

# Level of Acceptability, General Perception and Views of Ecotourism to Local People around Okomu National Park, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Okomu National park in Nigeria is known for its ecotourism potentials. Although it has experienced transformation over the past years as a result of a drastic improvement in its infrastructures, however, it's hard to justify the utilization of existing features using ecotourism as a yard stick. Hence the study was carried out to ascertain the level of acceptability and general perception and views of ecotourism to local people around Okomu National park in Nigeria.

Data was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Main source of primary data was Questionnaire survey, while Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and interviews with Key stakeholders, Service providers in charge of accommodation, Tour guides, and members of the Local authority were used for secondary data, respectively. Three (3) classes or respondents were served 300 structured questionnaires. Tourists on visitation were equally interviewed during the course of the study. Data collected subjected to descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

Results showed that the communities around the park were seen to have benefitted from the park by creating employment (84.6%), donation to schools and community centres (76.9%), less global warming effect (7.7%), as well as loan schemes/incentives (15.4%), social exposure (7.7%), supply of water (231%) respectively. Challenges such as lack of understanding of park's essence, values and goals (38.5%), lack of awareness (15.4%), illegal lumbering (53.8%), illegal hunting (38.5%), illegal habitation (38.5%), illegal farming (46.25), harvesting of non-timber produce (53.8%), as well as others were observed. Other challenges observed were: poor funding/ irregular allocation (92.3%), low staff strength (76.9%), insufficient operational vehicles (38.5%), insecurity on job (23.1%), park-community conflict (15.4%), high cost of maintaining old vehicles (23.1%), As well as lack of communication facilities (23.1%) respectively.

It can be rightly concluded that the contributions of the host communities to the national park is significant. Management plan should be employed and a regular and effective awareness campaign through Television, Radio and dailies.

**Keywords:** Okomu national park; Ecotourism potentials; Acceptability; Host communities; Management plan

## INTRODUCTION

One of the major global phenomena is tourism. It has been hailed by some as the largest and fastest growing industry in the world [1,2]. In 2000, record showed that 699 million international tourist arrivals generated an estimated US\$476 billion in international tourism receipts [3]. With its highest growth rate in almost a decade. World tourism increased by 7.4% in 2000 and by 2005, it has been projected that world it will generate US\$7.9 trillion in gross output and employ 348 million people. Developing countries in particular have looked to tourism to help increase national

foreign exchange earnings, gross domestic products (GDP), employment rates, and to improve socioeconomic conditions in peripheral regions. But tourism in Africa continent is yet to reach its full economic maturity. Indeed, during the 1990s many developing regions, such as Southeast Asia, Asia/Oceania and Africa, consequently experienced international tourism growth rates (receipts and arrivals) higher than averages for the rest of the world [1,4]. In 2000, East Asia/Pacific, the Middle East and South Asia were the three fastest developing tourism regions. Before the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the World Tourism Organization WTO [3] was expecting more moderate growth in 2001. Although

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major world events, like the Gulf War and September 11th, have and will, caused short-term fluctuations in tourism, the overall trend of growth is expected to continue well into the next decade. "Tourism plays an extremely important role in the economic and social development of most countries in the world. It is the largest generator of employment and its services range from travel, accommodation, catering and maintenance of culture and traditions especially the handicraft industry and to preservation of eco-system. The major benefit of tourism for a region or country is economic as it provides an opportunity for job creation and generation of revenue at international, national, regional and local levels. Tourism can also benefit economies at regional and local levels, as money comes into urban and rural areas which in turn stimulates new business enterprises and promotes a more positive image in an area. An attractive environment appeals to tourists, whether natural or built, and the development of tourism in a locality will relate to the surrounding area. The term 'environment' refers to the physical setting in which tourism takes place—this could be coastal resorts, historic cities, mountain ranges, pictures villages, sites of cultural interest including museums and national monuments—and which provides the stimulus for travel. Tourism itself will affect the environment in both positive and negative ways;

- Increased investment in the area (may improve facilities, access and enable development)
- Conservation of features encouraged (buildings, wildlife, countryside)
- Increased income for upkeep and preservation of facilities.

