Sustainable Tourism as a Catalyst for Resource Control: Balancing Economic Growth and Environmental Protection in Rivers State

By

Bob-Manuel, Lolo F., PhD
Rivers State University,
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Email: lolo.bobmanuel@ust.edu.ng

&

Karibo Innocent, PhD
Rivers State University,
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Email: kariboinnocent@yahoo.com

Abstract

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a strategic approach to economic diversification, environmental conservation, and socio-political stability in resource-rich regions. Rivers State, Nigeria, is predominantly dependent on oil revenue, a situation that has led to economic volatility, environmental degradation, and persistent struggles over resource control. Despite its vast cultural and ecological assets, tourism remains an underdeveloped sector in the state. This paper explores the potential of sustainable tourism as a catalyst for resource control by promoting local economic empowerment, fostering environmental sustainability, and enhancing community participation in governance. Drawing on Sustainable Development Theory and Resource Dependency Theory, the study argues that reducing over-reliance on oil through sustainable tourism can mitigate conflicts associated with resource control while fostering a more inclusive and stable economic structure. Sustainable tourism offers alternative livelihood opportunities, strengthens local governance structures, and contributes to environmental restoration. Through eco-tourism, heritage tourism, and community-based tourism initiatives, local communities can gain greater control over natural and cultural resources, ensuring equitable wealth distribution and long-term sustainability. Findings suggest that sustainable tourism can provide a

viable alternative economic pathway for Rivers State, reducing dependency on oil while promoting environmental stewardship. The paper recommends policy realignment to integrate tourism into resource management strategies, investment in eco-tourism and cultural tourism, and the establishment of revenue-sharing mechanisms that benefit local communities.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Resource Control, Economic Diversification, Environmental Conservation, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Introduction

Rivers State, Nigeria, is one of the most resource-rich regions in the country, primarily due to its vast oil and gas reserves. However, despite the substantial revenue generated from these resources, the state continues to grapple with economic instability, environmental degradation, and social unrest. The persistent struggle for resource control has been a defining feature of the region, with local communities demanding greater access to and benefits from the wealth derived from their land. Over the years, oil dependence has led to severe ecological damage, including pollution of rivers, destruction of farmlands, and loss of biodiversity. The dominance of the oil industry has also marginalized other economic sectors, particularly tourism, which remains largely underdeveloped despite the state's rich cultural heritage and natural attractions (Eregha & Mesagan, 2020). Sustainable tourism presents an opportunity to address these challenges by serving as a catalyst for economic diversification and environmental restoration. The concept of sustainable tourism emphasizes the responsible use of natural and cultural resources in a manner that benefits both present and future generations. Unlike extractive industries, tourism has the potential to generate long-term economic benefits while preserving the environment and promoting local cultural heritage. In resource-rich but economically unstable regions like Rivers State, sustainable tourism can provide alternative income sources, reduce reliance on oil, and empower local communities to take greater control over their resources (Sharpley & Telfer, 2014).

The economic reliance on oil in Rivers State has created a cycle of dependency that exposes the state to global oil price fluctuations. When oil prices decline, the state

experiences revenue shortfalls, leading to economic hardship and increased social unrest. Sustainable tourism, by contrast, provides a more stable source of income that is less susceptible to external shocks. Countries such as Kenya and South Africa have successfully leveraged tourism to drive economic growth, demonstrating that tourism can serve as a key pillar of economic stability and resource management (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). Moreover, tourism fosters environmental sustainability by incentivizing the conservation of natural landscapes and biodiversity. In contrast to the extractive nature of oil exploitation, which depletes resources and degrades the environment, sustainable tourism promotes eco-friendly practices that help protect forests, rivers, and wildlife. The Niger Delta region, including Rivers State, has suffered extensive environmental damage due to oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation. If properly developed, sustainable tourism could help restore degraded ecosystems and provide alternative livelihoods for communities that have been negatively impacted by oil extraction (Ibimilua, 2018).

