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PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE SACRED SITES OF ABIA STATE BY HOST COMMUNITIES

Ngoka, P C[1], Dike M C[2], Adedoyin A J[3] and Amaechi C J[4],
[1]Department of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State, Nigeria.
[2]Department of Forestry and Environmental Management, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State, Nigeria.
[3]School of General Studies, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, PMB 7267 Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria.
Corresponding Author's E-mail: ngoka.paulinus@mouau.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study determined the perceptions of the host communities toward tourism development at the sacred sites of Abia North Senatorial Zone of Abia State, Nigeria. The area was surveyed for existing sacred sites. The total of 104 community leaders and stake-holders were purposively selected as respondents for this study. A researcher – made Tourism Tolerance Questionnaire (TTQ) was used to elicit responses from the respondents. Unequal numbers were used depending on the number of community leaders and priesthood members that existed at each site. Data collection was done, using a structured four-point rated scale in which respondents were required to, in each item, choose the option that best suited their perceptions. The means obtained against each questionnaire item were used to make decisions such that items that yielded mean points of 2.5 and above were taken to be significant. Items that yielded mean points below 2.5 were taken to be insignificant. Seven important sites were identified and explored for the fears and expectations of the local people toward tourism development at their sacred sites. While the expectations and fears of the host communities showed slight disparities at the various sites, consistency was found in obliteration of their sacred sites, loss of control of their heritage and acceptance of tourism development in all the sites studied. With these findings, prospective investors from the public and private sectors can now know the fears and expectations of the locals as to ensure rapport and successful, sustainable tourism projects in the host communities of the sites studied.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural practices associated with religion and custom exist in many communities in the South-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Sites that serve as nexuses of such practices are often enunciated as sacred. Such sites or places that have one or more attributes which distinguish them as somewhat extraordinary, usually in a religious or spiritual sense, are often held to be sacred. They tend to evoke the feeling of some awesome, mysterious, and transcendental powers that merits special reverence and treatment. Sacred sites may be perceived as a site of fascination, attraction, connectedness, danger, ordeal, healing, ritual, meaning, identity, revelation, or transformation (Sponsel and Casagrande, 2008).

Host community refers to the area where tourist attractions are located and to which the tourists visit and where major activities of tourists take place (Obinwanne, 2015). The host community is an important element to consider in the concept of sustainable tourism development (Duning, 1992, Lascurain, 1992). This is pertinent, especially in the present study that revolves around heritage sites which are prized as sacred, and linked to the very foundations of the communities involved. Natural resources and cultural conservation are essential in any setting to ensure sustainability of resources (Akachuku, 2000).Local people's perceptions of the potential implications of cultural revitalization through tourism development can affect the development and sustainability of the tourism project (Ukaegbu and Okpoko, 2019). Hence, educating and endearing any tourism project to the host community should constitute an essential part of the project plan and implementation.

Host community's perception can be defined as the opinion either positive or negative of the locals about the tourism project or activities taking place within their domain (Fauziah & Fathiah, (2011). It is also about tourists with their previous experience (Rajaratnam et al., 2015). Tourist perception may take the form of local people's evaluation of the expected effects of the tourism project on individuals and the wellbeing of their community; or the expected adverse fall outs of the tourism project on the community (Nchor and Agbor, 2018).

In the context of the present study where formal tourism development is yet to take place, the study entails assessing the attitude of the locals towards large scale tourism activities at their sacred sites and the larger community since the effects of influx of people from outside the

