

Ecotourism Potentials In The Artisanal Fisheries Sector Along Ogbia Creek, Niger Delta

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Abstract: The prospects of ecotourism in artisanal fisheries sector along Ogbia creek, Niger Delta were investigated. This was done to ascertain the potential of this subsector to attract tourism, create employment, enhance creativity and enterprise, engender peace, generate wealth, fast tract development and diversify the economic activities. A survey of the entire creek and its adjoining tributaries was conducted. The catch composition and catch efficiency of the gears used by local fishers were assessed. The ecological diversity and sensitivity of the creek and its flag-ship village settlement Ekperiamama was also given consideration. Findings reveal that the creek can support an array of tourism activities such as diving competition, art competition, rowing tournaments, fishing tournaments, traditional music and local cuisine. It can be concluded that the Niger Delta in Nigeria has great potentials for ecotourism given its natural endowment. Ekperiamama creek has all the markings and potentials to be a world class tourism destination. This can only be achieved if government and the locals partner to obtain set goals.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Artisanal, fisheries, Ogbia creek, Niger Delta

I. INTRODUCTION

The Niger delta is blessed with numerous human and natural resources, having hectares of reservoirs, lakes, ponds and major rivers. These Water bodies are usually exploited by artisanal fishers within the aquatic environment, where different species of fin and shell fish are caught. FAO (2012) defined artisanal fisheries as traditional fisheries involving fishing households (as opposed to commercial companies), using relatively small amount of capital and energy, relatively small fishing vessels (if any), making short fishing trips, close to shore and mainly for local consumption. However, the definition of artisanal fisheries in practice varies from country to country. Artisanal fisheries are sometimes referred to as small-scale fisheries or traditional fisheries that are not mechanised with low level of production (Mathew, 2003). However, they are the prominent fisheries in tropical developing counties (Berkes *et al*, 2001). They can be subsistence or commercial fisheries providing for local

consumption or export characterized with low technology, lack of modern equipments and low fund to expand, resulting in labour intensiveness of the sector, with little or no opportunities to expand. These problems however forced the fishermen to seek for additional income in non fishing activities.

Alternative source of income for fishers focused on non-destructive activities such as ecotourism (Young, 1999). Ecotourism or nature-based tourism has become one of the hottest buzzwords in conservation (Aylward *et al.*, 1996). It is the fastest-growing sectors of the tourism industry, growing annually by 10–15% worldwide and captures more than 7% of the international market. The rise in its popularity can largely be attributed to the rise in the concept of “sustainability” (Kruger, 2005). It offers the potential for mobilizing resources from the private sector to contribute to local and national economic development, whilst providing an economic incentive for conservation land uses and financing conservation activities (Wells, 1997). This is a very attractive

option, particularly in remote rural areas of the developing world where economic alternatives are few, inadequate biodiversity investments, and scarce public funds (Wells, 1997).

Ecotourism and nature-based tourism has been described as strategy for conservation (Gossling, 1999), or having great potential to make a positive contribution (Wells & Brandon, 1992; Brandon, 1996). There are 5 identified benefits for conservation from nature-based tourism (Brandon, 1996). These benefits are identifiable vis-à-vis: 1. Providing a source of financing for parks and conservation. 2. Providing economic justification for park protection. 3. Providing local people with economic justification for conservation. 4. Constituency-building to promote conservation. 5. Creating impetus for private conservation efforts.

The potential economic benefits of tourism at the local level are employment and local tourism spending. At that level, the benefits can be direct (initial tourism spending), indirect (goods or services bought to supply tourists) or induced (money spent by employees) (Lindberg, 1996) and the economy can often benefit by improved infrastructure (Goodwin & Robson, 2004). Local benefits are highest where linkages to the local economy are strongest (Goodwin, 1998). It sees tourism as very relevant to poverty reduction in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (Ashley *et al.*, 2004).

This document will attempt to highlight potential ecotourism activities that could be introduced in the artisanal fisheries sector in Ekperiama, Ogbia creek in order to diversify the economic activities of the artisanal fishers.

II. EKPERIAMA FISHING COMMUNITY

Ekperiama is located along Ogbia creek, in the Niger Delta. It is 14km from Yenagoa, capital of Bayelsa State, 5km from Kolo creek and 2km from Ogbia town. The community share very close ties with Akakumama, Oruweiama and Kukukiri located around the Ogbia creek on the south-eastern part of Bayelsa State (Fig 1). All communities often participate in common fishing trips and other economic activities.

Ogbia creek is one of the tributaries of River Nun with substantial seasonal variations due to heavy rains and wind. The creek is tidal and it is characterized by both estuarine and freshwater macrophytes that includes; *Rhizophora racemosa* (Red mangrove) and *Raphia hookeri*, *Eichhornia crassipes* (water hyacinth), *Nymphae lotus* (water lily) and *Pistia stratiotes* (water lettuce). The dry season is from November to April and the rainy (wet) season peaks in July–September. The dry season lasts for four months (November- February) with occasional rainfall. The creek is also subjected to pollutants from petroleum exploration and exploitation activities in the Niger Delta.