There are pressure groups that campaign to preserve the environment and try to prevent over-development, such as Friends of the Earth and Tourism Concern. Government departments in many countries aim to achieve sensitive tourism development that is respectful of local environments and customs. The more involved a local community is with the development of tourism in an area, the less damaging the impact of tourism may be on that area.

However, the local community may see the benefits of tourism development without being fully aware of the negative effects or costs to the community. Or they may focus on the threats to the environment without seeing the positive aspects. This is where local tourism forums (such as regional tourist boards) can help focus the issues and provide an opportunity for discussion and analysis as well as raising public awareness.

In recent time, tourism has being one of the dynamic economic activities in creating socio economic changes across the world which has been increasingly important. Since, in the world present circumstances, diversifying the economy, enhancing human development indicators, reduce the problems of industrialization and pollution excessive cities, employment, cultural exchanges, environmental protection and ultimately sustainable development including the challenges facing the country are considered, importance of desired topic is completely clear. On the other hand, The tourism sector is probably the only service sector that provides concrete and quantified trading opportunities for all nations, regardless of their level of development. However, it is also a sector where there is clearly an uneven distribution of benefits, which is threatening the social, economic and environmental sustainability of tourism in some developing countries. For many

developing countries, tourism is one of fundamental pillars of their development process because it is one of the dominant activities in the economy, while for others, particularly islands and some small economies, it is the only source of foreign exchange earning and employment, and therefore constitutes the platform for their economic development. Therefore, Tourism planners must realize that these three concepts, 'the environment, the economy and the society are inextricably linked.

Changes in the industry over the years have dramatically altered the nature and value of information in ecotourism, consequently, the role of government. Ecotourism has experienced transformation over the past years as a result of a drastic reduction and improvement in infrastructures within the national parks. Tourist used to visit natural attraction centres, and most times spend more times than expected. Tourists discovered that they can travel from one centre to other without no fear of been hurt by the wild animals or communities around the protected areas. When one realized how comfortable, fun and easy it is to the leisure involve. It's hard to justify using ecotourism before but they must survive giving birth to competition for their stay in the tourism industry. The main objective of this study is to ascertain the level of acceptability and general perception and views of ecotourism to local people around Okomu National parkin Nigeria.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Description of study area

Okomu National Park is the smallest of Nigeria's seven National Parks, covering a total area of 181 km<sup>2</sup>. It was formerly the Okomu Wildlife Sanctuary, created in 1985 to protect the white-throated monkey (*Cercopithecus eruthrogaster*) and forest elephants (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*) in particular which is a forest block within the 1082 km<sup>2</sup> Okomu Forest Reserve in the Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo state in Nigeria gazette in 1935. The National Park is about 60 km North West of Benin city. It lies between latitudes 6015' and 6025'N and longitudes 509' and 5023'E. The status of the park was elevated in 1999 to a National Park. It holds a small fragment of the rich forest that once covered the region, and is the last habitat for many endangered species) [5].

The study was carried out in selected communities around Okomu National Park (OKNP), Edo state, Nigeria. The village is situated in Udo town surrounding with eight (8) market days. The presence of these communities has captured the town to national and international limelight because of the presence of the national park and the market.

### Climate

The Mean annual rainfall is about 2,100 mm with most of it falling between February and November, and the highest in June, July and September. The driest period is December and January. The mean monthly temperature is 30.20 C and Relative Humidity is about 65% during the afternoons throughout the year [5].

### Topography and drainage

The topography of the Park is gentle, ranging from 30 m to 60 m above sea level; several areas have no noticeable slope. The area is well drained by the Okomu River and a few of its tributaries. There