community would hardly be limited to the sacred sites but might affect the entire communities and region involved. Fear of the unknown is natural in new experiences, and such fear may affect the perception of the locals toward tourism within their priced heritage. Would tourism activity attract the much-needed infrastructural development from the government; create employment in small scale business activities and lead to poverty alleviation and improvement of living standards in their communities. Or will tourism lead to obliteration of their cultural values and heritage; loss of control of their heritage; loss of ancestral land to make way for tourism amenities; or will the move bring forth pollution and crime from influx of outsiders? These and, perhaps, more could be some of the thoughts that might be bugging the minds of the local people (Afamefuna, Lee and Trees, 2021). Ascertaining their thoughts and perceptions of this new development called tourism can be a lead way toward conceiving a viable tourism project in the area. Community involvement constitutes a relationship established by the members of the community themselves through their mutual collaboration in working toward achieving common goals and making their community a better place in which to live [Reo; Nelson and Sandbrook, (Eds.), 2009]. Community involvement, therefore, is a process of working together with people in the community for the benefit of that community. In such an arrangement, the connections and interactions between community members are important for creating strong bonds and relationships. Consequently, community involvement can create a sense of belonging, trust, and credibility among community members (Mostafa and Mastura, 2016).

Community involvement in heritage projects can influence residents' sense of belonging, aid in the development of social networks with others, and improve residents' pride and understanding of the value of the local area (Afamefuna, Lee, and Trees, 2021).

Considering the sensitive nature of the present proposed destination, it is vastly important to involve the locals pretty early, hence the present study to ascertain the perceptions of the host communities to be better able to douse their fears and accord them a fair share of involvement in the conceived project.

Objectives of the Study were to;

1. determine how communities perceive tourism development where their heritage sites will be the destinations.
2. identify the expectations of the communities in the development of tourism at their heritage sites.
3. ascertain the fears of the respondents to tourism development at their sacred sites.
4. assess the potential for optimistic development of tourism at the sites.

METHODOLOGY

The Study Area

The study area comprised Abia North Senatorial zone of Abia State, Nigeria. The study involved the identification of the important sacred sites of this area. Reconnaissance visits to the study area were undertaken to identify the sacred sites and to establish the framework for the study by identifying and getting acquainted with resource persons that might assist the authors in their investigation. Existing geopolitical and cultural structures of the area such as autonomous communities, traditional institutions, priesthoods and similar institutions, were relied upon. The Abia State Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments were approached for available useful information on the subject matter. Community leaders such as the traditional rulers, village heads, priests and other community leaders of the autonomous communities in which sacred sites were identified were relied upon for guiding the authors through the sacred sites that existed within their domains.

The total of 104 community leaders and stake holders were purposively chosen as respondents for this study. A researcher – made Tourism Tolerance Questionnaire (TTQ) was used to elicit information from the respondents. Unequal samples were used at respective sites depending on the number of community leaders and priesthood members that existed there. Data collection was effected using a structured four-point rated scale in which respondents were required, for each questionnaire item, to choose the option that best suited their perception and tick in the box provided. Responses of the respondents were weighted thus:

Strongly disagree ---------- 1 point
Disagree ---------- 2 points
Agree ---------- 3 points
Strongly agree ---------- 4 points

The means obtained against each questionnaire item were used to make decisions such that questionnaire items that yielded mean points of 2.5 and above were accepted to be significant. Items that yielded mean points below 2.5 points were rejected to be insignificant. By this, items that were found significant in each site for tourism development were identified.

RESULTS

Seven prominent sacred sites were identified and studied for the perceptions of their key stake holders toward opening of the sites for formal tourism development. Because the operations of the sacred sites were shrouded by mystery, such that the average person in any of the communities knew virtually nothing about the inner operations of the sites, only the

immediate stake holders could be studied. In most cases, the inner operators of the sites were said to be bestowed by the gods, and to persons running in particular families.

Table one shows that in the *Ibini Upabi* (Long Juju) oracle, variables including the project's occupation of ancestral land; tourists obliterate of the holy site; loss of control of their heritage were significant worries. However, support for tourism development was significant in the community.

In Alayi Ancient Cave, tourism development of occupation of ancestral land; obliterate their holy sites and loss of control of their heritage, were significant worries; while overall support for tourism development were found to be significant in this community.

At Chief Okoroji's House, occupation of ancestral land; obliterate holy sites; Restriction of cropping access into the project area; restriction of building lots in project area, and loss of control of their heritage were significant fears. Government's investment in the tourism project; public sector involvement in the tourism project; image laundering value of project; economic value of the project; public and private sector participation (PPP) in the tourism project were the local people's expectations. Support for tourism development in the area were not significant.

