

ASSESSMENT OF ECOTOURISM OPERATIONS IN EZEAGU TOURIST COMPLEX OF ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the level of community participation in tourism business, assessed the impact of tourism on households in the host community and investigated the factors militating against tourism growth in Ezeagu tourist complex. Data for this study were obtained through personal observations, indepth interviews with staff of the complex and indigenes of the community who are knowledgeable about tourism, and administration of three sets of questionnaires. A set was purposively administered to 146 household representatives of the host community, to collect information on tourism activities, benefits derived from the complex and households' awareness and participation in tourism business. The second set was administered to all the staff of the complex to collect information on frequency of visitation, categories of tourists that visit the ecodestination, the challenges to tourism growth and solutions proffered by the management to overcome them, while the third set was randomly administered to 50 tourists to get information on tourist attractions, available tourism facilities and infrastructures as well as their adequacy and maintenance, and challenges encountered in the site. Data obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics in form of frequency of counts, percentages, charts and tables. Most household respondents (84.24%) admitted that the host community participates in tourism in the destination. Respondents participate as tour guides (61.15%), in cultural activities and business (10.19%) among others. Some of the cultural activities integrated into tourism include masquerade parade (47.08%), celebration of new yam festival (46.15%) and age grade ogene dance (33.33%). Respondents' main way of deriving benefits from Ezeagu tourist complex is in form of income generation (75.34%) through transportation business (87.67%), supply of drinks (21.23%) and rental business (5.57%). Income generation peaks between December and February (60.27%) due to festivities. Most of the business operators in Ezeagu tourist complex are indigenes of the host community, thus leakages of resources are minimized. About 20% of household respondents perceived that benefits are derived from the destination through employment. Unavailability of hotel accommodation (50%), inadequate infrastructures and facilities (40%) and government neglect (30%) were identified by staff respondents as the major challenges of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex. Most tourist respondents (92.00%) considered the infrastructure in the destination inadequate. Provision of standard infrastructure and adequate publicity will bring about tourism boom in the destination, add more values to resources in the site and generate more benefits to households in the host community.

Key Words: Ecotourism, Rural development, Impact, Cultural preservation, Ezeagu tourist complex

Introduction

Tourism is a business entity that provides places and events to keep people psychologically relaxed (Agba *et al.*, 2010). Tourism, a concept that is as old as man (Blangy and Wood, 1993), has become a lucrative socio-economic and cultural phenomenon in the 21st century because of the publicized vast benefits it provides, when properly planned and managed (Ashley, 2000; Ashley *et al.*, 2000; Ayodele, 2002;Ijeomah, 2007) particularly in the face of high global rate of poverty. Ecotourism, an aspect of environmental tourism refers to an environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (Ceballos - Lascurain, 1996). Ecotourism creates a large and wide market in rural areas; which brings about wealth transfers across the globe. This is done through creation of awareness about rural products, addition of value to local products and attraction of people from different areas to destination host communities. Ecotourism opens up rural areas and enhances economic growth through foreign exchange earnings and revenue generation for many countries and states. It improves people's wellbeing through job creation, revenue or income distribution and balanced regional development.

Benefits derived from tourism depend on investment, understanding of tourism

business management strategies and stakeholders' level of participation (Ijeomah and Herbert, 2012). Good understanding of tourism business operation and management will guide the managers on the kind of activities to create that will satisfy customers, increase the rate of tourists' visitation and generate more benefits to households of destination host communities both at the formal and informal sector.

This implies that there is an urgent need, therefore, to assess the challenges of each tourism site, and the effects of existing destinations on host communities. The objectives of this study therefore are to:

- investigate the level of community participation in tourism business
- assess the impact of tourism on households in the host communities
- investigate the factors militating against tourism growth in Ezeagu tourist complex

Methodology

Study Area

Ezeagu tourist complex is located between 7°0'0" and 7°22'0"E and 6°20'30" and 6°31'30"N of Greenwich (Figure 1). Ezeagu tourist complex is located in the western part of Obinofia Ndi-Uno community of Ezeagu Local Government Area in Enugu State (Ezeh, 2006; Enugu State tourism Guide, 2016).

