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Visitors' Perception of Destination Image and Satisfaction in Selected Ecotourism Destinations in Southwest, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

The attributes of the different destinations form the basis for different image, expectations and satisfaction. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to determine visitors' perception of destination image and satisfaction with the destination. Data for the study were collected through questionnaires administration on visitors to selected ecotourism destinations. Data obtained were presented descriptively and analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA). The study revealed significant differences in visitors' perception of destinations' image. Regarding visitors' satisfaction of the destinations, the study has found that there is no significant difference in visitors' perception of destination image and their satisfaction with the destinations. The findings in this study could enhance visitors' pre-visit decision; assist in effective design and management of selected ecotourism attractions, as well as improving marketing strategies to fulfill the needs of ecotourists and other tourism industry stakeholders.

Key Words: Determine, perception, destination, image, satisfaction, attributes, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

People all over the world are always drawn to natural attractions such as magnificent waterfalls, unique wildlife, mountainous landscapes and a host of others. Nature-based tourism or ecological tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors within the global tourism industry (Buckley, 2004). The suggestion that eco-friendly tourism was growing three times faster globally than the tourism industry as a whole (UNWTO) 2004, cited in The International Ecotourism Society TIES (2006) came into limelight when people began to seek alternative options for mass tourism in the early 1980s. The concept of ecotourism has emerged as an effective platform that offers alternative tourism wherein people

tour natural regions with an objective to execute eco-friendly activities, to learn and research about their environment. Ecotourism which allows the tourist to go to relatively undisturbed natural areas for the purpose of enjoying the phenomena of nature combines wildlife and adventure tourism experiences accounts for a larger share of some countries' gross domestic product (UNWTO, 1991). According to the UNWTO (2018) World Tourism Barometer, it is estimated that destinations worldwide received 1,083 million international tourist arrivals between January and September 2018, and by 2030, the number of international tourist arrivals worldwide is forecast to reach 1.8 billion. In the present day, ecotourism has gained significant prominence

and is turning out to be a fast-developing segment in the existing global tourism industry including Nigeria with abundance natural resources and cultural heritage. As a matter of fact, Nigeria is actively including ecotourism as an integral aspect of her strategies for conservation and economic growth.

Anaiah *et al.* (2009) revealed that most tourists visited tourists' sites or destination due to environmental factors such as, climatic, weather condition and scenery of the environment, while some other tourists made their trip due to the socio-cultural attributes and events of the destination areas. Precisely, ecotourists are individuals who spend a predetermined number of days engaged in environmentally base activities and have unique motives for visiting natural areas (Palacio & McCool, 1997). However, the complex issues that influence the choice, the perception of tourists about a destination's and satisfaction with the destination are matters of concern. The institutions and agencies responsible for the development and promotion of tourism destinations need to determine the factors influencing tourists' destination choices. It is recognized that destination is not only a tourism product, offering an integrated experience to customers, but it is a perceptual concept, which is interpreted subjectively by the consumers and is dependent on a wide range of factors (Buhalis, 2000). Curry *et al.* (2006) examined the term perception from a psychological perspective and noted the difference not only between image and perception but also between seeing and perception. The authors define the perception process as that "by which sensations are selected, organized and interpreted" and one which "is strongly influenced by factors such as individual's experience, education and cultural values.

Image is the totality of impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations, and feelings accumulated towards a place over time by an individual or group of people" (Kim & Richardson, 2003). "Destination image is an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations, and intentions toward a destination" (Tasci *et al.*, 2007). The formation of tourist destination image has been researched over the past four decades and is considered to be one of the most important areas or research in destination marketing (Pike,

