

## Perception of Ecotourism among Tertiary Institution Students in Abeokuta Metropolis, Ogun State, Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

The study determined tertiary students' perception of ecotourism in Abeokuta, Ogun State. Data was garnered from 405 students who were randomly sampled from six tertiary institutions namely; Federal University of Abeokuta (94), Crescent University (23), Federal College of Education Osiele (80), Moshood Abiola Polytechnic Ojere (145), Sacred Heart School of Nursing Lantoro (31) and School of Nursing FMC Idi-Aba (32). The results of this study was presented using descriptive statistical tools such as frequencies, percentages and means, while inferential statistical tool used was Chi Square. The modal age category was 21-25 years (55.1%). Most of the students were female (60.5%) and single (96.8%). The percentages of students in 100 (36.0%) and 200 (32.1%) level were more compared to other levels of study. Students who were aware of ecotourism got to know about it mostly through school (15.6%) and personal interest (11.9%). Only 17.0% indicated awareness of ecotourism initiatives, club or society in their schools, while only 8.6% of the students had ever participated in ecotourism activities. The few students who participated in ecotourism activities engaged in rock climbing (3.2%), sightseeing (1.7%), visitation (1.2%) and trekking (1.5%) once in a while (4.9%). Some (33.6%) of the students indicated lack of information and time (14.8%) as constraining their participation in ecotourism activities. Almost all (90.9%) respondents reflected that they would like to know more about ecotourism. The main reason that stimulates students' interest in ecotourism was to understand the natural environment (46.9%) and get close to nature (20.7%). Most of the students were favourably disposed towards ecotourism bringing about infrastructural development ( $\bar{X}=4.20$ ), positive changes in value system of the community ( $\bar{X}=4.30$ ) and employment opportunity for indigenous population ( $\bar{X}=4.41$ ). Significant relationship existed between institution attended ( $\chi^2 = 0.274$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), level of study ( $\chi^2 = 0.174$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and perception of ecotourism. The study recommends intensification of ecotourism awareness, ecotourism advocacy and promotion of programmes that will encourage students' participation in ecotourism activities.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism initiatives, Tertiary level students, Ecotourism awareness, Rock climbing participation

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an ever growing industry around the world with many countries now dependent on the tourism industry within their countries for continued growth and development. It has penetrated human life as a necessity, as part "created" by man, with man and for man. Tourism whether practiced knowingly or instinctively was and is one of human activities with an extensive search and development from the beginning of mankind especially now, in the 21st century. A report put out by the World Economic Forum states that there was an increase in the number of international tourism receipts from US\$2.1 billion to US\$622.7 billion between 1950 and 2004. By 2006, the tourism sector accounted for 10.3% of world GDP. Furthermore, in 2006 there were 234 million jobs in the industry, making up 8.2% of total employment worldwide (World Tourism Analysis, 2007). The World Tourism Organisation - UNWTO (2011) has estimated that the industry has grown from 25 million international travelers in 1950 to over 800 million with a projection of 1.2 billion travelers by 2020. Many people involved in

travelling especially to long distance to ease tension and maintain a healthy living through a change of environment devoid of all stress of life (Ojewola, 2008).

Tourism can develop and grow when humans have a positive view towards it and when they see their role in the process of the tourism development. When a tourism destination is born, the quality of life of the people around goes through radical changes, which are not necessarily negative. Sometimes, influx of people, traffic difficulty, increase in crime rates and pollution of all environmental resources might be inevitable. Additionally, tourism brings changes that affect the traditional way of life, family relations, the nature of the local structure functioning and many more problems not predictable (Puczko and Ratz, 2005). Ecotourism does not only preserve the environment but also offers opportunities that are unique culturally and within nature which has made it become an avenue for much of the industry to look towards for the future of tourism.

Ecotourism is one of the fast growing sectors of the hospitality and tourism industries worldwide (Buckley, 2000). The term 'ecotourism' first definition was credited to the Mexican Consultant, Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, in July 1983, he stated that ecotourism involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects. The International Ecotourism Society - TIES (2002) defined ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the wellbeing of local people. Also, ecotourism is referred to as three inter-linked elements of environment, active learning and sustaining the socio-cultural and natural environments (Weaver, 2001).