Cultural tourism is another avenue through which Rivers State can diversify its economy. The state is home to numerous ethnic groups with rich traditions, festivals, and historical sites that could attract both domestic and international tourists. Festivals such as the Okrika Boat Regatta, the New Yam Festival, and the Oguta Lake Festival offer significant cultural experiences that could be marketed to a global audience. However, the lack of adequate infrastructure, policy support, and security concerns has hindered the growth of cultural tourism in the state (Akpan, 2021). Furthermore, community participation is crucial to the success of sustainable tourism as a means of resource control. Research indicates that when local communities are actively involved in tourism planning and benefit directly from tourism revenue, they are more likely to support conservation efforts and sustainable development initiatives (Tosun, 2006). In Rivers State, a bottom-up approach that includes traditional leaders, local entrepreneurs, and community organizations in tourism development can foster inclusive growth and social cohesion. This approach has been successfully implemented in other African countries, where community-based tourism projects have empowered local populations and improved their livelihoods (Manyara & Jones, 2007). Despite its potential, the tourism sector in Rivers State faces significant challenges that must

be addressed to realize its full benefits. One of the primary barriers is inadequate infrastructure, including poor road networks, limited transportation options, and a lack of quality accommodation facilities. Additionally, concerns over security, particularly in areas affected by militancy and political instability, deter potential investors and tourists. A concerted effort by the government and private sector is needed to address these challenges through improved security measures, investment in infrastructure, and targeted marketing campaigns to promote the state's tourism assets (Okech, 2011). Government policy and institutional support play a critical role in integrating sustainable tourism into Rivers State's economic framework. A clear policy roadmap is necessary to guide the development of tourism in the state, ensuring that tourism initiatives align with environmental conservation and community development goals. Additionally, policies that encourage private sector investment, provide incentives for sustainable tourism projects, and establish regulatory frameworks for responsible tourism practices can enhance the sector's growth. Lessons from countries with successful sustainable tourism models indicate that strong governance and policy coherence are essential for long-term success (Hall, 2019). This study explores how sustainable tourism can contribute to resource control in Rivers State by promoting local economic participation, fostering environmental sustainability, and enhancing community engagement in governance. Using Sustainable Development Theory and Resource Dependency Theory, the study examines the role of tourism in reducing dependency on oil and mitigating the socio-economic tensions associated with resource control. The paper also assesses the challenges and opportunities in integrating sustainable tourism into the broader economic framework of Rivers State. It argues that with the right policies, infrastructure, and community participation, sustainable tourism can transform Rivers State's economic landscape, providing a model for equitable resource management and long-term development.

Tourism: A Catalyst for Economic Growth and Development

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing global industries, contributing significantly to economic development, employment, and cultural exchange (UNWTO, 2020). According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2019), tourism accounted for 10.4% of the global GDP and provided one in ten jobs

worldwide before the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic significance of tourism is particularly evident in countries that have successfully leveraged it as a major source of revenue, such as France, Spain, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates (Hall & Lew, 2009). Tourism encompasses various sub-sectors, including eco-tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, adventure tourism, and community-based tourism. These forms of tourism contribute to economic diversification and can be tailored to align with local environmental and cultural contexts. Eco-tourism, for instance, promotes conservation and environmental awareness while generating income for local communities (Honey, 2008). Cultural tourism enhances the appreciation of indigenous traditions, arts, and heritage sites, making it a viable option for regions with rich cultural histories, such as Rivers State (Goodwin, 2016). In developing economies, tourism has proven to be a transformative tool for economic empowerment and resource utilization (Sharpley & Telfer, 2014). In Kenya, for example, wildlife tourism has become a key driver of GDP, while in Ghana, cultural tourism centered around historical slave trade sites has generated revenue for local communities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). These examples highlight how tourism can serve as an alternative economic sector in resource-rich but economically marginalized regions.

Sustainable Tourism: A Framework for Balanced Development

The concept of sustainable tourism emerged from the broader framework of sustainable development, as articulated in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). Sustainable tourism is defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities." This definition emphasizes the long-term viability of tourism by ensuring that tourism activities do not degrade environmental and cultural assets. Sustainable tourism encompasses three key dimensions: 1. Economic sustainability – Ensuring that tourism generates stable and equitable income for local communities while avoiding over-reliance on a single sector (Hall & Lew, 2009). 2. Environmental sustainability – Promoting eco-friendly tourism practices that protect natural resources, such as forests, rivers, and wildlife (Honey, 2008). 3. Socio-cultural sustainability – Preserving indigenous cultures, traditions, and local ways of life while promoting community

participation in tourism enterprises (Manyara & Jones, 2007). For sustainable tourism to thrive, governments, businesses, and communities must collaborate to create policies that promote responsible tourism practices. In Costa Rica, for example, government policies have encouraged eco-tourism, leading to significant conservation efforts and economic benefits (Honey, 2008). Similarly, Botswana's tourism sector is heavily integrated with wildlife conservation, ensuring that local communities benefit directly from tourism revenues (Mbaiwa, 2017). In the Niger Delta region, where oil extraction has led to environmental degradation and social conflicts, sustainable tourism presents an opportunity for economic diversification and environmental restoration. By leveraging its biodiversity, coastal landscapes, and cultural heritage, Rivers State can establish tourism-based economies that prioritize environmental conservation and local development.

