

CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN NIGERIA: PERCEIVED KNOWLEDGE, PROBLEMS, AND POLICY DIRECTION

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Abstract

The study explored sustainable tourism for conserving cultural heritage in Nigeria, thereby preserving various cultural geographies, historical sites, and rich traditions and customs. We deliberated on sustainable tourism as a realistic pathway to protecting immaterial cultural assets while nurturing socio-economic progress. The study gathered and utilized primary data with a well-structured questionnaire survey of 120 visitors of the tourist center Osun-Oshogbo Sacred Nigeria, which belongs to local communities. The study found that about 90% of stakeholders agreed that sustainable tourism can effectively preserve cultural heritage sites. Moreover, 75% of the respondents ranked Nigeria's cultural heritage conservation efforts as very essential, although showing very low familiarity (36%) and visitation to cultural heritage sites. However, the environmental problems and challenges threatening sustainable tourism in Nigeria were acknowledged as urban encroachment and pollution (26.67%), scarcity of funding and or coordination amongst the diverse government and non-government agencies (37.5%), and Insecurity (36.7%), among others. Furthermore, the survey disclosed that more than 60% of participants identified weak policy enforcement, underfunding, and over-commercialization as major challenges. The research confirmed that both community engagement and policy adjustments are necessary for enhanced and sustainable conservation of Osun-Oshogbo, and Nigeria in general.

Key words: Community-Based Tourism, Cultural Heritage Conservation, Heritage Preservation, Policy and Governance, Stakeholder Participation, Sustainable Tourism

Introduction

Nigeria is known for its cultural vibrancy, which embraces 250 ethnic groups through their various traditions and languages, nature, and festive customs and historical sites (Choi, 2010). Nigeria's remarkable cultural diversity creates a living cultural tapestry that emerges through its lively celebrations and traditional customs. The cultural wealth of Nigeria permeates daily life through musical energy, historical depth, and friendly interactions among its people (Bandelj, 2011).

The entire nation tells its story through diverse traditions, which create a welcoming atmosphere that makes Nigeria a place where cultural heritage remains precious. However, it continues to bring people together (Amalu et al., 2020). The cultural heritage of Nigeria includes the sacred beauty of Sukur Cultural Landscape and Osun-Osogbo Grove alongside the dynamic energy of Durbar and the festive spirit of the New Yam Festival, which represent the core values of Nigerian national identity (Loulanski, 2011). These cultural sites serve as links between our individual and collective heritage (Nzeda Tagowa, 2010).

Sustainable tourism has become a purposeful approach to addressing problems in cultural heritage preservation over the last few years. This method protects cultural sites, keeps them alive for future generations, and makes them accessible to everyone. Sustainable tourism allows communities to maintain their historical sites by creating welcoming spaces for visitors, thereby fostering economic growth and protecting indigenous sites. People will sustain their cultural heritage by keeping their historical narratives alive, which shape their identity. Sustainable tourism exists to safeguard both natural and cultural resources while creating economic and social benefits (Gill-Robinson, 2007, Abdullahi et al., 2023, Olagunju, 2024).

This research aims to solve current sustainability issues by studying the potential of sustainable tourism to protect Nigerian cultural heritage. The research aims to identify obstacles to implementing sustainable tourism, evaluate its advantages for heritage protection, and develop plans to safeguard Nigerian cultural assets for future generations.

Material and methods

The research design comprises various methods that connect quantitative and qualitative techniques to achieve not only desired but also high-quality results. The qualitative research method uses observational breakdowns and in-depth discussions to collect detailed stakeholder insights into sustainable tourism and heritage conservation strategies. The quantitative component helps this study by using structured surveys to collect numerical data, which estimates current perspectives, recognizes meaningful problems, and evaluates possible opportunities for sustainable tourism growth. A representative sample of 120 participants was selected to achieve diverse perspectives about cultural heritage conservation through sustainable tourism. The study used semi-structured questionnaires with both closed- and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data on sustainable tourism practices and heritage conservation initiatives from visitors, locals, and tourism operators.

The research employed a mixed-methods analysis, integrating quantitative methods with qualitative techniques. The questionnaire data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis for frequency/percentage calculations and visualization. Researchers used a thematic analysis to identify patterns in questionnaire and observational data, which they grouped into main themes: policy implementation barriers, environmental impacts, and community engagement. The research compared Nigerian findings with global best practices to identify specific areas for improvement.

Results and Discussion

The study analyzed three demographic variables: age, gender, and education level. Most respondents were between 18 and 44 years old, which were 92% of the sample. The gender distribution was 57.5% male and 42.5% female.

The findings revealed that 46.67% of respondents agreed that communities actively engaged in tourism management experienced increased preservation of cultural sites. Many community members confirmed their involvement in traditional festivals and in guiding tourists at cultural heritage locations/sites.