However, Singh *et al* (2007) suggests that ecotourists consist of three types; soft, structured and hard ecotourists. The structured ecotourists prefer intellectual interpretation, third party organization of the trips and using travel experts. Sometimes, structured ecotourists are likely to visit less well-known destinations and consider themselves dedicated ecotourists. Ecotourism can mean different things to different groups involved but ultimately it must bring about satisfaction. It is worthy of note that ecotourism provides one way to help educate the community to protect and conserve the environment through travel. It helps create and maintain a sustainable environment for both residents and tourists, and more importantly for the next generation. Broadly speaking, ecotourism refers to tourism that is based on nature but seeks to minimize harmful impacts and better still, seeks to promote conservation which is solely attainable through community resources and participation. Ecotourism becomes easy to be practiced and managed when there are creation of some protected areas. How human beings perceive their physical and social environment is crucial in that this will directly affect their view towards their physical and social environment.

Perceptions are socially and culturally constructed, and often interrelated with many influencing factors such as religion, cultural and ethnic background, collective pressure, laws and regulations. All these factors make up people's values and opinions. In a way, the degree to which an individual is aware of ecotourism is directly related to his/her perception about ecotourism. However, perception of ecotourism could best be assessed among tertiary student in that they are the leaders of tomorrow. It is recognized that education is the most efficient way to change people's thinking or perception about a particular problem; or a way to bring about desired change in their

attitude. It is noteworthy that education is a vital tool to a country's sustainable development.

Ecotourism and sustainable development are intertwined in that conservation and preservation of the environment is crucial to attaining sustainable development. Sustainable development is a way of thinking about how we organize our lives and works using limited natural resources in order to satisfy needs, not only for our generation, but also for future generation. Through education, it is possible not only to understand sustainable development concept, but also to promote and to improve the capability of people to address it with responsibility. Many people do not understand what ecotourism really means and consequently, abuse of the concept is prevalent. This study is hinged on the need to address poor awareness that many people have about ecotourism. The knowledge of a population's perception about ecotourism would help managers and operators of ecotourism plan the development of the industry. In this regard, it is considered that opinions of persons in tertiary institutions where ecotourism landmarks are situated are important. Weaver (2001) argues that misrepresentations of ecotourism is common in various places and state a reason for this as the lack of familiarity of the public with ecotourism criteria. Proper perception of ecotourism is a requisite to making it a powerful instrument for preservation of nature with favourable outcome for local populations, including a wide range of satisfaction. Therefore, the study was premised on the following objectives

1. To determine the personal characteristics of the students.
2. To assess students' awareness of ecotourism.
3. To assess students' participation in ecotourism activities
4. To identify constraints to participation.
5. To assess the level of interest in ecotourism among the students.
6. To determine students' perception of ecotourism.

## METHODOLOGY

The study area was Abeokuta in Ogun State; an ancient town dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century has its origin linked to Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba race. The town derives its name from a huge rock called 'Olumo'. The name Abeokuta in Yoruba language means 'under the rock or beneath the stone'. Abeokuta lies in the tropics within the rainforest belt of the southwestern part of Nigeria. It is located amidst a group of granite rocks of

natural formation and has an average height of about 280 meters above sea level. Students of tertiary institutions in Abeokuta metropolis constitute the population of this study. A structured questionnaire was used to elicit responses from students. Data was gathered from a total of 405 students who were randomly sampled from six tertiary institutions proportionate to size. Five percent of the departments/units were sampled, from where ten percent of the students were randomly sampled namely; Federal University of Abeokuta (94), Crescent University (23), Federal College of Education Osiele (80), Moshood Abiola Polytechnic Ojere (145), Sacred Heart School of Nursing Lantoro (31) and School of Nursing FMC Idi-Aba (32). The results of this study was presented using descriptive statistical tools such as frequencies, percentages and means while inferential statistical tool used was Chi Square.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Personal characteristics of respondents**

