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# ECOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AND PROSPECTS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA

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**Abstract**
*The Niger Delta region is known globally for its richly endowed (oil) environment and ecotourism destinations. Expectedly, ecotourism is a leading way for developing countries to generate revenue, employ their rural populace, market their cultures and national images, and preserve their rainforests, among others. These benefits have not been achieved in the Niger Delta due largely to the fact that ecotourism sites are underdeveloped, underfunded and mismanaged. Consequently, visitations to the sites are low, inputs to national economy and development are low, and the people remain increasingly impoverished. Marxist political ecology approach has been used to situate the study in proper theoretical perspective. The paper adopts historical research method to collect, verify and synthesize evidence from the past in order to authenticate and validate the result of the study, while drawing inferences from related articles, journals to critically explore the prospects for using ecotourism in Niger Delta to enhance the livelihoods of the Niger Deltans and contribute to national development in the country. Findings reveal that ecotourism has not been given adequate policy attention as the Niger Delta wetlands which ought to have been major tourist destinations. The paper recommends that tourism should be prioritized as a central concept in resource sustainability and proposes policy discourse aimed at ecological justice as integral to eco-tourism.*

**Keywords:** Ecological determinism, ecotourism, national development, Niger Delta

## Introduction

In most African countries, tourism sectors contribute hugely to the annual GDP (Eja et al, 2001), unfortunately, Nigeria is conspicuously absent from the global tourism development data (Okoli, 2013). United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), (2013) had identified tourism as one of the 10 sectors to generate trade opportunities, that could have transformed both the rich and poor societies. However, the economic well-being within poor societies or communities, according to Giddens (1981) and Cohen (1989), is environmentally determined. Bramwella and Laneb (2010), writing in the same general vein, noted that natural environment provides opportunities for maximization of eco-tourism potentials of the wetland region.

The Niger Delta region like most wetlands has enormous tourism potentials, (Ukapanah, 1991 and Ijeoma & Esaen, 2011). According to Esu (2013), these tourism potentials can fuel Nigerian economic development. Unfortunately, they suffer increasing relegation and under-utilization of the sector has rendered it unproductive as the Country relies solely on the monolithic resource based of petroleum products (Ibaba, 2002). Eco-tourism, as posited by Amadi et al (2016), relates to the preservation of natural resources. Cater (1993) underscores the ecological eco-tourism injustice, as the latent threats posed by unsustainable environmental rise of tourism. Interestingly, sustainable tourism is not just about protecting the environment, but, concerned with the long term economic viability and social justice, which require the need for more critical evaluation of existing thinking and techniques in the area of sustainable development (Cater 1993; Amadi et al 2016).

Observably, Ijeoma & Esaen (2011) further reveal that underdevelopment, underfunding, underutilization and the mismanagement of eco-tourist centres in the region, has being the hallmark of tourism investments by Nigerian governments, in spite of its significant contributions to the economic developments. The consistent neglects of tourism sector are due to over-dependence on revenue from petroleum products (Ibaba, 2002). Suffice it to say, that the inability of the governments to diversify its economy in spite of the high level of environmental pollution and degradation, and the mismanagement of existing eco-tourists' centres, will not only deny the people, economic opportunities, but, impoverishes the region (Partnership for Development, 2002); Ijeoma & Esaen (2011) and Okoli (2013). Nevertheless, Amadi et al (2016) conclude that failure to addressed tourism challenges of the Niger Delta, by relevant stakeholders, will catalyze amplified depletion of environmental resources, and by extension, endangers eco-tourism sustainability in the region. Lack of or inadequate ecological or environmental management, results in continuous environmental degradation (Odum, 1983; Barrow, 1995).

