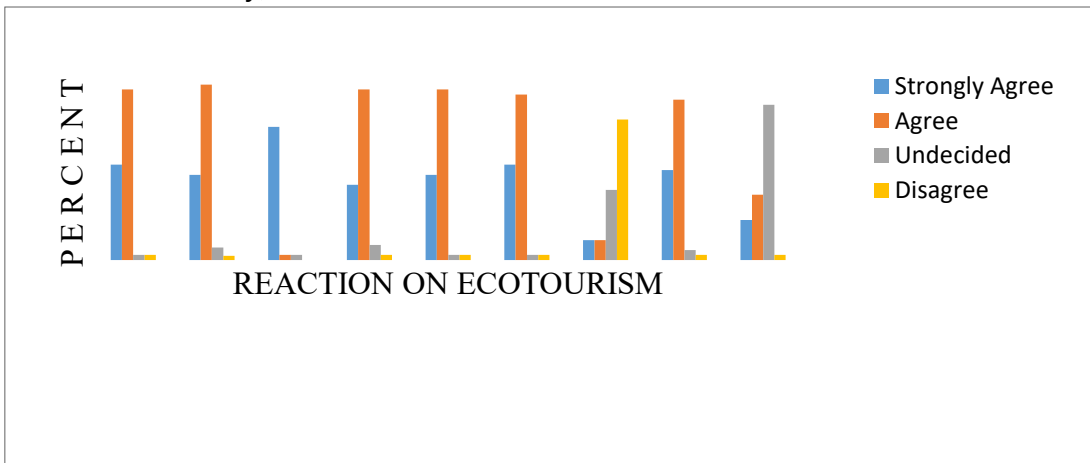


Figure 9: The perception of Ipole Iloro community to ecotourism development

Source: Field Survey, 2013-2013

**Table 5: Summary of the Relationship between the Ipole-Iloro Community and Arinta waterfall (The Ecotourism site)**

Indicator	Assessment
Local residence dependency on water resources	Average
Access to site resources	Average
Illegal Resource use	None
Enforcement Capacity	None
Benefits from resource location	Water resources and wild animals (hunting)
Conservation attitude	Positive
Potential for Stewardship	Good
Staff-local people relations	Variable
Direct participation (participation in planning)	None
Indirect participation ( provision of employment)	poor

Source: Field Survey (2013-2015)

### Discussion

Nigeria has paid little attention to tourism development despite the rich ecology, wide variety of biodiversity, culture and traditional festivals which provide a good setting for tourist facilities due to the low economic structure and its rural base (Bankole and Odularu, 2006). The existence of beautiful natural scenarios and breath-taking vistas in the rural areas creates social safety and the enabling environment for recreation and tourism but also emphasizes that these areas need to be increasingly protected from misuse and over-use, or managed for specific leisure activities. The dominance of male respondents in the three communities agrees with the trend in national population (NPC, 2006) and may also be due to the tendency of men having an open attitude to enquiries, especially from strangers. Besides, depending on the time of the day, men would be more outdoors while the women, after the day's chores and marketing activities, would be involved in caring for the home. The reverse was the case for business owners where there were more female respondents probably involved in petty trading. The age distribution of the local residents differed significantly with almost one-third less than 30 years old but approximately three-quarter when the age increased to 50 years. These observations agree with the description of the Nigerian population as youthful and with the active economic age between 35 and 55 years of age (Neth, 2008). The married respondents were highest in the residents of the three communities with 66.8% which has validated the socio-cultural importance attached to marriage especially in Southwestern Nigeria (Obajana, 2007).

However, the singles percentage 23.0 % which comes next to that of married is a reflection of the present harsh economic conditions, widespread unemployment and crippling poverty which would prevent young people from venturing into married life. The 34.9% with at least primary educations which is followed by 31.9% of tertiary shows the relatively high literacy level of the residents which recognizes the Ekiti people's



legendary penchant for acquiring education by all means and to confirm the view of Ezebilo et al. (2012) that majority of the indigenes are somewhat learned. If ecotourism is to function effectively, there must be a positive relationship between residents living near the site (the host community) and the site itself, including both natural resources and the staff that manage them (David and Morais, 2004). Ideally, local residents act as stewards of the sites, supporting protection and conservation efforts (Cater, 1994). In return, residents benefit from resource protection through sustainable access to resources that support and, ideally, improve their livelihoods.

When asked about if there is any possibility that Ipole -Iloro and River Ooni will be developed in the future during focus group discussion, many of the participants said there is a great possibility. They also added comments such as local economy will increase, planning and management will become very important but the Government may not involve the communities and that they(communities) also might not personally benefit that only government officials will benefit from tourism, not the public.

When a top site official was asked a similar question relating to potential tourism benefits/negatives, his response was that more jobs opportunities will be available for young people and that local spending/tourist consumption would increase. No negative effects were predicted. A village leader interviewed in Ipole -Iloro was equally optimistic, citing opportunities for increased fruit sales and a generally stronger local economy as benefits if tourism was to increase. He, like most others interviewed, could perceived no negative impacts associated with tourism growth in the region

Majority of the participant interviewed perceived that the development of Arinta waterfall and river Ooni will bring the name of the community to lime light and improve the living condition of the people. Therefore they were willing to participate in the development process if given the opportunity and they also affirmed that if the communities were fully involved this will prevent environmental problems. . The overwhelming pattern in questionnaires and interviews responses was optimism. This is perhaps not surprising given the early stage of development, somewhat reminiscent of Doxey's 'Stage of Tourist Euphoria' (Doxey, 1976) or Butler's 'Exploration Stage' (Butler, 1980) of a tourism development. Although tourism-related benefits have been limited thus far, the residents and business owners seem confident that tourism growth at Arinta waterfall will generate economic benefits for the Ipole Iloro community. This agrees with Akinsorotan *et al.* (2011) who concluded that there was need for synergy between host communities and the management of ecotourism sites. This is because, to a reasonable extent, the local communities are very knowledgeable about the sites and know what it means and the benefit they can derive from the sites. According to Olayeni (2005), the attitude of local residents towards development may unfold through the stages of euphoria, where visitors are welcome with apathy, irritation and potential antagonism when anti-tourist attitude begins to grow among the local people.

### **Conclusion**

Ecotourism great potentials in providing high quality tourism experiences while stimulating socio-economic development, promoting environmental awareness and generating funds for resource management and conservation activities are widely accepted. Local perception and attitudes towards tourism depend on whether or not residents (the hosts) are receiving socioeconomic benefits or some form of compensation in return for restricted access to resources they may have been dependent

on prior to (eco)tourism development/ site establishment. If residents are content, there is a much greater opportunity for enhanced tourist experiences through positive intercultural interactions with local residents. Host community should not only be recipient of sustainable tourism but active participant in the planning process for it to be successful (Byrd, 2007). Of critical importance at an ecotourism destination is the relationship between local community residents and tourism/tourists. If ecotourism is to develop successfully, community support must be strong (David and Morais, 2004).

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