Resource Control: A Pathway to Economic Autonomy

Resource control refers to the authority and capacity of local communities or regional governments to manage and derive benefits from natural and economic resources within their territories (Ebeku, 2006). The issue of resource control has been a longstanding debate in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta, where oil-producing communities have consistently demanded greater autonomy over their natural wealth. The Niger Delta conflict, which emerged due to disputes over oil revenue allocation, has underscored the economic and environmental challenges of resource mismanagement (Watts, 2004). While oil wealth has contributed significantly to Nigeria's national revenue, the local communities in the Niger Delta have faced economic marginalization, environmental pollution, and socio-political instability (Ebeku, 2006). Sustainable tourism offers an alternative approach to resource control by empowering local populations to manage tourism-related resources, generate income, and reduce dependency on oil revenues.

Several countries have successfully used community-based tourism (CBT) as a form of resource control. In South Africa, for example, community-driven tourism initiatives have provided economic independence to local populations, reducing reliance on government subsidies (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). Similarly, in Tanzania, local communities around Mount Kilimanjaro have benefited from tourism revenues by managing trekking services, lodging, and guided tours

(Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). For Rivers State, resource control through tourism development could involve: Community ownership of tourism enterprises, ensuring that revenues remain within local economies. Collaborations between government and private investors to promote sustainable tourism infrastructure. Eco-tourism initiatives that protect the Niger Delta's biodiversity while generating income for local communities. By aligning tourism development with resource control, Rivers State can move towards economic autonomy while addressing socio-political grievances related to resource mismanagement.

Integrating Sustainable Tourism with Resource Control in Rivers State

The integration of sustainable tourism and resource control in Rivers State requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes environmental protection, economic diversification, and community participation. The following strategies can facilitate this integration:

1. Policy Development and Institutional Support – The government should establish regulatory frameworks that promote sustainable tourism and ensure that local communities have ownership rights over tourism resources (UNWTO, 2020).
2. Investment in Tourism Infrastructure – The development of eco-friendly resorts, cultural heritage centers, and tourism parks can attract domestic and international tourists while creating employment opportunities.
3. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Initiatives – Encouraging local participation in tourism planning, ownership, and management will ensure that revenues benefit local populations.
4. Environmental Conservation Programs – Implementing conservation initiatives, such as marine parks and forest reserves, will enhance the sustainability of tourism while protecting biodiversity (Honey, 2008).
5. Tourism Education and Awareness Campaigns – Educating local communities on the benefits of sustainable tourism and training them in hospitality management can improve service delivery and tourism quality. Sustainable tourism, when effectively integrated with resource control policies, can transform Rivers State into a self-sustaining economic hub that reduces dependency on oil revenues while promoting environmental conservation and cultural preservation.

Theoretical Framework

Sustainable Development Theory

The Sustainable Development Theory emerged from the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), which defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This theory underscores the importance of balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity in all development efforts, including tourism. Sustainable tourism aligns with this theory by ensuring that economic benefits from tourism do not lead to environmental degradation. It emphasizes community involvement in tourism development, ensuring that the local population benefits from tourism-related activities rather than being marginalized. It advocates for government policies that regulate tourism activities to ensure sustainability, such as eco-tourism regulations and environmental impact assessments. According to Sharpley and Telfer (2014), sustainable tourism has been successfully integrated into national economies in countries like Costa Rica and New Zealand, where eco-tourism policies ensure that natural resources remain protected while generating income for local communities. In the context of Rivers State, adopting sustainable tourism policies can mitigate environmental damages caused by oil exploration while promoting alternative economic opportunities.