## Conceptual Discourse

### Ecological Determinism

Environmental determinism, according to Adeyemi, (2002), suggests that the environment essentially provides for man all he needs and also, sets limits on man's or society's culture and development. Therefore, it is left for man to utilize the provisions of the environment for further development, including ecotourism, especially, as Developed societies have capitalized on this, to harness the full potentials of their environment for their benefits. Ecologists and development experts come close circle that tourism sector could be an influential resource hub of the coastal regions in the Third World (Swarbrooke, 1999). Importantly, the Niger Delta is one of such regions. According to the Niger Delta Human Development report UNDP (2006), a major concern is the region's longstanding exclusion from the mainstream of Nigeria's socio-economic and political activities. The Niger Delta region is well endowed with ecotourism prospects, (Ijeomah and Esaen, 2011). Examples of well-known ecotourism centres in the Niger Delta include the Turtle station in Akassa, Bayelsa State; Elephant Sanctuary at Ikuru in Andoni, Rivers State; Port Harcourt Zoo in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, and Cross River National Park.

According to Ijeomah and Esaen (2011), the attractions at the Port Harcourt Zoo include viewing of the wild animals in captivity, horse and donkey ride; the attractions at Akassa community are viewing of the turtles and witnessing of Akassa beach party; and the attractions at Ikuru community are sighting of elephants,

wilderness experience, and annual boating. Also, among the animals in Port Harcourt Zoo are Lioness (*Pantheraleo*), Nile crocodile (*Crocodylusnilotica*), and Royal python (*Python sabae*), among others.

Existing literature shows evidence of unsustainable environmental resource use in the region which has been a challenge to eco- tourism. Amadi et al. (2014) observed that poor people are vulnerable to environmental dynamics because social, political and economic exclusion indicates they are left with few choices about where they live.

**Ecotourism**

Ecotourism placed heavy expectations on it's potential to promote conservation and sustainable development (Yu et al, 1997). It is intended to be sustainable and focused on the natural world, and beneficial to local communities. The World Conservation Union sees ecotourism, as environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, that promotes conservation with active socio-economic involvement of local populations (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1987). It simply refers to travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and improves the well-being of local people or people living in the environment. It is a fast growing industry in recent times. This, according to Nickerson (2000) and Foot (1990, 2004), is because increase in human population and preferences in demand for leisure activities often leads to an increase in demand for recreational use of public lands in many parts of the world.

Ecotourism is one of the most potent tools of the contemporary conservationists (Downs, 1994). According to Anne (2004), it is a more sustainable alternative to escape a cycle of poverty by the local people, as well as sharing the knowledge of the local terrain and ecology with visitors, to develop a stronger sense of community pride and a more global perspective that recognizes the value of biodiversity to all people.

In practical terms, ecotourism in Nigeria, includes activities in which visitors enjoy handsome experiences, such as cow-viewing in Obudu Cattle Ranch in Cross River State whose National Park, is apparently the only ecotourism centre in the Niger Delta region, that is well-established, well-managed and hence, contributes significantly to national economy and development. This is because it is the most widely visited ecotourism centre in the region.Tourists typically stay with environmentally-friendly hotels called 'eco-lodges'. These opportunities for personal contact with members of the host community facilitate cross-cultural exchange and add greatly to the value of ecotourism experiences for some people. Ecotourism is rooted in a conservation ethic and has a mission to support the biological and cultural resources of the community.

According to Ijeomah and Esaen, (2011), if properly developed and managed, ecotourism holds the following significant prospects for the development of the Niger Delta region: (i) economic empowerment of the people, and overall development of the Nigerian economy; (ii) ecotourism provides an opportunity to visit undisturbed natural areas, scenic vistas, and to observe plants and wildlife; (iii) it can offer many opportunities for local governments to promote their natural environments to visitors, which in turn, may enhance business partnership and collaboration; (iv) ecotourism can help in advancing social, economic, and environmental objectives in the region and the entire country; (v) it offers countries new opportunities for small-enterprise investment and employment and increases the national stake in protecting their biological resources; and (vi) well-developed ecotourism will promote the culture of

the people of Niger Delta (and Nigeria) to tourists coming from other parts of the world.