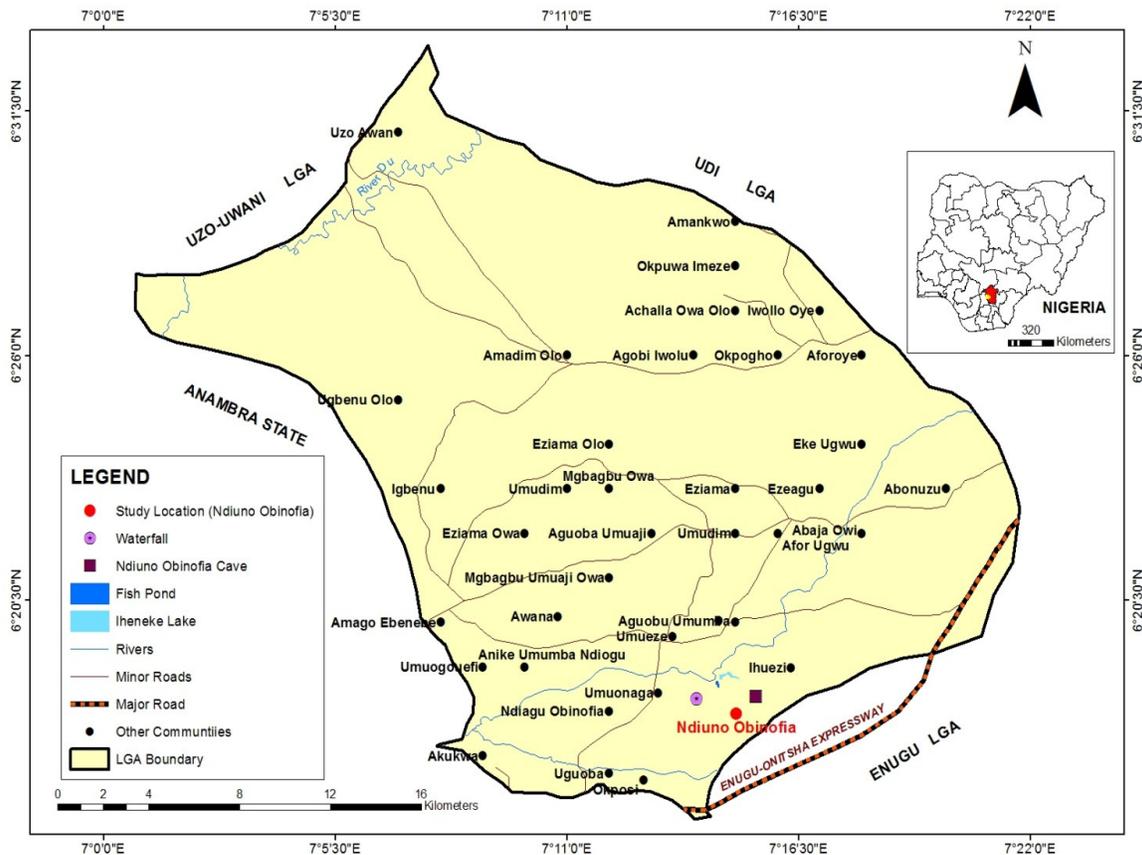


Figure 1: Map of Ezeagu Local Government Area showing location of Ezeagu tourist complex

Source: Ijeomah *et al.*, 2018

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through oral interviews, administration of questionnaire and field observations. Three sets of questionnaires were administered for data collection (Table 1). The first set was administered to representatives of household members of the host community, Obinofia. It was used to collect information on tourism activities, benefits derived from the tourist complex by households, and respondents' awareness and participation in tourism business in Ezeagu tourist complex.

The second set was administered to all staff and management of the tourist complex to collect information on categories of tourists that visit the ecodestination, challenges to tourism growth, and solutions proffered by the management to overcome them.