At the Obu Nkwa in Asaga Ohafia, the significant worries included the obliteration of their sacred site by tourists; government involvement in the project, and loss of control of their sacred sight. However, general acceptance of tourism development was significant.

At the Obu Chukwu Monument in Elu Ohafia, the significant worries included tourist's obliteration of their holy sites and loss of control of their sacred heritage. Their expectations included government investment in the tourism project and economic value of the tourism project. General acceptance of tourism development in the area was significant.

In the case of Aro Uturu Oracle, tourism development's occupation of ancestral land; the obliteration of their sacred site; Denial of building lots into project area, and loss of control of their heritage were significant fears. Government and public sector investment in the tourism project; image laundering value of project were significant expectations. On the whole, acceptance of tourism development in the community was significant.

At the Uturu cave, the obliteration of the sacred site and loss of control of their heritage were significant fears. Image laundering value of project and economic value of the project were significant expectations. Acceptance of tourism development in the area was significant.

From the above findings, the obliteration of sacred sites by tourists, loss of control of the local's heritage and general acceptance of tourism development in their area were unanimously significant in all sites studied. Expectation of government investment was also a universal expectation in the area. With the above picture, the potential for the development of tourism in the sacred sites of Abia North Senatorial Zone is high in the sites studied; although trying to meet the expectations of the locals, respecting their traditional values, and not stepping on their fears and worries. These are consistent with the concept of ecotourism as espoused by Lascurain, (1992; Duning, (1992); Sponsel (2008), and Reo, Nelson, and Sandbrook (2009). Ecotourism has physical social and cultural dimensions to the effect that a green tourist must respect the physical environment, traditio,n and culture of the visited destination.

The perceptions of the local people were as follows:

Table 1: SACRED SITE: *IBINI UKPABI* (LONG JUJU) No. = 22

S/No	Item perceived	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Tourism development will occupation of ancestral land	60.94	2.77	Accepted
2	Tourists will obliterate our holy sites	140.36	3.68	Accepted
3	Restriction of cropping access into the project area	36.96	1.68	Rejected
4	Restriction of subsistence economic activities in the project area	42.02	1.91	Rejected
5	Denial of access to grazing in the project area	27.06	1.23	Rejected
6	Denial of access to hunting in the project area	39.82	1.81	Rejected
7	Denial of access to gathering in the project area	30.56	1.36	Rejected
8	Denial of access to lumbering in the project area	25.08	1.14	Rejected
9	Denial of building lots in the project area	23.1	1.05	Rejected
10	Appreciation of government investment in the tourism project	62.92	2.86	Accepted
11	Appreciation of public sector involvement in the tourism project.	29.92	1.36	Rejected
12	Appreciation of the image laundering value of project in Area	45.1	2.05	Rejected
13	Appreciation of the economic value of the project	34.1	1.55	Rejected
14	Appreciation of Public and private sectors (PPP) involvement in the tourism project	42.9	1.95	Rejected
15	Community might lose control of their heritage.	75.02	3.41	Accepted
16	On the whole, I support the establishment of the tourism project.	69.08	3.14	Accepted

Table 2: SACRED SITE: *ULO CHUKWU ABIOMA* (ALAYI ANCIENT CAVE)
No. = 19

S/No	Item perceived	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Tourism development will occupation of ancestral land	64.6	3.40	Accepted
2	Tourists will obliterate our holy sites	65.55	3.45	Accepted
3	Restriction of cropping access into the project area	58.9	3.10	Accepted
4	Restriction of subsistence economic activities in the project area	38	2.00	Rejected
5	Denial of access to grazing in the project area	23.75	1.25	Rejected
6	Denial of access to hunting in the project area	37.05	1.95	Rejected
7	Denial of access to gathering in the project area	36.1	1.90	Rejected
8	Denial of access to lumbering in the project area	26.6	1.40	Rejected
9	Denial of building lots in the project area	53.2	2.80	Accepted
10	Appreciation of government investment in the tourism project	38.95	2.95	Accepted
11	Appreciation of public sector involvement in the tourism project.	58.9	3.40	Accepted
12	Appreciation of the image laundering value of project in Area	62.7	3.30	Accepted
13	Appreciation of the economic value of the project	68.4	3.20	Accepted
14	Appreciation of Public and private sectors (PPP) involvement in the tourism project	59.85	3.15	Accepted
15	Community might lose control of their heritage.	54.15	2.85	Accepted
16	On the whole, I support the establishment of the tourism project.	47.5	2.50	Accepted