Others are (vii) eco-tourism allows the traveler to become educated about the areas both in terms of the physical landscape and cultural characteristics and often provides funds for conservation and benefits the economic development of places that are frequently impoverished; (viii) tourism provides positive experience for both the visitors and the hosts; (ix) provide financial aid for conservation, empowerment and other benefits for local people while raising the traveler's awareness of the host country's political, environmental and social climate. Ecotourism holds all these (and more) prospects for the Niger Delta region; (x) economic and job-creation benefits, such as the building, maintenance and operation of hotels, the supply of goods and services to these, and the generation of government tax revenues; (xi) new educational and training opportunities for management and labour, including interaction with foreigners and others from outside immediate social groups (Gossling, 1999; Wunder, 2000; Stronza, 2000); and; (xii) incentives for the conservation of wild nature via the collection of user fees to finance Protected Area. Some of the benefits which local communities can derive from ecotourism are employment opportunities, development associated with infrastructure (such as electricity, good road network and water), and ecotourism businesses (Weiler and Scidl, 2004).

**Theoretical Approach**

For proper theoretical perspective and analytical premise, the study subscribes to the Marxian Political Ecology approach to contextualize the dynamics of equitable natural resources in the coastal Niger Delta, Nigeria. Although Smith (2009), observes that the dearth of Marxist theorizing in tourism remains a mystery, owing to the non-mentioning of Marxist thinking on tourism. Marxist political economy is nevertheless, apparent in the economic geography of tourism (Britton 1991; Hall 1994; Ioannides & Debbage 1998; Mosedale, 2006; Jamal & Robinson (2009), tourism and corporate globalization (Bianchi, 2002; Duffy, 2002; Reid, 2003) as well as informed analysis of "commodificatrion" in tourism (MacCannell, 1992, 1999; Meethan 2001; Harrison, 2001).

Within the political ecology dialectics, eco-tourism and natural resources sustainability become inextricably related to the people and society that uses it. According to Bryant & Bailey (1997), the assumptions of political ecology include: first, cost and benefits associated with environmental change are distributed equally; second, changes in the environment do not affect society in a homogeneous; third, any change in environmental conditions and must affect the political and economic status-quo; and fourth, the unequal distribution of lost and benefits and the reinforcing or reducing of pre-existing inequalities holds political implication in terms of the attired relationship that now result.

In the words of Amadi et al (2016), this approach (political ecology) seeks to explore the critical challenges posed by poor and unjust natural resource management (as in the case of tourism potentials in the coastal Niger Delta region of Nigeria). There is a contention that resource denial can have a destabilizing effect on the polity. It is theoretically discussed among Comity of Nations that communities that deprived of their natural resources or politically degraded even with their resources out of their control are prone to social instability, thus, making their efforts to develop unsustainable (Rodney, 1978).

In spite of the enormous tourism potentials and huge revenue contribution of Niger Delta region to Nigeria's economic development (Ukapanah,1991), the 2006

policy recommendations of Nigerian Tourism Board master plan relegated the Coastal Niger Delta to the background, rendering it under-utilized, redundant and unproductive (Esu, 2013 and Okoli, 2013). The critical analysis of Osaghae (1995); Oloya & Ugbeyavwighren (2009) and Okoli (2013) conclude that failure to address tourism challenges of the wetland Niger Delta region will catalyze amplified depletion of eco-system (natural resources). Economic diversation from monolithic resource based (from crude oil), to a huge investment in tourism could help propel Nigeria to economic prosperity (Unigue & Agho, 2007).

## Method and Materials

The approach to the study is essentially historical. It was adopted to collect, verify and synthesize past evidence to establish facts on the subject under study. The paper relies majorly on data from related articles and journals which are secondary in nature to authenticate, validate and analyze the possible challenges and prospects of the subject under discourse.

## Description of the Study Area

Ethnographically, over forty (40) ethnic groups with about 250 different dialects spoken, prominent among which is the Bini, Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Isoko, Urhobo, Ukwani and Kalabari are the inhabitants in the Niger Delta (Nyoyoko&Umotong 2015). The region, according to Obi-Ani (2004), is made up of a medley of ethnic nationalities referred to as minorities, in relation to the three major ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo) in the Nigeria. However, the region has outstanding long historical background of conflicts and insurgences, resulted from infrastructural and human development in the midst of rich deposits of environmental resources. Osaghae (1995) have observed the region belongs to the ranks of the most backward and politically marginalized groups in the country, despite the fact that bulk of crude oil, Nigeria's main source of revenue, is derived from the Niger Delta region, which has the largest mangrove swamps in Africa (Awosika, 1995).