Dependency Theory

Dependency Theory, formulated by scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank (1967) and Dos Santos (1970), argues that underdeveloped nations are economically dependent on industrialized countries, often leading to the exploitation of local resources by foreign entities. This theory is particularly relevant to the resource control debate in Nigeria, where multinational oil corporations extract significant wealth from the Niger Delta while local communities remain impoverished. The Niger Delta's reliance on oil revenue has created an economic dependency that limits diversification into other sectors. Tourism offers an alternative economic model where local communities can retain control over their resources, reducing external exploitation. Countries like Tanzania and Kenya have successfully used tourism as a means of economic decolonization, ensuring that tourism revenues remain within the local economy (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). By promoting community-based tourism (CBT) and heritage tourism, Rivers State can reduce

economic dependency on oil revenues and empower local communities through tourism-based economic activities.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), emphasizes that organizations and industries should consider the interests of all stakeholders—including local communities, businesses, government agencies, and environmental groups—rather than prioritizing corporate profit alone. The success of sustainable tourism depends on the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, including local businesses, cultural institutions, conservation organizations, and policymakers. Local communities must have a say in tourism planning and decision-making to ensure that they benefit from tourism activities rather than being displaced or exploited (Byrd, Cardenas, & Greenwood, 2008). Government policies should balance economic interests with environmental conservation to ensure that tourism development does not result in over-exploitation of natural and cultural resources. For example, in South Africa's post-apartheid tourism sector, policies were designed to ensure that historically marginalized communities participated in and benefited from tourism development (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). A similar model could be applied in Rivers State by incorporating indigenous leadership and local entrepreneurs in tourism planning.

Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory, developed by Barney (1991), argues that a region's competitive advantage depends on its ability to leverage unique, valuable, and non-substitutable resources. This theory is critical for examining how Rivers State can capitalize on its natural and cultural heritage to develop a sustainable tourism sector. Rivers State has unique cultural and environmental resources, including the Niger Delta mangroves, historical sites, and indigenous traditions that can serve as tourism attractions. Unlike oil, which is a finite and depletable resource, tourism based on natural and cultural assets can be renewable and sustainable if properly managed. Successful examples include heritage tourism in Egypt and eco-tourism in Brazil's Amazon region, where governments and local communities have monetized their unique historical and environmental assets for sustainable economic growth (Goodwin, 2016). For Rivers State, investing

in eco-tourism, historical site restoration, and cultural festivals can create a unique tourism brand that attracts both domestic and international visitors while reducing dependence on oil revenues.

Global Perspectives on Sustainable Tourism and Resource Control

Several countries have successfully leveraged sustainable tourism to enhance economic diversification, community empowerment, and resource management. Empirical studies show that sustainable tourism reduces economic dependency on extractive industries while promoting environmental conservation and cultural heritage preservation. For instance, Costa Rica is internationally recognized for its eco-tourism and sustainable tourism policies. The government established protected areas covering over 25% of the country's landmass to support biodiversity conservation while generating revenue through tourism (Honey, 2008). Empirical studies highlight the following outcomes: Economic Growth: Tourism contributes over 8.2% of GDP, generating jobs and reducing reliance on agriculture and manufacturing (Gössling, 2009). Community Involvement: Community-based tourism (CBT) has empowered indigenous and rural populations, ensuring that tourism revenue benefits local communities (Weaver, 2011). Environmental Protection: Strict environmental policies regulate tourism infrastructure, reducing ecological degradation (Stronza & Durham, 2008). The Costa Rican model demonstrates that sustainable tourism can replace extractive industries as a major economic driver while ensuring environmental and resource sustainability.

Kenya has integrated wildlife tourism into its national economy, linking conservation efforts with economic benefits (Sindiga, 1999). Empirical studies highlight key impacts: Revenue Generation: Kenya's tourism industry contributes over 10% of GDP (World Bank, 2020). Community-Based Conservation: The Maasai Mara Conservancies model allows local communities to co-manage wildlife reserves and benefit from tourism revenue (Manyara & Jones, 2007). Wildlife tourism has provided alternative employment for pastoralist communities, reducing overdependence on livestock farming. Kenya's model demonstrates how sustainable tourism can promote resource conservation, economic stability, and local empowerment a concept that could be applied in Rivers State.

Regional Perspectives: Sustainable Tourism in Africa

Across Africa, sustainable tourism has been implemented in various forms, demonstrating its potential to support economic growth, protect natural resources, and strengthen local governance over resources. South Africa, has developed CBT initiatives that integrate rural communities into tourism development (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). Key empirical findings include: Increased Local Participation: Government policies mandate that local communities own stakes in tourism businesses (Ashley & Roe, 2002). Economic Benefits: Rural tourism initiatives generate over ZAR 20 billion annually, providing employment in previously marginalized areas (Spenceley, 2008). Sustainability Measures: Eco-tourism projects in areas like Kruger National Park demonstrate how tourism can coexist with conservation efforts. The South African model is relevant for resource control in Rivers State, as it shows how local communities can be integrated into tourism management.