Table3: SACRED SITE: CHIEF OKOROJI HOUSE No. = 18

S/No	Item perceived	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Tourism development will occupation of ancestral land	50.4	2.78	Accepted
2	Tourists will obliterate our holy sites	64.08	3.56	Accepted
3	Restriction of cropping access into the project area	45.0	2.50	Accepted
4	Restriction of subsistence economic activities in project area	37.8	2.10	Rejected
5	Denial of access to grazing in project area	18.9	1.05	Rejected
6	Denial of access to hunting in project area	36.0	2.00	Rejected
7	Denial of access to gathering in project area	34.02	1.89	Rejected
8	Denial of access to lumbering in project area	30.06	1.67	Rejected
9	Denial of building lots in project area	64.8	3.60	Accepted
10	Appreciation of government investment in the tourism project	52.02	2.89	Accepted
11	Appreciation of public sector involvement in the tourism project.	67.14	3.72	Accepted
12	Appreciation of the image laundering value of project in Area	61.02	3.39	Accepted
13	Appreciation of the economic value of the project	54.36	3.20	Accepted
14	Appreciation of Public and private sectors (PPP) involvement in the tourism project	61.02	3.39	Accepted
15	Community might lose control of their heritage.	59.22	3.29	Accepted
16	On the whole, I support the establishment of the tourism project.	59.04	3.28	Accepted

Table 4: SACRED SITE: OBU NKWA **No. = 19**

S/No	Item perceived	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Tourism development will occupation of ancestral land	43	2.26	Rejected
2	Tourists will obliterate our holy sites	68	3.58	Accepted
3	Restriction of cropping access into the project area	31	1.63	Rejected
4	Restriction of subsistence economic activities in the project area	28	1.47	Rejected
5	Denial of access to grazing in the project area	31	1.63	Rejected
6	Denial of access to hunting in the project area	26	1.33	Rejected
7	Denial of access to gathering in the project area	27	1.42	Rejected
8	Denial of access to lumbering in the project area	27	1.47	Rejected
9	Denial of building lots in the project area	32	1.68	Rejected
10	Appreciation of government investment in the tourism project	56	2.95	Accepted
11	Appreciation of public sector involvement in the tourism project.	45.98	2.42	Rejected
12	Appreciation of the image laundering value of project in Area	57	3.00	Accepted
13	Appreciation of the economic value of the project	67	3.53	Accepted
14	Appreciation of Public and private sectors (PPP) involvement in the tourism project	59	2.44	Rejected
15	The community might lose control of its heritage.	58	3.05	Accepted
16	On the whole, I support the establishment of the tourism project.	67	3.53	Accepted

Table 5: SACRED SITE: OBU CHUKWU MONUMENT IN ELU OHAFIA
No. = 08

S/No	Item perceived	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Tourism development will occupation of ancestral land	15	1.88	Rejected
2	Tourists will obliterate our holy sites	30	3.75	Accepted
3	Restriction of cropping access into the project area	12	1.50	Rejected
4	Restriction of subsistence economic activities in the project area	12	1.64	Rejected
5	Denial of access to grazing in the project area	11	1.38	Rejected
6	Denial of access to hunting in the project area	12	1.56	Rejected
7	Denial of access to gathering in the project area	12	1.51	Rejected
8	Denial of access to lumbering in the project area	13	1.63	Rejected
9	Denial of building lots in the project area	12	1.67	Rejected
10	Appreciation of government investment in the tourism project	28	3.50	Accepted
11	Appreciation of public sector involvement in the tourism project.	16	2.00	Rejected
12	Appreciation of the image laundering value of the project in the Area	25	3.12	Rejected
13	Appreciation of the economic value of the project	26	3.65	Accepted
14	Appreciation of Public and private sector (PPP) involvement in the tourism project	19	2.38	Rejected
15	The community might lose control of its heritage.	26	3.65	Accepted
16	On the whole, I support the establishment of the tourism project.	27	3.38	Accepted