## Historical Background of Ecotourism of the Study Area

The history of tourism in Nigeria can be dated back to 1959 when the colonial government set up an ad hoc advisory committee on the promotion of tourism in the country. This committee recommended among other things the establishment of the Nigerian Tourist Association (NTA). The NTA established in 1962 was made up of government representatives and private individuals and organizations with an interest in tourism. The NTA was a private, voluntary, and not-for-profit organization but was assisted by the government with funds to shoulder the responsibility of developing and promoting tourism in the country. In 1964, the association joined the International Union of Official Travel Organizations (IUOTO), which was later renamed the World Tourist Organization (WTO) (Ukpanah, 1991).

Studies by Ukapanah (1991), reveals further that eco-tourism in Nigeria started with the establishment of Nigerian Tourist Association (NTA), with the recognition of the International Union of Official Travel Organization (IUOTO), now known, as World Tourism Organization (WTO). Esu (2013), recounts that due to the pressure from NTA, the Federal Government, in 1971 engaged the African Development Bank (ADB), to conduct feasibility study to ascertain the tourism potential of Nigeria. The ADB report indicated that Nigeria has huge tourism potential that can drive its economic development.

Interestingly, Government of Nigeria promulgated Act No. 54 of 1976, which later established Nigerian Tourism Board (NTB), to replace erstwhile NTA. In 1989, the Federal Military Government reorganized the Nigerian Tourist Board and created a department for tourism in the Ministry of Trade and renamed it the Ministry of Trade and Tourism (Ukpanah, 1991: 3). Six zones were established with their headquarters to cover the whole country and later state headquarters were also established for better administration (Ukpanah, 1991: 3). State governments were also ordered to create similar ministries and local governments were ordered to create committees for tourism. Throughout this period, tourism development and policies were formulated and implemented by the three tiers of government, including those in the Niger Delta to have Ministry that exclusively taken care of tourism activities.

Regrettably, the fortunes of Nigerian tourism to develop the country's tourism into a viable, sustainable, and revenue-generating industry failed to achieve its main objective of promoting Nigerian tourism to be one of the major foreign exchange earners for the country despite all the funds allocated and the support given to the board by the Federal Military Government (Aremu, 2001: 38).

**Discussion of Findings**

Ecotourism is indeed, a major promoter of conservation and development, with concomitant effects on economies and livelihoods. Development represents the emergence from a primitive state through progressive advancement in sustained socio-politico-economic growth and stability to improved standards of living for the citizenry (Adeyemi, 2002). Alternatively, Rodney (1978) explains the term development to imply the capacity to improve the quality of human life which involves raising the standard of living of people (income, material well-being, infrastructural development, etc), as well as, increasing freedom of choice of goods and services. It is generally acknowledged by most scholars that the advanced societies enjoy rapid growth via ecotourism activities, (Odusola, 1998). Thus, the increase in individuals' access to paid employment (in eco-tourism centres, empowers them for social and political participation in the economy (Bello and King, 1991; Odusola, 1998).

Ecotourism accounts for a large share of some countries' gross domestic product (GDP), and thus, contributes to livelihoods of many people, as in Kenya, Madagascar, Nepal, Thailand and Malaysia, among others (Isaacs, 2000). It is true that development can be likened to a concerted effort geared towards improving the qualities of a deteriorated environmental system with a view to improving the living conditions of the inhabitants (Hill and King, 1991). Therefore, national development is development that affects the entire society or country.

The major tourist attraction in Africa is wildlife (Kamuaro, 1996), and cotourism contributes to the national economy, with much of it centred around the wildlife on display in game reserves and national parks. National parks and protected reserves are scattered throughout Nigeria, providing critical footholds for embattled wildlife and natural ecosystems as well as premier ecotourism locations. National parks in Nigeria include Chad Basin, Cross River, Gashaka-Gumti, Kamuku, Kainji Lake, Okomu and Old Oyo. An eighth site, the well-known Yankari Game Reserve, held national-park status.