The modal age category was 21-25 years (55.1%), implying that respondents are still in their prime ages and the quest for knowledge is expected to be high. Hence, interest of respondents in ecotourism can be aroused or stimulated. This result is consistent with Ogunjinmi (2016) who conducted a study among students of the Department of Ecotourism and Wildlife Management, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria and

found that most of the students (58.3%) are between the age brackets of 21-22 years. Similarly, Mirjam (2013) also found that most students surveyed in University of Shkodra, Albania with respect to perception of tourism are between 21-25 years. More so, youths like adventures that is beneficial and highly rewarding. In this study, the females (60.5%) were more than males (39.5%). It is noteworthy that the two nursing schools sampled for this study might have contributed to number of females compared to males. Majority of the respondents were still single (96.8%), indicating that they can fully concentrate on their study with minimum or no distraction. There were more students from Moshood Abiola Polytechnic Ojere (35.8%) and Federal University of Abeokuta (23.2%) compared to students from other tertiary institutions. The percentages of students in 100 (36.0%) and 200 (32.1%) level were more compared to other levels of study. Furthermore, students in faculty of science (30.6%) were more compared to students from other faculties. Students in Faculty of Education and Agriculture were 15.1% and 19.5%, respectively. Thus, awareness of ecotourism among students might be sparing as students are from wide varieties of departments which might not take ecotourism as a course of study. Awareness of ecotourism requires a level of exposure which students need in order to broaden their horizon and sharpen their perspective towards ecotourism potentials, particularly in a nations' economy.

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on their personal characteristics**

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentages
<b>Age</b>	15 – 20	147	36.3
	21 – 25	223	55.1
	26 – 30	32	7.9
	31 – 35	3	0.7
<b>Sex</b>	Male	160	39.5
	Female	245	60.5
<b>Marital status</b>	Single	392	96.8
	Married	13	3.2
<b>Institution</b>	Federal University of Abeokuta	94	23.2
	Crescent University	23	5.7
	Federal College of Education, Osiele	80	19.8
	Moshood Abiola Polytechnic, Ojere	145	35.8
	Sacred Heart School of Nursing Lantoro	31	7.6
	School of Nursing FMC Idi-Aba	32	7.9
<b>Level</b>	100	146	36.0
	200	130	32.1
	300	65	16.0
	400	23	5.7
	500	36	8.9
	700	5	1.2
<b>Course of study</b>	Art	15	3.7
	Science	124	30.6
	Education	61	15.1
	Social science	45	11.1

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentages
	Agriculture	79	19.5
	Engineering	16	4.0
	Others	65	16.0

### Awareness of ecotourism

Table 2 reveals that less than half of the students (42.7%) were aware of ecotourism. This implies that the awareness of ecotourism among students in tertiary institutions is low in the study area and this will not encourage students' participation in ecotourism activities. This is because knowledge is vital in every life endeavour. The low level of students' awareness of ecotourism is tantamount to their low knowledge level. Cini *et al* (2015) research revealed that for the majority of students surveyed, their knowledge of ecotourism remains scarce. Students who were aware of ecotourism got

to know about it mostly through school (15.6%) and personal interest (11.9%). This implies that exposure of students to importance and benefits of ecotourism while in school become pertinent coupled with their personal interest. Only 17.0% indicated awareness of ecotourism initiatives, club or society in their schools. Also, 17.0% of the students were aware that there are ecotourism sites in their schools. It was found that 11.8% of students indicated one ecotourism site, 3.0% students indicated 2 sites, while 2.2% students indicated that they had more than two ecotourism sites.