The third set was administered to obtain information on attractions to Ezeagu tourist complex, tourists' purpose of visit, tourism activities, tourism facilities, problems encountered by the tourists and tourists' experiences.

Table 1: Proportional allocation of questionnaires to respondents

Set of questionnaire	Number administered	Number retrieved	Total used
First set for households			
Ihueze village	30	30	-
Umueze village	30	26	-
Umuonaga village	30	30	-
Okposi village	30	30	-
Awana village	30	30	146
Second set for staff of the complex	15	10	10
Third set for tourists	50	50	50

Personal interviews were conducted with selected staff members who have worked with the tourist complex for a minimum period of five years and are therefore quite knowledgeable about the management of the tourist complex and also with traditional chiefs who have lived up to a minimum of twenty years in the community to obtain information mainly on the history of the eco-destination and culture of the host community.

Method of Data Analysis

Data obtained from the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics in form of frequencies, percentages, pie chart, bar chart and tables, while chi-square was used to test for associations. Chi-square (χ^2) = The degrees of freedom (df) = (r – 1) (c – 1)

Where, r = number of rows
c = number of columns

Result

Community Participation in Tourism

Results on community participation in tourism are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4. Table 2 shows that many household respondents (61.15%) participate in tourism in the complex as tour guides. According to Table 3, the major cultural activities integrated into tourism in the complex are masquerade parade (47.08%), new yam festival (46.15%) and age grade *ogene* dance (33.33%). As suggested by staff respondents in Table 4, the major way household participation in tourism could be increased is through government support and provision of adequate fund for development of facilities.

Table 2: Assessment of community and household participation in tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex as indicated by household respondents

Parameter	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
If household members in anyway are participating in tourism?	Yes	123	84.24
	No	23	15.76
If yes, how?	Tour guide	96	61.15
	Cultural activities	24	15.29
	Commercial activities	16	10.19
	Recreational activities	9	5.73
	Sanitation of the complex	7	4.46
	Organizing events and function	5	3.18

Table 3: Cultural activities of host community that are integrated into tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex as indicated by household and staff respondents

Cultural activities of host community	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Masquerade parade	76	47.72
New yam festival	72	46.15
Age grade ogene dance	52	33.33
Egwuonwa	7	4.49
Atiliogwu dance	4	2.56
Ihuogba festival	3	1.92

Table 4: Ways to increase household participation in tourism operation in Ezeagu tourist complex as indicated by staff respondents

Ways of increasing participation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Government support and provision of adequate fund	5	50.00
Innovation of strategies for tourism development	2	20.00
Introduction of various tourism facilities	2	20.00
Provision of adequate infrastructure and tourism facilities	2	20.00
Creation of awareness and campaign in Ezeagu tourist complex	1	10.00

Impact of Tourism on the Host Community

Results on the impact of tourism on the host community are presented in Tables 5 and 6 and Figure 2. Table 5 shows that respondents' main way of deriving benefits from Ezeagu tourist complex is through income generation (75.34%), while employment was for

some respondents (19.11%). Income generation peaks between December and February (60.27%) due to festivities (Table 6). The major ways households of the host community generate this income in Ezeagu tourist complex are through transportation business (87.67%), supply of drinks (21.23%) and rental business (5.57%) as shown in Figure 2.

Table 5: Benefits derived by household from Ezeagu tourist complex

Benefits	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Source of income	110	75.34
Employment	28	19.18
None	21	14.38
Infrastructural development	6	4.11
No response	4	2.74

Table 6: Distribution of households based on periods the benefits are derived from Ezeagu tourist complex

Period	Frequency	Percentage
December-February	88	60.27
June-August	51	34.93
September-November	36	24.66
March-May	32	21.92
Reason of benefits during the time		
Festive period	52	35.62
One activity or the other	46	31.51
Rainy season	46	31.51
Dry season	42	28.77
No response	5	3.42