Local Perspectives: Nigeria's Experience with Tourism and Resource Control

Empirical research on Nigeria's tourism sector reveals both challenges and opportunities in leveraging tourism for economic autonomy and sustainable resource management. Obudu Mountain Resort: A Case of Sustainable Tourism in Nigeria The Obudu Mountain Resort in Cross River State is one of Nigeria's most successful tourism projects. Research by Eja, Out, and Eni (2012) highlights key achievements: Employment Generation: The resort has created thousands of direct and indirect jobs, particularly in the hospitality sector. Infrastructure Development: Investments in roads, hotels, and electricity have enhanced local development. Environmental Conservation: The government implemented conservation policies to protect the mountain ecosystem. Despite its success, challenges such as poor marketing, inconsistent government policies, and infrastructure decay limit its potential. These findings suggest that sustainable tourism in Rivers State must be backed by long-term planning and investment.

Tourism and Resource Control in the Niger Delta

Studies on the Niger Delta reveal the negative effects of oil dependence and the potential of tourism as an alternative economic driver (Aaron & George, 2010). Empirical data indicate: Oil dependency has led to economic instability due to price

fluctuations and environmental degradation (Nwankwoala, 2012). Heritage and cultural tourism remain underdeveloped, despite the region's rich history and cultural diversity (Okonkwo & Odum, 2017). Community-based tourism projects have been proposed but lack government support and investment (Eja et al., 2012). These findings underscore the urgent need for sustainable tourism policies in Rivers State to promote economic independence and local resource control.

Methodology

This study adopts a research design, integrating qualitative approaches to examine how sustainable tourism can serve as a catalyst for resource control in Rivers State. Qualitative approach explores stakeholder perspectives through interviews and also assesses economic and environmental impacts A descriptive research design is employed to analyze tourism trends, infrastructure challenges, and policy effectiveness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study focuses on key tourism locations in Rivers State, including Port Harcourt, Bonny Island, Opobo/Nkoro, Andoni, Akuku-Toru, and Ogoni Land, selected based on their tourism potential and resource management challenges. Sources include direct observations, government reports, academic publications, and tourism industry statistics (Bryman, 2016). Data analysis employs descriptive skewed in phenomenology. Qualitative data undergoes thematic analysis.This methodology provides a systematic and comprehensive approach to investigating sustainable tourism and resource control in Rivers State.

Findings and Discussion

Economic Impact of Sustainable Tourism on Resource Control

Tourism is a significant contributor to economic growth, job creation, and infrastructure development. In Rivers State, the potential for sustainable tourism to stimulate local economies and enhance resource control is evident in key tourist destinations such as Port Harcourt, Bonny Island, and Opobo/Nkoro. Findings indicate that tourism-related activities contribute to local economies by generating employment opportunities, fostering entrepreneurship, and attracting foreign and domestic investments (UNWTO, 2021). According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the tourism sector in Nigeria contributed approximately 4.5% to the country's GDP in 2022, with Rivers State being one of the top

contributors in the South-South region (NBS, 2023). However, the research findings reveal that while tourism holds economic potential, a lack of sustainable tourism policies and effective revenue management has hindered its role in resource control. Many tourism-generated revenues are centralized at the federal level, limiting the capacity of local governments and communities to harness tourism for resource governance (Akpan & Eyo, 2020). Participants in the study emphasized that if properly managed, sustainable tourism could serve as an alternative revenue source, reducing dependency on crude oil and enhancing local resource control initiatives.

Furthermore, findings highlight the multiplier effect of tourism on other sectors, such as agriculture, transportation, and handicrafts. Many respondents noted that eco-tourism and cultural tourism provide economic benefits to rural communities, supporting small-scale businesses and fostering sustainable livelihoods (Hall, 2019). Nonetheless, insufficient government incentives, inadequate financial support, and limited access to credit facilities remain barriers to tourism-driven economic transformation in Rivers State.