2002). Its principal constructs consist of the destinations cognitive and affective images along with its overall image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) which has more recently been included and linked to the cognitive influences of holiday choice and behavior (Lin *et al.*, 2007). As the numbers of tourists who visit eco-tourism settings or protected areas increased sharply in recent years, it is necessary to understand more about eco-tourist perception of destination image and visitor satisfaction. Once a destination has been established as such, it is very important to ensure that visitors have a positive assessment of their experience. Visitor Satisfaction was more a judgment or evaluation than an attitude and is a complex construct with numerous associated measurement issues (Yüksel & Rimmington, 1998). Past research has operationalized satisfaction at both the overall satisfaction and attribute satisfaction levels. Attribute satisfaction has been defined as consumer subjective satisfaction judgment resulting from observation of attribute performance (Oliver, 1997). Taking into account the multidimensional nature of the concept of satisfaction, it is desirable to use a multi-attribute approach where overall satisfaction is a function of attribute level evaluations (Voon & Lee, 2009). Following these areas of research, this paper seeks to analyze the components and attributes of visitor's perception of destination image and satisfaction in selected ecotourism destinations in the study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted in selected ecotourism destinations in Southwest Nigeria. The study sites were Okomu National Park, Edo State, Lekki Conservation Centre, Lagos State, Idanre Hills, Ondo State, Ikogosi Warm Spring, Ekiti State and Osun Osogbo Sacred grove, Osun State, Nigeria. The area in the southwest lies between longitude 2°31'1" and 6°00'1" East and Latitude 6°21'1" and 8°37'1" N (Agboola, 1979) with a total land area of 77,818 km² and a projected population of 28,767,752 in 2002 (NBS, 2011). The southwest part of the study area is bounded in the East by Edo and Delta states, in the North by Kwara and Kogi states, in the West by the Republic of Benin and in the south by the Gulf of Guinea. Edo state as part of the South South is an inland state in central southern Nigeria. It is bounded in the

north and east by Kogi State, in the south by Delta State and in the west by Ondo State. Generally, climate and vegetation of the study areas is tropical in nature and it is characterized by wet and dry seasons. The temperature ranged between 21 and 34°C while the annual rainfall ranged between 150 and 3000 mm. The wet

season is associated with the Southwest monsoon wind from the Atlantic Ocean while the dry season is associated with the northeast trade wind from the Sahara desert. The vegetation in Southwest Nigeria is made up of fresh water swamp and mangrove forest at the belt.

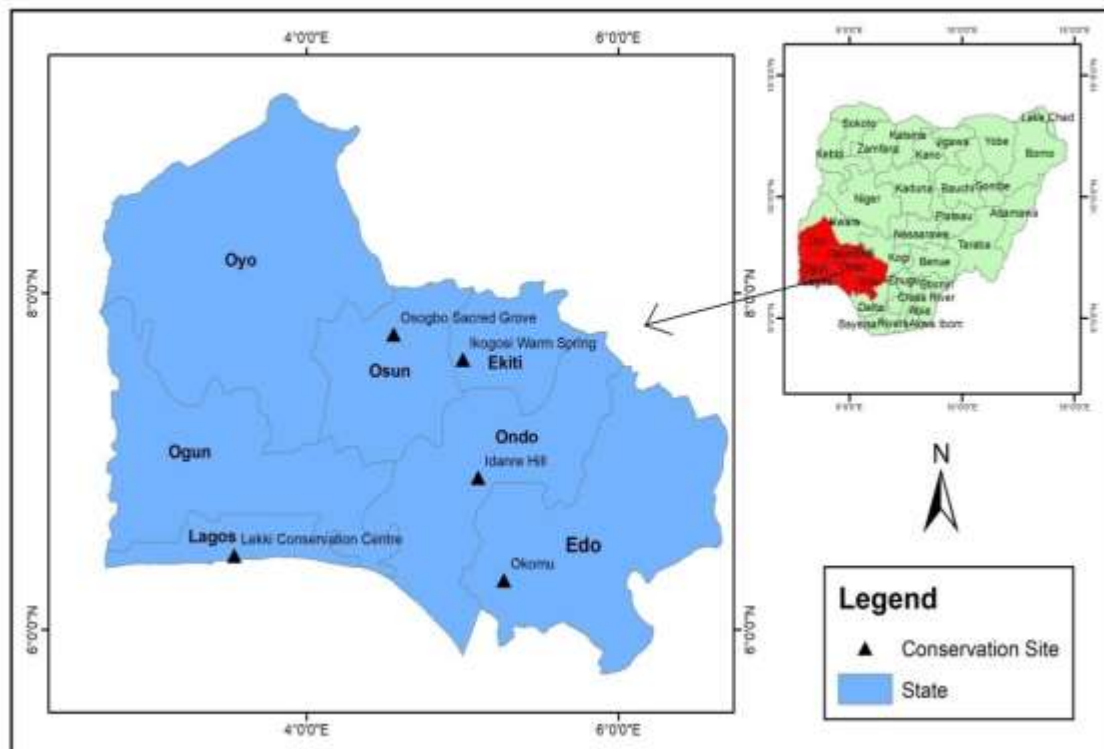


Figure: 1: Map showing some of the study sites in South-west and part of South-south Nigeria.