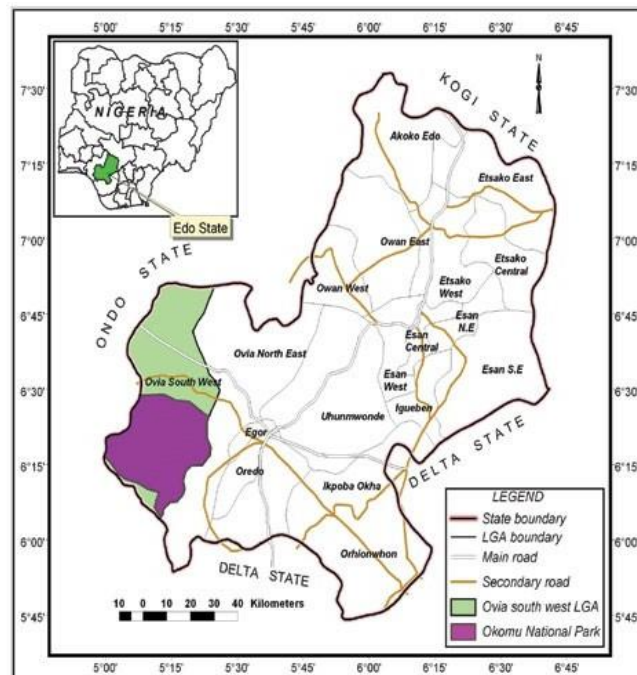
are many areas where the water (Table 1) rises above ground level to form treeless freshwater pools and marshes, some of which dry up in the dry season [5] (Figures 1 and 2).

**Data collection**

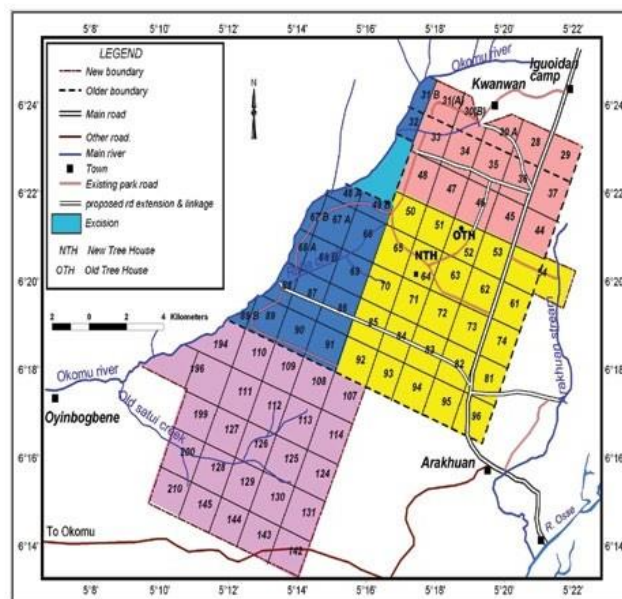
Reconnaissance survey was carried out at ONP to get familiar with the area, and to acquire firsthand information on tourism as it concerns the Park. For the purpose of this research, data was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The main source of primary data will be Questionnaire survey. This was conducted in the park as well as in some selected community around the Park. Three (3) classes of respondents will be involved in the survey namely tourists visiting the site, staff of the park management and members of the host community. Interview sessions were also carried out with service providers in charge of accommodation, tour guides, wildlife watching as well as members of the local authority. Focus group discussions and interviews with key stakeholders were also being conducted. The target population of the study consists of community members in Ovia South Local Government Area of Edo State. The (Tables 2,3 and 4) below shows the communities that exist around the park. The communities were divided into three zones based on their respective distances from the park. Zone 1 (distances between 0-1.6 km), Zone 2 (2.4-8 km) and zone 3 (6.4-11.2 km). Based on this three zones, 50% of each zone will be selected. Data collected subjected to descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The descriptive statistics included frequency analysis and percentages; while the inferential statistics included chi square( $\chi^2$ ) regression and analysis of variance.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of staff.**

Variables	Frequency	Percent
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	12	92.3
Female	1	7.7
Total	13	100
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	7	53.8
Single	5	38.5
Divorced	1	7.7
Widowed	0	0
Total	13	92.3
<b>Age group</b>		
20 - 30 years	7	53.8
30 - 40 years	1	7.7
40 - 50 years	5	38.5
Total	13	100
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	12	92.3
Islam	1	7.7
Total	13	100
<b>Educational status</b>		
None	2	15.4
Tertiary	11	76.9
Total	13	100



**Figure 1: Map of Edo State, showing the location of Okomu National Park. Source; Adapted from Ojewola (2011).**



**Figure 2: Map of Okomu National Park. Source: Adapted from Ojewola (2011).**

**Table 2: Departments at Okomu National Park.**

Departments	F	Percent
Works and maintenance	2	15.4
Human resources management	3	23.1
Ecology and resource management	2	15.4
Plannong, research and ict	5	38.5
Finance and control	1	7.7
Total	13	100