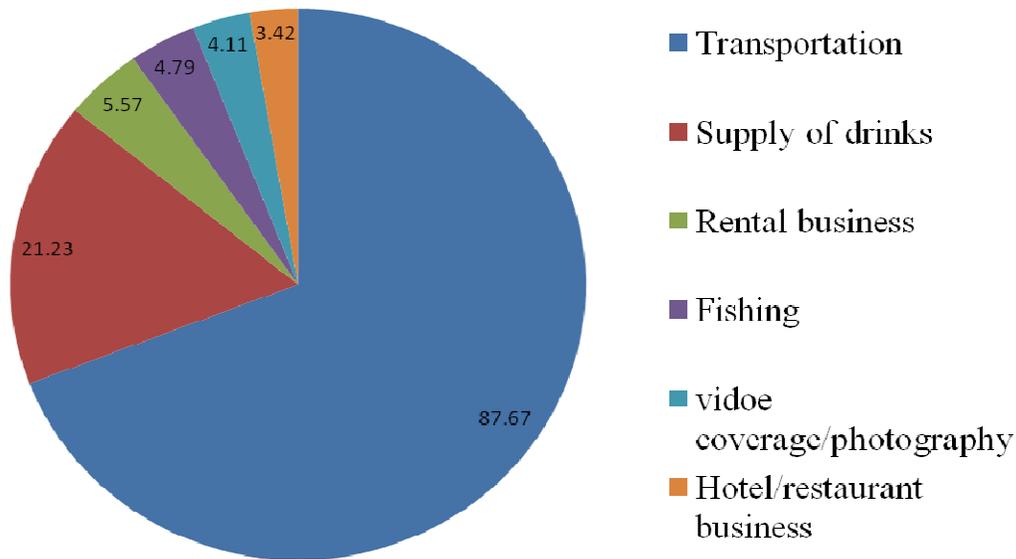


Fig 2: Activities that generate income for the households in Ezeagu tourist complex as identified by household respondents

Challenges of Tourism in Ezeagu Tourist Complex

Results on the challenges of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex are presented in Tables 7, 8, 9 and Figure 3. Unavailability of hotel accommodation (50%), inadequate infrastructures and facilities (40%) and government neglect (30%) were identified by staff respondents as the major challenges of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex, while

poor transportation system (32%), inadequate infrastructures and tourism facilities (20%) and lack of maintenance and poor management of facilities (18%) amongst others were also indicated by tourist respondents as the major challenges of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex (Table 7). Figure 3 shows that the infrastructures in Ezeagu tourist complex are inadequate. Provision of hotel accommodation (30%), creation of

awareness (30%) and government participation and proper management (20%) were suggested by staff respondents as ways to overcome the challenges of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex, while provision of standard

infrastructures and tourism facilities (50%) and provision of adequate transportation system (42%) were suggested by tourists as the major ways to overcome challenges in the complex (Table 8).

Table 7: Factors militating against tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex as indicated by staff respondents

Factors militating against tourism	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Government neglect	5	50.00
Inadequate funding	3	30.00
Inadequate infrastructures and tourism facilities	3	30.00
Inadequate creation of awareness	3	30.00
Lack of inspection	2	20.00
Poor management of structures and facilities	2	20.00

Table 8: Challenges encountered in Ezeagu tourist complex as indicated by staff and tourist respondents

Assessor	Challenges encountered in Ezeagu tourist complex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Staff	Unavailability of hotel accommodation	5	50.00
	Inadequate infrastructures and facilities	4	40.00
	Government neglect	3	30.00
	Poor transport system	2	20.00
	Insecurity	2	20.00
	Poor communication network	2	20.00
	Inadequate funding	2	20.00
	Tourists	Poor transport system	16
Inadequate infrastructures and tourism facilities		10	20.00
Lack of maintenance and poor management of facilities		9	18.00
Government neglect		8	16.00
Poor community participation		6	12.00
Inadequate funding		6	12.00
lack of creation of awareness programme		4	8.00
Insecurity		1	2.00
Unavailability of accommodation		1	2.00
No response		1	2.00