Figs.1&2, Pictures of the Boat Regatta Opobo Nwaotam Dance group dressed in cultural outfit

Environmental Sustainability and Tourism Development

One of the key aspects of sustainable tourism is its ability to promote environmental conservation while generating economic benefits. Findings from this study reveal that while Rivers State possesses diverse ecological and cultural landscapes, the environmental sustainability of tourism sites is often compromised

by pollution, deforestation, and oil-related environmental degradation (Okonkwo, 2021). Communities in Ogoni Land and Bonny Island reported significant ecological damage caused by oil exploration, which in turn affects tourism development and community participation in resource control. Sustainable tourism has been recognized as a tool for biodiversity conservation and natural resource protection (Buckley, 2018). However, in Rivers State, weak regulatory frameworks and poor enforcement of environmental laws have led to the degradation of many natural sites. This study found that tourism sites such as the Finima Nature Park in Bonny Island have successfully implemented conservation strategies, demonstrating that eco-tourism can serve as a model for sustainable resource control (Eze & Okpara, 2020).

Community-based tourism initiatives, where local communities take an active role in managing and protecting natural resources, emerged as an important theme in the findings. Respondents indicated that empowering communities to oversee tourism sites enhances environmental responsibility and promotes sustainable land use practices (Scheyvens, 2019). However, many communities lack the necessary training, technical knowledge, and financial resources to implement sustainable tourism practices. Findings also reveal that climate change and rising sea levels pose a growing threat to tourism sustainability in coastal areas such as Andoni and Akuku-Toru. As a result, adaptive strategies such as eco-friendly infrastructure, community-led conservation efforts, and public-private partnerships are needed to safeguard tourism assets (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021).

Challenges to Sustainable Tourism Development and Resource Control

Despite the potential of sustainable tourism in Rivers State, several structural, political, and economic challenges hinder its effective implementation. Findings from this study identify five primary challenges:

1. Lack of Policy Implementation: Although Nigeria has a National Tourism Development Master Plan, its implementation at the state level remains weak. Many respondents pointed out that tourism policies are often disconnected from local realities, making resource control initiatives ineffective (Awaritefe, 2017).

2. Poor Infrastructure and Security Concerns: The absence of adequate roads, electricity, and water supply in tourism areas limits the sector's growth. Additionally, security threats such as piracy, kidnapping, and communal conflicts discourage investors and tourists (Eboh, 2022).
3. Limited Community Involvement: Many tourism initiatives are government-driven, with minimal participation from local communities. This exclusion often leads to conflicts over resource control, as communities feel marginalized in decision-making processes (Tosun, 2000).
4. Environmental Degradation and Oil Conflicts: Oil exploration has caused severe environmental degradation in parts of Rivers State, affecting the attractiveness of eco-tourism sites. Conflicts between oil companies and local communities further complicate tourism-driven resource control (Ebeku, 2021).
5. Financial Constraints and Lack of Investment: The tourism sector requires substantial investment in infrastructure, capacity building, and marketing. However, limited government funding and weak private sector engagement pose significant barriers (Sharpley, 2018).

Community Engagement in Resource Control through Tourism

Findings from the study reveal that community-based tourism (CBT) is an effective strategy for enhancing local resource control. Communities in Opobo/Nkoro and Andoni, for example, have initiated cultural tourism projects that promote indigenous heritage while fostering economic self-reliance. This aligns with the theory of sustainable livelihoods, which posits that empowering local communities through tourism can lead to socio-economic stability and environmental conservation (Chambers & Conway, 1992). However, effective community engagement requires policy support, financial assistance, and capacity-building programs. Interviews with tourism stakeholders indicate that government collaboration with local communities and the private sector is crucial for sustainable tourism development (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Furthermore, findings highlight the importance of tourism revenue-sharing models that ensure local communities benefit from tourism proceeds. In successful case studies from Kenya and South Africa, community conservancies and tourism revenue-sharing agreements have empowered indigenous populations in resource management

(Spenceley, 2021). Such models could be adapted to Rivers State to enhance community participation in tourism governance.





Figs.1&2, Pictures of the Opobo Nwaotam Masquerade and women dressed in cultural attire

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of sustainable tourism as a catalyst for resource control in Rivers State, Nigeria, highlighting its potential to drive economic diversification, environmental conservation, and community empowerment. The findings demonstrate that sustainable tourism can serve as an alternative revenue source, reducing the state's overdependence on oil by fostering local entrepreneurship, creating employment opportunities, and encouraging private sector investment. However, the full realization of these benefits is hindered by weak policy implementation, infrastructure deficits, environmental degradation, and inadequate community participation. The study underscores the importance of integrating tourism into broader resource control strategies, as it not only provides economic opportunities but also strengthens local governance and environmental stewardship. Sustainable tourism models, such as eco-tourism and cultural tourism, have proven successful in many parts of the world and can be adapted to the unique socio-cultural and environmental context of Rivers State. However, the lack of political will, inadequate funding, and security challenges continue to impede the growth of the tourism sector, thereby limiting its potential to contribute to resource control.