Our results show that 54.17% of all stakeholders agreed that sustainable tourism helped protect heritage sites, indicating strong consensus on its role in conservation. Tourists (26.67%) specifically sought authentic cultural experiences, indicating that their motivations closely aligned with cultural values. Government officials (19.17%) identified weak policy enforcement as the main institutional challenge that prevented effective preservation.

A satisfactory percentage of participants (52%) reported familiarity with cultural heritage sites, with average interpretation among local residents. Comprehending the public's understanding of heritage sites is important because awareness influences both visitation rates and conservation support. Approximately 37% actually stood in the affirmative with familiarity, indicating an emphatic attribute base among the studied inhabitants' part. Exclusively, 12% of respondents reported being unfamiliar with cultural heritage sites, indicating that a small number of residents lacked knowledge of these paramount cultural assets.

The results show that most respondents (about 56%) had previously visited at least one cultural heritage site in Nigeria. This finding implied a notably high level of public engagement with cultural heritage locations. However, about 44% of respondents indicated that they had not visited any heritage sites; accordingly, a crack in experiential frontage among a marked portion of the population.

This level of acquaintance indicates that while many Nigerians identify with and admire their cultural heritage, there is a need for more focused education and promotion programs to deepen public engagement and understanding, particularly to move individuals from moderate to advanced levels of familiarity.

Our results indicate that a large majority of respondents (75%) ranked Nigeria's cultural heritage conservation efforts as essential. In comparison, 22.5% judged them vital, and only a small bit (2.5%) viewed them as not essential. These outcomes highlight strong shared support for the demand for practical heritage conservation. The increased ratio of respondents who felt conservation efforts as crucial displays across-the-board backing for protecting cultural reserves. Regarding the respondents' perceptions of the importance and effectiveness of efforts being made to conserve Nigeria's cultural heritage, It sought to understand whether the public views conservation initiatives as a priority and how strongly they believe these efforts contribute to preserving national identity and cultural pride.

The survey findings showed that poor government policies and lack of funding were the most cited threats, identified by 50.8% of respondents. Other significant dangers included vandalism and neglect (34.2%), pollution (23.3%), deforestation (22.5%), and urbanization (18.3%). Elements such as climate modification and natural risks, over-tourism, and unbridled access were also cited, though to a lesser extent.

Assessing perceptions/views of effectiveness is important for identifying gaps between conservation policies and actual outcomes on the ground. The survey results indicated that most respondents (50.0%) were unsure if the current conservation efforts were practical. Only 24.2% of participants felt the efforts were not practical, while 25.8% were confident in their effectiveness.

These findings suggest a general dissatisfaction with Nigeria's current situation of cultural heritage conservation. A high ratio of negative responses indicated concerns about weak policy enforcement, including inadequate funding, inferior infrastructure, and a shortage of community involvement in decision-making. The study results further indicate that an overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) agreed that tourism can effectively and efficiently improve the preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage. Understanding public opinion on this connection is vital, as sustainable tourism is often seen as a fundamental strategy for heritage conservation.

The survey responses revealed that the most important strategy was community involvement in tourism management (42.5%). Other key strategies included increasing awareness and education on cultural heritage conservation (40.0%), encouraging eco-friendly and responsible tourism practices (37.5%), and establishing public-private partnerships for funding heritage sites (32.5%). Smaller proportions also support stricter government regulations (20.8%) and limiting the number of tourists at sensitive sites (Table 1).

Tab. 1: Views on sustainable tourism strategies for cultural heritage conservation

ANSWER	RESPONSES	RATIO
Community involvement in tourism management	51	42.5%
Gate fee for visitors	20	16.7%
Stricter government policies and regulations	25	20.8%
Public-private partnerships for funding heritage	39	32.5%
Limited number of tourists on sensitive heritages	15	12.5%
Eco-friendly and responsible tourism practices	45	37.5%
Awareness and education	48	40.0%

These results indicate that respondents strongly favor strategies/approaches that empower or support local communities/societies, promote responsible tourism behavior, and ensure shared responsibility between public and private sectors. The findings reveal a mixed perception: while half of the respondents recognized some level of community participation, a considerable proportion doubted its existence or was unaware of it. This implies that although measures to entertain communities exist, they may not be overall or visible enough. Supporting community participation through greater decision-making power, training, and equitable benefit-sharing is essential to foster a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility toward heritage conservation.

The results indicated that the leading factor was training and education on heritage conservation (55%), followed closely by government and NGO support for community-led conservation projects (about 49%). Other important motivators included financial incentives for local communities (39%) and increased employment opportunities in heritage tourism (44%). Only about 16% implied greater participation in policymaking processes.

The research findings demonstrated that building community capacity through education and offering tangible socioeconomic benefits is seen as paramount for encouraging/supporting active involvement. Additionally, institutional support from both the government and non-governmental organizations is critical to empowering local communities. The results highlight that meaningful participation must go beyond symbolic gestures; communities need the fundamental skills, resources, and opportunities to fully engage in heritage conservation efforts.