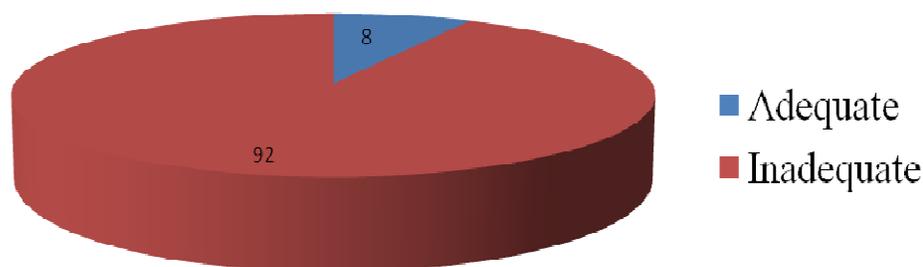


Figure 3: Adequacy of infrastructures in Ezeagu tourist complex as assessed by tourists

Table 9: Ways to overcome challenges of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex as suggested by staff and tourist respondents

Assessor	Strategies to overcome challenges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Staff	Creation of awareness and advertisement	3	30.00
	Availability of hotel accommodation	3	30.00
	Provision of adequate fund	2	20.00
	Government participation and proper management	2	20.00
	Provision of adequate infrastructures and tourism facilities	2	20.00
	Development of tourist interests and potentials	2	20.00
	Provision of adequate security	1	10.00
	Constant communication between management and host community	1	10.00
	Constant tour packaging to the complex	1	10.00
	Tourists	Provision of standard infrastructures and tourism facilities	25
Provision of adequate transport system		21	42.00
Creation of awareness		9	18.00
Government participation		5	10.00

Discussion

Most household respondents participate in ecotourism business activities in the complex (Table 2). This is because the activities created by ecotourism practice are numerous and based on comparative cost and cultural advantage it will be relatively easier for indigenes of the community to participate in at least an activity. Most businesses and cultural activities in the

ecodestination are therefore carried out by indigenes of Obinofia Ndi-Uno, the host community. Ijeomah *et al* (2015) obtained a similar report in Oguta lake ecodestination. Obinofia Ndi-Uno, the ecodestination host community is involved in the management of the complex, thus indigenes mostly participate as tour guides (Table 2). Those selected as tour guides are persons that grew up in the community, quite

knowledgeable about the history of the complex, conversant with the different routes to the complex, and the rules and regulations guiding the complex. The tour guides take charge of the daily activities in the complex; which include ensuring safety of tourists throughout their stay in the complex. They also ensure that the complex is kept clean by appointing indigenes especially women and children who clean the destination on weekly basis.

The households also participate in cultural and recreational activities in the destination (Table 2). The households always organize and host events in the ecodestination. The World tourism day celebration held in September, 2015 in the complex attracted many visitors; who were taken round the complex and community for sightseeing. Similarly, the play ground of Farin Ruwa water fall has served as venue for many events including the World tourism day celebration of 2006 (Ijeomah and Alao, 2007). There are a lot of cultural activities organized by households of Obinofia that have been integrated into tourism in Ezeagu tourism complex as these attract multitudes to the ecodestination (Table 3). These cultural festivals are organized in a way that different age groups in the community appear in their best traditional outfit, dancing and singing in local dialect, in such an interesting and unique manner that always draws the interest of most tourists. These cultural activities include; masquerade festival, new yam festival, age grade dance, Atilogwu dance and Ihu-ogba festival among others (Table 3). The masquerade festival usually takes place from October to November and is performed by different masquerades who gather to