Findings from the study also reveal that effective community engagement is essential for sustainable tourism development and resource control. When local communities are actively involved in decision-making processes, revenue-sharing agreements, and conservation efforts, they develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for natural and cultural resources. This aligns with global best practices in community-based tourism (CBT), where local populations play a key role in managing tourism resources while benefiting from economic gains. Unfortunately, in Rivers State, community involvement remains limited, often leading to conflicts over resource governance. Moreover, the study highlights the need for a multi-stakeholder approach, involving the government, private sector, local communities, and international organizations, to create a sustainable tourism framework that supports resource control. Collaboration is necessary to develop policies that balance economic growth with environmental protection, improve tourism infrastructure, and enhance security measures to attract both domestic and international tourists. Overall, this research concludes that sustainable tourism presents a viable pathway for achieving resource control in Rivers State, but its success depends on addressing existing structural and governance challenges. A strategic shift towards a more inclusive, environmentally responsible, and economically viable tourism sector can contribute significantly to resource management, environmental sustainability, and long-term development in the region.

Recommendations

1. Invest in Tourism Infrastructure and Security: Infrastructure deficiencies such as poor road networks, lack of reliable electricity, and limited accommodation facilities must be addressed to boost tourism activities. Additionally, security challenges such as kidnappings, piracy, and communal conflicts should be mitigated through improved policing, community surveillance programs, and stakeholder collaboration to ensure a safe environment for tourists.

2. Enhance Community Participation in Tourism and Resource Control: Policies should be designed to empower local communities by involving them in decision-making, revenue-sharing models, and conservation initiatives. Community-based tourism (CBT) programs should be introduced, offering training, financial support,

and technical assistance to enable communities to manage tourism enterprises effectively.

3. Encourage Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in Tourism Development: Collaboration between the government, private investors, local communities, and international organizations is essential for tourism sector growth. PPPs can mobilize funding for tourism infrastructure, improve service delivery, and create employment opportunities, ultimately contributing to economic diversification and sustainable resource control.

4. Leverage Digital and Smart Tourism Technologies: The adoption of digital tourism platforms, virtual tourism experiences, and smart tourism technologies can enhance tourist experiences, market local attractions, and improve environmental monitoring. Digital platforms should be used to promote sustainable travel options, online booking systems, and eco-friendly tourism destinations in Rivers State.

5. Expand Research and Development on Sustainable Tourism: More academic and policy research should be conducted to explore the long-term impacts of sustainable tourism on resource control, environmental conservation, and socio-economic development. Collaboration between universities, research institutions, and tourism agencies can generate valuable insights to inform policy formulation and decision-making

References

Acheampong, K., & Ibrahim, A. (2020). Sustainable tourism development in Africa: Challenges and prospects. Routledge.

Ashley, C., & Roe, D. (2002). Making tourism work for the poor: Strategies and challenges in southern Africa. Development Southern Africa, 19(1), 61–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/03768350220123927

Akpan, E. (2021). Cultural tourism in Nigeria: Opportunities and challenges. African Journal of Tourism Studies, 5(2), 34-48.

Aremu, D. A. (2001). Cultural and eco-tourism development in Nigeria: The role of the three tiers of government and the private sector. Hope Publications.

Ayeni, D. A., & Ebohon, O. J. (2012). Exploring sustainable tourism in Nigeria for developmental growth. European Scientific Journal, 8(20), 126–140.

Butler, R. W. (1980). The concept of a tourism area cycle of evolution: Implications for management of resources. The Canadian Geographer, 24(1), 5–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x

Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (1993). Sustainable tourism: An evolving global approach. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 1(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669589309450696

Chambers, R. (1983). Rural development: Putting the last first. Longman.

Ceballos-Lascuráin, H. (1996). Tourism, ecotourism, and protected areas: The state of nature-based tourism around the world and guidelines for its development. IUCN.

Cole, S. (2006). Cultural tourism, community participation, and empowerment. In M. K. Smith & M. Robinson (Eds.), Cultural tourism in a changing world: Politics, participation and representation (pp. 89–103). Channel View Publications.

Dangi, T. B., & Jamal, T. (2016). An integrated approach to sustainable tourism: The case of Bhutan. Journal of Travel Research, 55(1), 81–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287514532365

Dieke, P. U. C. (2003). Tourism in Africa's economic development: Policy implications. Management Decision, 41(3), 287–295. https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740310469468

Doxey, G. V. (1975). A causation theory of visitor-resident irritants: Methodology and research inferences. Sixth Annual Conference Proceedings of the Travel Research Association, 195–198.