**Table 2: Distribution of respondents based on their awareness of ecotourism**

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
A Are you aware of ecotourism?		
Yes	173	42.7
No	232	57.3
B If yes, indicate the medium		
1 School	63	15.6
2 Personal interest	48	11.9
3 Television	11	2.7
4 Radio	1	0.2
5 Print Media	7	1.7
6 Friends	31	7.7
7 Others	2	0.5
Neutral	242	2.4
C Awareness of ecotourism initiatives, club or society in students' schools		
Yes	69	17.0
No	336	83.0
D Ecotourism site awareness		
Yes	69	17.0
No	336	83.0
If yes, indicate number of sites		
1 Site	48	11.8
2 Sites	12	3.0
3 Sites	7	1.7
4 Sites	2	0.5

### Participation in ecotourism activities

The result in Table 3 shows that only 8.6% of the students had ever participated in ecotourism activities. This is at variance with Günay and Akıncı (2017) who found that 38.8% of tertiary students engaged in ecotourism activities. The few students who participated in ecotourism activities engaged in rock climbing (3.2%), sightseeing (1.7%), visitation (1.2%), trekking (1.5%) and

cruising (1.0%) once in a while (4.9%). This implies low level of students' participation in ecotourism activities which might not favour ecotourism promotion among students in tertiary institution. Consequently, students after graduation will not be encouraged to engage in any endeavor that is associated with ecotourism due to deficient knowledge of its benefits. Furthermore, 33.6% of the students indicated lack of information as constraining their participation in ecotourism

activities, 14.8% indicated lack of time, while 34.1% did not indicate any constraint to participation. It could be inferred from the result of this study that information on ecotourism potentials will be an effective tool in stimulating students'

participation in ecotourism activities in tertiary institutions. Other constraints militating against students' participation in ecotourism activities were cost (7.2%), lack of interest (6.2%) and safety (4.2%).

**Table 3: Distribution of respondents based on their participation in ecotourism activities**

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
<b>A</b> Have you ever participated in ecotourism activities?		
Yes	35	8.6
<b>B</b> If yes, indicate activities		
1 Rock/Mountain climbing	13	3.2
2 Sight seeing	7	1.7
3 Visitation	5	1.2
4 Walking/Trekking	6	1.5
5 Cruising	4	1.0
<b>C</b> Frequency of participation in ecotourism activities		
1 Fortnightly	1	0.2
2 Monthly	3	0.7
3 Seldomly	8	2.0
4 Yearly	1	0.7
5 Once in a while	20	4.9

**Table 4: constraints to students' participation in ecotourism activities**

Constraints	Frequency	Percentage
Safety	17	4.2
Lack of interest	25	6.2
Cost	29	7.2
Lack of time	60	14.8
Lack of information	136	33.6
Neutral	138	34.1

**Interest in ecotourism**

Table 4 shows that almost all (90.9%) the respondents reflected that they would like to know more about ecotourism. The main reason that stimulates students' interest in ecotourism was to understand the natural environment (46.9%) and get close to nature (20.7%). This result aligns with Günay and Akıncı (2017) who found that 17.6% and 29.5% of tertiary students' interest in ecotourism is stimulated by seeing cultural/historical attractions and seeing natural

beauties, respectively. Few students indicated relaxation (8.9%) and fun/pleasure (7.2%) as reasons for their interest in ecotourism. Very few of the respondents indicated lack of time (6.6%), lack of information (1.0%) and boredom (1.5%) as reasons for lack of interest in ecotourism. It could be inferred from the result of this study that if students are well informed on ecotourism, they will have adequate knowledge which would have spurred their perception of and interest in ecotourism.

**Table 5: Distribution of respondents based on their interest in ecotourism**

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
<b>A</b> Are you interested in knowing more about ecotourism?		
Yes	368	90.9
<b>B</b> If yes, state reason		
1 To understand natural environment	190	46.9
2 To get close to nature	76	18.8
3 For relaxation	30	7.4
4 For fun and pleasure	29	7.2
5 Habit	10	2.5
6 For environmental actions	11	2.7

	Variables	Frequency	Percentages
7	To understand environment and to get close to nature	8	2.0
<b>C</b> Reasons for lack of interest			
1	Lack of time	27	6.6
2	Boring	6	1.5
3	Lack of information	4	1.0