In a similar vein, a number of studies and reports have provided ample evidence of environmental challenges to tourism in the Niger Delta region (Amadi, 2013; Amadi et al., 2015; Duke and Burns, 1999; UNEP, 2011). Interestingly, a study carried out by Ijeomah and Esaen (2011), concerning the management of ecotourism

in the Niger Delta revealed that there are several factors militating against ecotourism in the region. Amongst thes include lack of animals, dirty environment and poor conditions of available animals and facilities, high trend of militancy and kidnapping, distance and cost of accommodation, and accommodation problems. As a result, visitations to the sites are alarmingly decreasing and input to national development or economy is lamentably low.

The inability of the government to properly manage the ecotourism centres in the region does not only deny the people economic opportunities, but impoverishes the region. Ibaba (2002) lamented that in spite of the great endowment of the Niger Delta region, the economies of many agrarian households in the region are not diversified in the face of high level of environmental pollution and degradation (from many years of petroleum prospecting and exploration), which has paralyzed farming and fishing occupations, as many other sectors in the region have consistently suffered neglects due to over-dependence on revenue from petroleum products.

A primary value of ecotourism is the employment opportunities it provides to local people, yet, many tourism operations are owned and run by foreign corporations, who siphoned revenue off to foreign investors instead of being reinvested in the community, and the environmental resources are degraded, and the needs of the local population are marginalized.

The Nigerian wildlife also, suffered from a variety of ills as a result of the country's expanding population, poaching, resource extraction and other anthropogenic effects. Because the locals receive no benefit from tourists, they have no incentive to protect the reserve, and a significant portion of the reserve's budget must go to guarding the reserve from poachers. Others may have good intentions but may be unable to live up to their goals due to financial and organizational limitations of promoting an ecotourism destination, (McLaren, 1998).

In some places, locals have resisted tourism development efforts, including ecotourism, because of the potential for disruption to their lives (McLaren, 1998). However, some ecotourism ventures are succeeding (Stronza, 2000; Wunder; 2001; Taylor et al, 2006), meanwhile, weak governance structures have the potential to undermine the conservation and development actions of ecotourism activities at tourism centres.

## Conclusion

The Niger Delta region is richly endowed with ecotourist sites, such as the Port Harcourt Zoo, Akassa Turtle Station, and Ikuru Elephant Sanctuary, among others. These are expected to enhance the livelihood of the people of the region and thus contribute to national development. These ecotourist sites are largely underdeveloped, underfunded and undermanaged, and are facing other militating challenges such as lack of animals, dirty environment and poor conditions of available animals and facilities, high trend of militancy and kidnapping, distance and cost of accommodation, and accommodation problems. Consequently, visitations to the sites are alarmingly decreasing, the people are increasingly impoverished, and inputs to national development or economy are lamentably low.

The Proponents of ecotourism see it as potential salvation of some of the world's most endangered ecosystems, and an opportunity for communities that possess biological and environmental resources to develop sustainable economic strategies, instead of pursuing environmentally-damaging patterns of resource use. However, finding a compromise between preservation and development is often

challenging, and ecotourism can generate additional environmental problems for the very regions it is intended to protect.

**Recommendations**

From the forgone discussion, this paper note that it is important to develop ecotourism in the Niger Delta region so as to enhance the livelihoods of the people. In doing this:

1. Ecotourism should be prioritized first as a policy option for diversifying the economy of the Niger Delta region and funding should be made adequate for the management of ecotourism, the management should be strengthened and staff properly mobilized, trained and educated.
2. The development of ecotourism in the area should not be left in the hands of the government alone; private partners and interested agencies should also be involved. For instance, the USAID supports for ecotourism include developing national park systems, demarcating and equipping new national parks, recruiting and training park staff, as well as encouraging government reforms that promote regulated investments in private lodging, guide service and other tourism ventures (Barkin, 2002).
3. Information is also needed to demonstrate to decision-makers the economic contributions towards tourism.
4. Better understanding of the impact of ecotourism (such as in resort development) is needed to regulate and enforce against environmentally damaging investments. Therefore, experts should be involved in ecotourism development in Niger Delta region.

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