Eja, E. I., Ukwayi, J. K., & Ajake, A. O. (2012). Success assessment of tourism development in Cross River State, Nigeria. American Journal of Tourism Research, 1(2), 33–40.

Fennell, D. A. (2008). Ecotourism: An introduction (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Gunn, C. A. (1994). Tourism planning: Basics, concepts, cases (3rd ed.). Taylor & Francis.

Goodwin, H., & Santilli, R. (2009). Community-based tourism: A success? ICRT Occasional Paper No. 11.

Hall, C. M., & Lew, A. A. (2009). Understanding and managing tourism impacts: An integrated approach. Routledge.

Hall, C. M. (1994). Tourism and politics: Policy, power and place. John Wiley & Sons.

Honey, M. (2008). Ecotourism and sustainable development: Who owns paradise? (2nd ed.). Island Press.

Ibimilua, A. F. (2018). The impact of oil exploitation on tourism development in the Niger Delta. Journal of Sustainable Tourism Development, 7(1), 56-73.

Manyara, G., & Jones, E. (2007). Community-based tourism enterprises: Development, sustainability, and participatory planning. Tourism Management, 28(4), 1236-1249.

Mitchell, J., & Ashley, C. (2010). Tourism and poverty reduction: Pathways to prosperity. Earthscan.

Mowforth, M., & Munt, I. (2015). Tourism and sustainability: Development, globalisation, and new tourism in the Third World (4th ed.). Routledge.

Ogechi, I. J. (2017). Environmental impact of tourism in Nigeria: Issues and prospects. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 6(4), 1–14.

Nunkoo, R., & Gursoy, D. (2012). Residents' support for tourism: An identity perspective. Annals of Tourism Research, 39(1), 243–268. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.05.006

Okonkwo, E. A. (2015). Tourism as a tool for economic diversification in Nigeria: Potentials and challenges. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 4(2), 1–15.

Okonkwo, A. (2018). The role of sustainable tourism in economic diversification in Nigeria. Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa, 20(1), 123–141.

Okech, R. N. (2011). Tourism development in Africa: Strategies for improvement. International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Systems, 4(1), 57-64.

Pearce, D. G. (1989). Tourist development (2nd ed.). Longman.

Rogerson, C. M. (2007). Reviewing Africa's tourism performance and policy framework. Development Southern Africa, 24(3), 361–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/03768350701445576

Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2019). Tourism-led local economic development in developing countries: A review. Tourism Planning & Development, 16(3), 231-250.

Sharpley, R. (2018). Tourism, sustainable development and the theoretical divide: 20 years on. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 26(1), 96–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2017.1363464

Sharpley, R., & Telfer, D. J. (2014). Tourism and development: Concepts and issues. Channel View Publications.

Scheyvens, R. (2002). Tourism for development: Empowering communities. Pearson Education.

Smith, V. L. (1989). Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism (2nd ed.). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Spenceley, A. (2012). Responsible tourism: Critical issues for conservation and development. Earthscan.

Telfer, D. J., & Sharpley, R. (2015). Tourism and development in the developing world (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. Tourism Management, 21(6), 613–633. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(00)00009-1

Tosun, C. (2006). Expected nature of community participation in tourism development. Tourism Management, 27(3), 493-504.

UNESCO. (2019). Sustainable tourism and cultural heritage: Strategies for responsible development. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNWTO. (2021). Tourism and sustainable development goals: A guide for policymakers. United Nations World Tourism Organization.

UNWTO. (2018). Tourism for development: Volume I – Key areas for action. United Nations World Tourism Organization.

World Bank. (2018). The economic impact of tourism in developing economies: A focus on sub-Saharan Africa.

World Economic Forum. (2019). The travel and tourism competitiveness report: Enabling growth through sustainability.

Wade, D. J., & Eagles, P. F. J. (2003). The use of sustainable tourism indicators to measure the sustainability of a community-based ecotourism venture in the Torres Strait, Australia. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 11(2-3), 123–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580308667197

WCED. (1987). Our common future: The Brundtland report. Oxford University Press.

WTTC. (2020). Travel & tourism: Economic impact 2020 – Africa. World Travel & Tourism Council.

Yale, P. (1991). From tourist attractions to heritage tourism. ELM Publications.