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Socio-economic level of respondents**

**Table 3:** Major ecotourism activities of ONP.

Activities	F	Percent
Swimming	1	7.6
Games	1	7.6
Education/research	2	15.4
Bird watching	1	7.6
Outdoor camping/picnicking	1	7.6
Sport fishing	2	15.4
Boat cruising	1	7.6
Game viewing	1	7.6
Tree house climbing	2	15.4
Walking on nature trail	1	7.6
Total	13	100

**Table 4:** Major benefits of ONP to the community.

Activities	F	Percent
Cultural activities	1	7.6
Archaeological activities	1	7.6
Indoor games	1	7.6
Popularity/image building	1	7.6
Employment	1	7.6
Donation to schools and community centres	2	15.4
Less global warming impact	1	7.6
Infrastructural development	1	7.6
Loan scheme/incentives	1	7.6
Social exposure	1	7.6
Supply of water	1	7.6
Total	13	100

From the results shows (Tables 5,6 and 7), it can be said that the distribution of marital status was 38.5%, and 53.8%, for single and married respondents respectively. This validated the socio-cultural importance attached to being married especially in the Mid-western region of Nigeria where the study was conducted. Those that were married accounted for the highest of the percentages of the marital status of 53.8%. Also, revealed was the level of education. The level of education shows that majority of respondent staff are learned. The value of tertiary education holders was 76.9%, while those with no formal education was 15.4%. This corroborated earlier findings of Ezebilo et al. [6] that majority of staffs are somewhat learned. Findings for the departments of workers at ONP revealed variation in their distribution namely works and maintenance 15.4%, human resources management 23.1%, ecology and resources management 15.4%, planning and research 38.5%, as well as finance control 7.7%. This is an indication that majority of staffs ere working as planning and research staff. This is a fact that was supported by the NPC, where is it mentioned that most workers of the national parks are either low income of middle income earners.

**Major activities at the ONP**

Distribution of activities within the study area had swimming with the value of 23.1%. This is an indication that most of those that visits the site usually come for the purpose of recreation [7]. The distribution of the other activities as well as their respective values is

games (7.7%), education and research (30.8%), and bird watching (7.7%) (Table 8 and Figure 3).

**Major benefits of ONP to the community**

The communities are the park benefits maximally from the activities going on around the park. Also, they also benefit from the natural resources within the park. These are distributed as cultural activities (15.4%), archaeological activities (7.7%), indoor games (15.4%), while others are (15.4%) (Table 9).

Apart from that, the community also benefitted from the park by creating employment (84.6%), donation to schools and community centres (76.9%), less global warming effect (7.7%), as well as loan schemes/incentives (15.4%), social exposure (7.7%), supply of water (231%) respectively. The community was also engaged as stakeholder in the sense that some of their men and women of work age were engaged as water suppliers (92.3%), conservation education (46.2%), as well as repairs and other manual jobs (7.7%).

**Problems encountered with surrounding communities-insecurity**

In any human endeavour, there must be some forms of challenges

**Table 5:** Engagement of the communities as stakeholder.

Engagement	F	Percent
Employment	2	15.4
Water supply	1	7.6
Repairs and other manual jobs	4	30.7
Conservation education club (school)	3	22.8
Conservation education (community)	3	22.8
Total	13	100

**Table 6:** Problems encountered with surrounding communities-insecurity.

Engagement	F	Percent
Lack of understanding of the park's essence, values and goals	1	7.6
Lack of awareness	2	15.4
Lumbering	1	7.6
Hunting	2	15.4
Habitation	1	7.6
Farming	2	7.6
Debarking of trees	1	7.6
Harvesting of non-timber produce	2	7.6
Others	1	7.6
Total	13	100

**Table 7:** Problems faced in managing the park.

Engagement	F	Percent
Lack of funds/irregular allocation	2	15.4
Low staff strength	1	7.7
Insufficient operational vehicles	1	7.7
Insecurity on job	1	7.7
Park-community conflict	1	7.7
High cost of maintaining old vehicles	1	7.7
Lack of communication facilities	1	7.7
Weak legislation	2	15.4
Others	2	15.4
Total	13	100