Figure 1: Map of Ekperiama

III. ECOTOURISM IN THE FISHERIES SECTOR

The fisheries sector has been growing very rapidly with 120 million people estimated to be partly or totally dependent on fisheries related activities of which 95% are in developing countries (Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 2005). This rapid growth has led to fears of a world-wide fisheries crisis (McGoodwin, 1990), and tropical fisheries are no exception (McManus, 1997).

Though fisheries ecotourism is still in its emerging phases, it is estimated that up to 700 million people might be engaged in some form of recreational fishing creating several million jobs and contributing to the national economy of countries (Diffey, 2012). Other activities related to fisheries ecotourism have been established depending on the natural assets of the site and its cultural and social heritage (Diffey, 2012). The main aim is to support local communities by making ecosystem conservation and management of natural resources a source of economic benefits, for the present time and in the long term run (Dellink & Ruijs, 2008).

A. ARTISANAL FISHERIES SECTOR IN NIGER DELTA

Artisanal fishing is a major occupation of the inhabitants in the Niger Delta irrespective of age and sex with an all year fishing activity (Abowei *et al.*, 2006; Ngodigha, *et al.*, 2013). Fishing in the area is based on traditional methods that employ mainly canoe and different fishing nets which depend on the season and target fish species (Abowei and Hart, 2008). Canoes are either motorized or un-motorised. The common fishing gear types include shrimp traps, stow net, drift gill nets, set gill nets, cast nets, seine nets, hook and lines (Abowei and Hart, 2008; Akinwumi, *et al.*, 2011; Kingdom and Kwen, 2009; Adeyemo, 2011; Ngodigha *et al.*, 2013). Lift nets may be used by womenfolk who target small shrimp species in the creeks and creeklets. Other fishing methods include hand-picking for different types of molluscs by the womenfolk and

children such as periwinkles, oysters and other shellfish (Abowei and Hart, 2008).

B. POTENTIAL ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES

Artisanal fisheries ecotourism can offer various activities for tourists for the benefit of both the fishers and local communities. Founding appropriate ecotourism development strategies and implementing activities will prove to provide additional sources of income to the families and region of the people (Roness, 2011; Carey *et al.*, 2012). In addition, sustaining such activities will allow fishermen to develop their own ecotourism activities from experience gained (Nader *et al.*, 2013).

The ecotourism activities could be organised to run through a period of three days in December when most people are in holiday mood. Activities should be promoted through the media, ministries, tourist agencies and schools in order to reach a broader audience and support initiative. This will allow a wider audience to experience the daily lives of the fishers through activities such as fishing and rowing tournaments, diving and art competitions, traditional music and local cuisines. This will surely expose the importance of the artisanal fisheries sector in the country and support the local fishermen and their communities in improving their livelihood and sustain their cultural heritage and coastal natural resources (Nader, *et.al*, 2013).

a. FISHING TOURNAMENTS

Fishing tournaments can be organized involving fishers having fishing experience of 10 years and above to catch the largest quantity of a selected fish species using a defined legal fishing gears within a given time. Interactive sessions between fishers, the academia and officials from both the state and federal department of fisheries could be organised to gather information on the species trophic ecology, life cycles and natural habitats. Such an event will allow the public share their experiences and raise awareness about the importance of responsible fishing for sustainability of the fishing industry.

b. ROWING TOURNAMENTS

Rowing competition using fishing boats can be held by classifying different boat sizes with a fixed number of rowers per boat for a predetermined distance. Rowing distance of the smaller boats should be shorter with few rowers per boat, as compared with the bigger boat with more rowers and longer distance. The tournament should look like a festival with the boats and rowers looking colourful.

c. DIVING COMPETITION

The clam (*Galatea paradoxa* and *Eqeria radiate*) is an important fishery in the area. Fishers harvest their catch by diving into creek. Diving competition could be organised amongst fishers at different categories based on age range to see the highest harvester within a given time frame.

d. ART COMPETITION

Art competition involving youths of different age range could be organised using shells of shellfishes. This will reduce youth restiveness.

e. TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND LOCAL CUISINE

Traditional music and local cuisines prepared with different aquatic organisms should be encouraged during the festival period. This will create excitement in the ecotourism atmosphere and attract more visitors. It will also expose the culture of fishing communities to the world, thereby transferring ownership of activities to the fishers and their families which could strengthen sustainability of the programme.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Niger Delta in Nigeria has great potentials for ecotourism given its natural endowment. Ekperiana creek has all the markings and potentials to be a world class tourism destination. This can only be achieved if the suggestions contained herein are implemented and executed.

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