display different style of dances and cultural performances. During the World tourism day celebration of 2015 in the complex, there were five different types of masquerades from the five villages in the host community that performed. The awareness of their performance attracted people from far and near to the complex. Their performance fascinated many tourists and made the event more enjoyable. On the 26th of December every year, the youths of Obinofia community organize their usual masquerade parade which has always been captivating as the indigenes of Ihuezi resident within and outside the state return home with friends to participate in the event (Personal communication, 2016). The new yam festival which is celebrated to mark the beginning of yam consumption on annual basis, and appreciate the goddess of farming for her guidance throughout the farming season usually takes place in July, August/ September. The age grade *ogene* dance is practiced mostly by the youths. The age grade *ogene* dance also generates income as it is a popular group and, often hired to perform in events and functions within and outside Enugu State. The Atilogwu dance is a unique dance which the dancers perform occasionally when the community is hosting an event. The agility of the dancers which manifest in performance of frequent acrobatic displays interests most tourists who will always want to repeat visit whenever the group is scheduled to perform in the destination. The prevailing perception by the people of Ihuezi community is that the cave (Ihu-ogba cave) hosts the famous Ogba deity (which popularized the cave). Based on this, the Ihu-ogba festivals is considered an important

festival in the community and therefore celebrated in the month of December to thank the Ogba deity for his guidance throughout the year and pray for his protection in the next year. Ihu-ogba festival involves masquerade displays and dances - People dress in their best and admirable traditional attires during the festival to celebrate, meet friends and view masquerades.

The recreational activities carried out by households are entertainment, sightseeing, swimming and picnicking. The households invite their friends to visit the complex. When they visit, they engage them in swimming and also take them around to admire the scenery and serenity of the complex. They also give them souvenirs such as yams, fish and palm wine. The good hospitality of household and satisfaction of visitors make tourists to always honour invitations from Ezeagu people to attend occasions. This makes visitors to repeat visits.

Households' participation in tourism could be increased through government support and adequate funding, innovation of strategies for tourism development, introduction of various tourism facilities, provision of adequate infrastructure and tourism facilities and creation of awareness (Table 4). This can be related to the fact that improvement of facilities and services will increase visitation on sustainable manner which increases demand and in the long run promotes sales and other benefits.

Impact of Tourism on the Host Community

The benefits households derive from Ezeagu tourist complex are mainly in form of income generation (Table 5). Income is generated from various

commercial activities such as transportation, supply of drinks, rental business, fishing, video coverage/photography and restaurant business (Figure 2). Cultural groups could be hired to perform in the ecodestination. Similar observation was made by Ijeomah *et al* (2015) in Oguta lake destination. In the case of Kainji Lake National Park, the major sources of income generation include accommodation, catering services, hiring of assets and park entries (Ajibade, *et al.*, 2013). Households generate income through transportation as bike men that convey tourists to the complex. Most of the bike men are from the host community since they are conversant with the different routes to the complex. Households also supply drinks and sell fishes to tourists during their visit. The rental aspect is based on the *ogene* age grade dance group that is being hired for performance in the destination. Similarly the Plateau State Tourism Corporation always hires Asharuwa cultural dance to entertain tourists during major tourism events in Jos (IjeoSmah, 2007). Less revenue is generated from video/photography coverage in the complex since phone camera is readily available to tourists. It only contributes some income to households during hosting of events in the complex. Households do not generate money from hotel/restaurant because the facilities are none existent in the ecodestination. There is only one 'bush bar' at the entrance to the complex; which provides tourists with different types of food, bush meats and drinks. The benefits derived from tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex, more especially as source of income, are mostly generated during the festive

periods (Table 6). This can be attributed to the fact that many people visit the complex during Christmas, valentine, cultural festivals or for other events during the period. Households generate income throughout the year from various commercial activities in the ecodestination but more are generated during the festive periods. Similar case was equally reported in Rwanda, where households were involved in economic activities (Nsabimana, 2010).

Challenges of Tourism in Ezeagu Tourist Complex

The major factors militating against tourism growth in Ezeagu tourist complex includes neglect from the state government, unavailability of hotel accommodation and inadequate infrastructures (Table 7). The government of Enugu State has not made adequate effort towards promoting tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex. Many projects in Ezeagu tourist complex such as proposed construction of bridges and roads were abandoned due to inadequate funding and lack of government interest. Lack of schools and health centers in the host community (as a result of government neglect) is also a hindrance to tourism growth in the complex because money that is to be invested in the development of the complex is used to meet the basic needs of the community. There is no hotel accommodation in the complex, tourists who wish to spend more than a day in the community lodge in Orji River which is about 45 minutes to 1 hour drive to the complex and also attracts more expenses. Ijeomah *et al* (2015) obtained a similar report in Oguta lake destination. Income that would have accrued to households in the destination host community is leaked out to investors

in other areas. Due to lack of accommodation facility, tourists that visit the complex must leave that same day.