**Table 8:** Communities visited during the study.

Communities visited	Frequency	Percent
Igolahor	9	4.5
Ihugbe quarters	9	4.5
Nikorowa	10	5
Igboba	10	5
Nguokolor	8	4
Udo akien	11	5.4
Okomu extension 1	30	14.9
Igweaforle	22	10.9
Irueze	11	5.4
Iguowan	20	9.9
Effa	14	6.9
At&p	11	5.4
Igwenwagwe	2	1
Julius creek	1	0.5
Arakuan	4	2
College road	11	5.4
Ugueze	6	3
Ido	12	5.9
Udo	1	0.5
Total	202	100

**Figure 3:** sign post at the entrance of Okomu National Park (ONP). Source: Field survey, 2015.

that face them. In this case challenges such as lack of understanding of park's essence, values and goals (38.5%), lack of awareness (15.4%), illegal lumbering (53.8%), illegal hunting (38.5%), illegal habitation (38.5%), illegal farming (46.25), harvesting of non-timber produce (53.8%), as well as others. There are also other problems facing the daily running of the park such as lack of fund/irregular allocation (92.3%), low staff strength (76.9%), insufficient operational vehicles (38.5%), insecurity on job (23.1%), park-community conflict (15.4%), high cost of maintaining old vehicles (23.1%), As well as lack of communication facilities (23.1%) respectively.

### Communities visited during the study

The communities visited during the study were Igolahor, Ihugbe Quarters, Nikorowa, Igboba, Nguokolor, Udo Akien, Okomu

Extension-1, Igeaforle, Irueze, Iguowan, Effa, AT&P, igwenwagwe, Julius Creek, Arakuan, College Road, Ido and Udo respectively.

### Biometrics of communities visited during the study

Ages of respondents encountered during the study differ significantly. The frequency of males was 115 representing (56.9%), while females were 87 representing (43.1%). Those in the age range of 40-50 have the highest value of 62 (30.7%), while those below 20-230 years were 17 (8.4%). The discovery above corroborated what Ajayi said concerning age distribution in Nigeria. He further postulated that the active economic age in the country ranges between 35-55 years of age.

The management of any community living very close to any national park must consist of management of resources, management of visitors and management of personnel [8]. This assertion supports the discovery of sustainable tourism potentials of national parks in Nigeria [9]. This survey revealed the potentials of national parks that abound in the rainforest zones. For instance Meduna, et al. [10] highlighted various contributions of some local residents within the ONP comparing this the recent findings, it can be said that majority of the human activities going on around ONP can be termed as illegal.

### Awareness level

Awareness level inferred among the staff indicated that 42.4% of the senior staff respondents are aware of the contributions of the communities to the park. The positive contributions are lesser (23.8%) compare to the negative contributions (76.2%) respectively.

### Willingness to pay

It was observed that during the interview sessions, respondents

**Table 9:** Socio-economics of communities visited during the study.

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Male	115	56.9
Female	87	43.1
Total	202	100
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	56	27.7
Married	105	52
Divorced	15	7.4
Widowed	21	10.4
Total	202	100
<b>Age group</b>		
Below 20 years	17	8.4
20 - 30 years	62	30.7
30 - 40 Years	21	10.4
40 - 50 Years	62	30.7
50 Years And Above	39	19.3
Total	202	100
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	182	90.1
Islam	14	6.9
Others	1	0.5
Total	202	100
<b>Level of education</b>		
None	41	20.3
Primary	44	21.8
Secondary	83	41.1
Tertiary	25	12.4
Total	202	100

who claimed to be willing to pay less than 500 naira were (64.4%), those who said that they can pay 500-1000 n (11.9%) those who said they can pay 1000-1500 ( 0.5%), those who said that they can pay 1500-2000 (1.0%), while those who said they can pay 2000 and above were ( 3.5%). In addition to that, those that will want to visit the site free of charge were (16.8%). and recuperated from illness, entertained and relieved from boredom, and so on. This corroborates Charles, It was observed that majority of the visitors visited for recreation purposes and traditional purposes. Most people come in company of friends, families with goodies, games and so on. Children's often in this place are mostly primary and nursery school students who come for excursion i.e., educational purpose. While few visit the place for traditional reasons.