Table 6: SACRED SITE: ARO UTURU ORACLE No. = 17

S/No	Item perceived	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Tourism development will occupation of ancestral land	52.02	3.06	Accepted
2	Tourists will obliterate our holy sites	55.08	3.24	Accepted
3	Restriction of cropping access into the project area	23.97	1.41	Rejected
4	Restriction of subsistence economic activities in the project area	20.06	1.18	Rejected
5	Denial of access to grazing in the project area	28.05	1.65	Rejected
6	Denial of access to hunting in the project area	29.02	1.71	Rejected
7	Denial of access to gathering in the project area	28.05	1.65	Rejected
8	Denial of access to lumbering in the project area	30.94	1.82	Rejected
9	Denial of building lots in the project area	52.02	3.06	Accepted
10	Appreciation of government investment in the tourism project	46.92	2.76	Accepted
11	Appreciation of public sector involvement in the tourism project.	54.06	3.18	Accepted
12	Appreciation of the image laundering value of the project in Area	57.97	3.41	Accepted
13	Appreciation of the economic value of the project	40.97	2.41	Rejected
14	Appreciation of Public and private sector (PPP) involvement in the tourism project	58	3.41	Accepted
15	The community might lose control of its heritage.	57.97	3.41	Accepted
16	On the whole, I support the establishment of the tourism project.	64	3.76.	Accepted

Table 7: SACRED SITE: UTURU CAVE No. = 07

S/No	Item perceived	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Tourism development will occupation of ancestral land	13.02	1.86	Rejected
2	Tourists will obliterate our holy sites	28.0	4.00	Accepted
3	Restriction of cropping access into the project area	11.92	1.71	Rejected
4	Restriction of subsistence economic activities in the project area	13.09	1.87	Rejected
5	Denial of access to grazing in the project area	9.03	1.29	Rejected
6	Denial of access to hunting in the project area	13.44	1.92	Rejected
7	Denial of access to gathering in the project area	10.01	1.43	Rejected
8	Denial of access to lumbering in the project area	11.97	1.71	Rejected
9	Denial of building lots in the project area	14.07	2.01	Rejected
10	Appreciation of government investment in the tourism project	24.99	3.57	Accepted
11	Appreciation of public sector involvement in the tourism project.	14.77	2.11	Rejected
12	Appreciation of the image laundering value of the project in Area	21.98	3.14	Accepted
13	Appreciation of the economic value of the project	23.94	3.42	Accepted
14	Appreciation of Public and private sector (PPP) involvement in the tourism project	14.49	2.07	Rejected
15	The community might lose control of its heritage.		3.29	Accepted
16	On the whole, I support the establishment of the tourism project.		3.43	Accepted

CONCLUSION

From the results, it can be concluded that while the expectations and fears of the locals showed slight variations in the various sites, consistency was found in their locals' fear of the obliteration of their sacred sites and loss of control of their heritage in all the sites studied. Also, they expected government investment in the infrastructure of the areas studied; added to the attendant economic inclusive growth and general welfare of the local communities. With these findings, prospective investors from the public and private sectors can now feel the pulse of the local people who will be the custodians of any investment in their domains and are now well disposed for meaningful decision making about going in for a tourism project in any of the communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Federal, State and Local Governments should create the enabling environment that would encourage tourism development in the area by providing the necessary tourism infrastructure such as asphalt roads, electricity, water supply, security, and the necessary incentives.
2. As host communities are critical stakeholders in any tourism project, they should be carried along in any tourism project targeted in the area to ensure that such project is endeared to the local people for optimizing the sustainability of the project.
3. Government and NGOs should embark on public enlightenment on the need to harness the tourism potentials that lie within their domains, stressing the benefits the locals stand to gain through such development.

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