### Perception of ecotourism

Table 5 presents students' perception of ecotourism and it was found that most students were favourably disposed towards ecotourism bringing about infrastructural development ( $\bar{X}$ =4.20), positive changes in value system of the community ( $\bar{X}$ =4.30), employment opportunity for indigenous population ( $\bar{X}$ =4.41), recreational opportunities ( $\bar{X}$ =4.45), source of revenue generation for the government ( $\bar{X}$ =4.22), incentive for the protection and conservation of natural resources ( $\bar{X}$ =4.21) and

conservation of wild plants and animals ( $\bar{X}$ =4.26). The result of this study implies that students are favourably disposed to ecotourism, hence it could be inferred that any initiation on ecotourism promotion will be welcomed. Students are mostly youths and when they are well groomed with the nitty-gritty of ecotourism while in school they will be able to influence the larger society, thereby paving way for a better economy that is well balanced. The result of this study is consistent with Mirjam (2013) who found that tertiary students had favourable perception towards the positive economic and socio-cultural impacts of ecotourism.

**Table 6: Distribution of respondents based on their perception of ecotourism**

S/N	Perception statements	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
1	Ecotourism will encourage infrastructural development	38.5	44.2	6.7	2.2	2.7	4.20
2	Ecotourism brings about positive changes in value systems of the community	39.3	47.4	5.9	0.2	1.5	4.30
3	Ecotourism brings change to traditional culture	20.7	37.0	16.8	9.4	8.9	3.60
4	Ecotourism creates employment opportunity for indigenous population	40.2	42.2	7.4	1.7	2.0	4.41
5	Ecotourism enhance acculturation	25.9	43.2	18.8	3.0	2.5	3.93
6	Ecotourism provide incentive for the protection and conservation of natural resources	36.3	43.7	8.1	2.5	1.2	4.21
7	Ecotourism promote the conservation of wild plants and animals	43.2	37.0	7.4	2.2	2.5	4.26
8	Ecotourism increases recreational opportunities	36.8	42.2	10.4	1.2	2.5	4.45
9	Ecotourism increases revenue of local government through visitation by tourist	40.2	40.0	8.6	1.7	2.5	4.22
10	Ecotourism boosts preservation of nation integrity	27.2	46.2	12.6	2.5	3.5	3.99
11	Ecotourism encourage sustenance of cultural activities by local residents	25.7	44.4	17.3	2.0	3.5	3.93
12	Ecotourism makes awareness of the potentials of the community possible	26.9	48.4	12.6	1.5	3.2	4.02
13	Destruction of natural beauty by establishment/presence of hotels and other tourist facilities	15.3	21.5	16.3	20.0	19.8	2.91
14	Ecotourism promote erosion of local culture	15.3	31.4	22.7	9.9	13.1	3.27
15	There is possibility of preserving cultural or historical based attraction through ecotourism	33.3	42.7	11.4	2.2	3.5	4.08

### Test of relationship between students' personal characteristics and perception of ecotourism

The result of the Chi square relationship between students' personal characteristics and perception of ecotourism shows that the relationships between institution attended ( $\chi^2 = 0.274$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), level of

study ( $\chi^2 = 0.174$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and perception of ecotourism were significant. This implies that school and level of study had influence on students' perception of ecotourism.

**Table 7: Chi square analysis of students' personal characteristics and perception of ecotourism**

Variables	df	$\chi^2$	p-value	Decision
Sex	1	0.000	0.993	Not significant
Age	3	0.042	0.871	Not significant
Marital status	1	0.021	0.679	Not significant
Institution	5	0.274	0.000	Significant
Level	5	0.174	0.027	Significant

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings from this study, it can be inferred that awareness of ecotourism potentials is still sparing among students of tertiary institutions. This has resulted in low participation in ecotourism activities by students. However, favourable perception of ecotourism by students as found in this study serve as a ladder that could be used for ecotourism promotion. The study recommends intensification of ecotourism awareness, ecotourism advocacy and promotion of programs that will encourage students' participation in ecotourism activities.

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