### Perceived contributions of communities to the park

Respondents expressed their perception of the community's involvement in park management and it was observed to correspond with Ajayi [5] where they postulated that in rural African cities, there is a significant contribution the community's to their immediate environment. Perception was ranked based on the available evidences of the park. A total of 29 respondents expressed their perception of the community to help prevent environmental problems. This affirms the submission of [11], when they concluded that there is need for synergy between host communities and the park management.

### Assessment of selected communities

Level of awareness in arakhuan range, okomu national park community: Arakhuan Range is a sprawling suburb of Okomu National Park [12]. It is located toward the revered river. During the focus group discussion, there were even some that claimed that this suburb is part of Edo state and it was illegally annexed by the park management due to population pressures within the surrounding communities. It was observed through the interviews that based on the level of knowledge of the community about the park to a reasonable extent that the community is knowledgeable about park. They know what it means and the benefit they can derive from the park. According to Genot [12], the attitude of local residents of Arakhuan Range towards development may unfold through the stages of euphoria, where visitors are very welcome, through apathy, irritation and potentially antagonism when anti-tourist attitude begin growing among the local people originally occupying the place before the coming of the land developers. Also the interview survey revealed that tourists benefit more from the communities more than the residents of the community. The residents however gained from the influx of the tourists; learn history and other things. Conversely, some of the respondents felt that tourists have brought development to the community.

### CONCLUSION

Past studies have mainly concentrated on the evaluation of ecotourism in different destinations in which achievement of specific conservation and development principles of ecotourism were discussed, while some have emphasized the definitions and/or impacts of ecotourism. Even others have examined the roles and responsibilities of different players in the planning or promotion

of ecotourism destinations. However it can be rightly concluded that the contributions of the host communities to the national park is significant. Also in an overview of park and their host communities, the factors affecting the development may include low level of awareness. This study has focused on the potentials of ecotourism to sustain livelihoods of community members living around the park ranch based on patronage.

In another instance the communities were assessed and were also found to be involved in tourism planning and development at ONP. This study recommended community engagement and impact of development must be given high cognisance as lack of community acceptance can have adverse effect on any development. All the above recommendations were based on this study conducted. Hence, the recommendation can centre the focus on tourism and its potentials for sustainable development in Okomu National park.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Also based on the several approach on ecotourism and resource conservation in ONP, this study have been conducted on community participation on ecotourism development. In ONP, it is however recommended that the evaluation of the Evolution of Communal Areas Management programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE); a community based natural resource management programme in which natural resources are managed by community representatives and tourists operators and the proceeds are shared between both parties on a agreed sharing formular should be implemented. Similarly, therefore, this study aimed at evaluating how ecotourism can sustainably enhance the conservation of natural resources in Okomu National Park, both flora and fauna through the participatory approach. Hence the conclusive recommendation is that involvement and appraising the level of participation of the host communities around the National park in the decision making processes and conservation as well as management of its resources should be encouraged and effected. This study has also helped to understand the degree to which community influence in the management of natural resources can aid the development of ecotourism and conservation in such a way that societal, cultural and aesthetic needs are fulfilled while maintaining the essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and naturally occurring life support systems for present and future generations. However, the evaluated ecological resources of ONP can also form a basis for the management of ecotourism development in Okomu National Park, Edo state, Nigeria. This will help to pay more attention to the management of the park as well as take into consideration the host communities who are in constant interaction with the park. This study is unique in its approach in that it assessed the level of involvement of the community required for the success of ecotourism in ONP as well in conservation of natural resources for the purpose of ecotourism development.

The importance of Okomu National Park, Edo state, Nigeria in the light of its contributions to nation building cannot be over emphasized. Management plan should be employed and a regular and effective awareness campaign through Television, Radio and dailies. This is to bring the consciousness of recreation and awareness of the tourism potential of the park to the public. Extension programmes through qualified and well trained extension workers should be used to reach out to the public and tourist on the need

for conservation and community participation and how they can help in sustainable management of our environment in their daily life and reduce tourism impact. The standard of facilities in the park needs to be improved so as to attract visitors and give them a sense of satisfaction. Restaurants should be made to function as to provide local Edo delicacies such as Banga soup, Afang soup etc can begin to have international recognition.

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