Our results show participants' opinions on the problems affecting the economic impact of using tourism to conserve heritage. Undersupply of funds for conservation activities" was the most frequently noted challenge, with 63 respondents (52.5%) citing it as a notable problem. This suggests that a lack of allocation makes it more demanding to support and facilitate cultural heritage assets, which in turn diminishes their capability to benefit from tourism. Sixty-one respondents (50.8%) selected poor infrastructure and accessibility, including roads, airfields, and even hotels, as the second-highest challenge. This indicates that inadequate transportation system, poor site amenities, and limited accessibility impact tourists' ability to visit and enjoy places of interest, thereby reducing their potential financial benefits. Fifty respondents (41.7%) highlighted "low tourist awareness and curiosity," indicating a lack of marketing, education, or advertising initiatives that highlight the pleasures and importance of cultural heritage sites. Meaningful problems were also recognized as "poor government

aid" (37.5%) and security crises (36.7%). These insinuate that inadequate legislative frameworks, a dearth of political will, and safety concerns deter both conservation investments and tourism. The study results show that increasing government funding for site maintenance (59.2%) is the top priority, reflecting urgent infrastructure and preservation needs (Table 2). Improved security/accessibility (55%) and better tourism marketing (50%) were also significant, aligning with findings on Nigeria's challenges with neglect and low tourist engagement. Public-private partnerships (29.2%) and gate fees (16.7%) scored lower, suggesting stakeholders favor direct government intervention over revenue-dependent models. These results reinforce the Sustainable Tourism Development Theory, balancing economic, social, and environmental needs, and mirror respondents' demands.

Tab. 2: Initiatives that can improve the economic benefits of cultural heritage conservation

ANSWER	RESPONSES	RATIO
Increased government funding	71	59.2%
Better marketing and tourism promotion	60	50.0%
Improved security and accessibility	66	55.0%
Community involvement in tourism management	47	39.2%
Public-private partnerships for site development	35	29.2%
Introduction of gate fees	20	16.7%

Conclusion

Our study aims to solve current sustainability issues by studying the potential of sustainable tourism to protect Nigerian cultural heritage. This research reveals how sustainable tourism can help develop Nigeria's cultural heritage by promoting its historic sites, cultural events, and creative traditions. The analysis showed that sustainable tourism establishments, which combine environmental conservation with socio-cultural aspects and economic inclusivity, successfully develop both tangible heritage items, such as old monuments and museums, and intangible heritage elements, such as oral traditions and craftsmanship.

The case of the Osun-Oshogbo Sacred Grove and the Sukur Cultural Landscape showcases how community-run ecotourism projects can save heritage sites while generating economic benefits for local people. Eco-Friendly enterprises can preserve cultural sites and create jobs and income opportunities for the locals and adjacent communities through activities such as ecotourism, handicraft sales, and visionary initiatives.

The study results emphasize that integrated policy-driven actions are a key tool to sustainable tourism and effective conservation of its heritage. Moreover, the study identified challenges, including weak enforcement and budget insufficiency that hinder the effectiveness of conservation efforts. This integration of economic and cultural development supports a more comprehensive approach to heritage conservation, where the protection of cultural assets goes hand in hand with improving the livelihoods of local communities.

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Souhrn

Cílem naší studie je řešit současné problémy v oblasti udržitelnosti prostřednictvím zkoumání potenciálu udržitelného cestovního ruchu při ochraně nigerijského kulturního dědictví. Tento výzkum

ukazuje, jak může udržitelný cestovní ruch přispět k rozvoji nigerijského kulturního dědictví prostřednictvím propagace historických památek, kulturních akcí a tvůrčích tradic. Analýza prokázala, že subjekty zabývající se udržitelným cestovním ruchem, které spojují ochranu životního prostředí se sociokulturními aspekty a ekonomickou inkluzivitou, úspěšně rozvíjejí jak hmotné památky, jako jsou staré památníky a muzea, tak prvky nehmotného dědictví, jako jsou ústní tradice a řemeslná výroba. Příklad posvátného háje Osun-Oshogbo a kulturní krajiny Sukur ukazuje, jak mohou ekoturistické projekty řízené komunitou zachránit památky a zároveň přinést ekonomické výhody místním obyvatelům. Ekologicky šetrné podniky mohou chránit kulturní památky a vytvářet pracovní místa a příjmové příležitosti pro místní obyvatele a sousední komunity prostřednictvím aktivit, jako je ekoturistika, prodej řemeslných výrobků a vizionářské iniciativy. Výsledky studie zdůrazňují, že integrované opatření založené na politice jsou klíčovým nástrojem pro udržitelný cestovní ruch a účinnou ochranu jeho dědictví. Studie navíc identifikovala výzvy, včetně slabého vymáhání a nedostatečného rozpočtu, které brání účinnosti snah o ochranu. Tato integrace ekonomického a kulturního rozvoje podporuje komplexnější přístup k ochraně dědictví, kde ochrana kulturních statků jde ruku v ruce se zlepšováním životních podmínek místních komunit.

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