The few facilities in the complex are inadequate and poorly maintained (Figure 3; Table 7). The thatched house close to the cave which is supposed to serve as a resting place for visitors is gradually becoming dilapidated. Lack of well-constructed bridges to act as a link to the sites is also a hindrance as some visitors could be afraid that the hanging bamboo bridge might eventually break. Poor road network has always been a challenge in the complex. Flooding of the access road (when heavy rain falls) hinders tourist visitation especially during rainy season, and the fact that it sometimes takes weeks, for the water to drain aggravates visitation challenges. Ijeomah and Okoli (2016a) obtained a similar report in Farin Ruwa waterfall of Nasarawa State. During the dry season, the road is more accessible but the steepness of the slope and the S-shaped nature of the road constitute a challenge to motorists - accidents have been recorded to take place where the road curves. Information obtained through personal interaction revealed that in 2010, 5 deaths were recorded as a result of accidents that happened at that S-shaped point. Tourists are advised not to go to the complex alone without a tour guide. This is because of high level of insecurity in the complex including threats from Fulani herdsmen. This agrees with the report of Ijeomah *et al* (2016). However, the youths of the community have volunteered to embark on a self – help security service by forming a *vigilate* group to protect the complex. The culture of the people to an extent also affects tourism growth as tourists would not

want to be victims of the consequences of cultural violation. Ecotourists believe that these cultural laws/taboo act as protective shields to the attractions, which ensure their continual survival till date. As at 2012, entering of the cave by female tourists on trousers or pants was considered a taboo. Information obtained through oral interview revealed that a female student who went against one of the cultural laws menstruated continuously until sacrifices were offered to the Ogba deity. This particular law was abolished in 2015 so as to encourage visitation. However, there are still laws governing the complex that tourists feel that they need to be abolished for effective growth, development and management of the complex. Abolishment of cultural laws to encourage visitation is against the basic principles of ecotourism; which seeks to protect the culture of destination host communities (Hetzer, 1965; Ceballos - Lascurain, 1992; Ceballos - Lascurain, 1996; Honey, 2008). Inadequate awareness of the complex also affects the visitation – the destination became recognized by Enugu State Tourism Board in 2010. This is different from the findings of Ijeomah and Okoli (2016b) in Oguta Lake, Farin Ruwa Waterfall and Okomu National Park.

Government participation and full support in terms of adequate funding and proper management will aid in overcoming the challenges being faced in Ezeagu tourist complex (Table 8). The adjoining pristine forest surrounding the lake can be used for the establishment of an ecofriendly recreational park, hotels, shopping complex and golf course to create employment for households, thereby making them more empowered.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Ezeagu tourism complex is a community - based ecotourism destination. Most of the cultural activities integrated into tourism in Ezeagu tourism complex are carried out by indigenes of the host community who therefore enjoy benefits from ecotourism even though the ecodestination is not well developed. Unavailability of hotel accommodation, poor road system, inadequate tourism facilities and infrastructures, poor maintenance of infrastructures and lack of awareness have hindered the growth of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex. Tourism boom in the destination and full involvement of the host community in tourism business can go a long way in bringing about poverty alleviation in Obinofia community as well as Ezeagu Local Government Area. Both foreign and local investors can be attracted to the complex, when it is adequately developed with standard infrastructures and facilities.

For promotion and enhancement of tourism in Ezeagu tourist complex, the government should ensure that standard infrastructures are provided. Adequate provision of tourism facilities, security and publicity will encourage visitation of ecotourists to the destination.

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