Population and Sampling

The population for the study was visitors drawn from selected ecotourism destinations. Four hundred and twelve (412) visitors were randomly selected for the study, using Krejcie Morgan (1970) method for determination of sample size.

Data Collection and Analysis

The instruments for data collection was structured questionnaire, consisting of personal details of visitors such as gender, age, marital status, nationality, religion, monthly income and membership of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGO). Data collection also includes face to face interview with the visitors,

staff, local residents and personal observations made in the research areas. These was done in order to provide additional information needed to support the claims of the respondents in the study. Visitors' perception of destination image were rated on a 6- point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 =disagree; 3= undecided; 4= agree; 5= strongly agree) while visitors' perception of satisfaction was rated in Likert scale as (1= not at all satisfied; 2=merely satisfied; 3= neutral; 4= satisfied and 5= very satisfied).

Other variables included in the study were gender, age, marital status, State of origin, nationality, 1

education, religion, occupation, and monthly income. Data collected were analyzed and presented using descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive techniques include the use of tables, graphs, means, standard deviation, and percentages. The inferential statistics employed was ANOVA.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Visitors to the Selected Destinations

The result in Table 1 (socio-economic characteristics) shows that out of 412 sampled visitors, 234 were males representing 56.8% and 178 were females representing 43.2%. This result indicated that more male visitors visited selected destinations area than female. Table 2 shows that 245 visitors were within the age of 25 to 50 years representing (59.5%). This was followed by 122 visitors within the age group of 15-24 years representing (29.6%). In addition, 38 visitors who are in the age bracket of 51-54 represent (9.2%). Those who are above 64 years were 3 representing (0.7%) while the least age group of 0 to 14 years were 4 representing (1.0 %). The result reveals that more than half of the visitors totaling 221 (53.6%) were married, followed by 167 visitors who were single (40.5 %). The least category of visitors (8) (1.9%) were divorced/separated. On religion, 306 visitors (74.3%) practiced Christianity, 101 (24.5%) practiced Islamic religion while only 5 of the respondents (1.2 %) practiced traditional religion.

Result further indicates that 29.3% of respondents were public sector employees. This is followed by 26.4% that were self-employed, 20.8% of the respondents were students, 13% that were working in the private sector. Those retired were 5.9%. Those categorized as 'others' were 4.12% while 0.48% were those unemployed. On monthly Income, 119 visitors (28.9%) of respondents were in the highest income category of more than ₦80,000/month while the least was

₦61,000 and ₦80,000 (8.5%). The findings indicate that 333 visitors representing (80.8%) were not members of NGOs on conservation or environment while 79 (19.2%) were members.

Visitors' Perception of Destination Image

Results on visitors' perception of destination image are presented in Table 2. The mean of visitors' perception of destination image ranges from 3.81 to 4.53. The highest mean (4.53) was for "the quality of the environment in terms of safety, security, cleanliness, hospitality, tranquility and pleasant weather is satisfying" while the lowest mean was for perceived attitude of the destinations' host community does not affect its image with a mean of 3.81.

Visitors' Satisfaction with Ecotourism Destination

Relating to visitors' satisfaction of the destination, results shows that visitors were satisfied by "feeling welcome and free to explore the destination without restriction" with the highest mean of 4.45 and also in terms of activities of tour guides in providing relevant explanation on the attraction with a mean of 4.43 while the lowest mean was for "information and availability of brochures in English, French and local languages (Table 3).

Differences in Visitors' Perception of Destinations' Image and their Satisfaction

Table 4 reveals that there is a statistically significant difference in visitors' perception of destination image ($p < 0.01$). On visitors' satisfaction, findings show that there is no statistically significant difference in visitors' satisfaction of the destinations ($p > 0.05$).

Table 1: Visitors' socio-economic characteristics (n=412)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	234	56.8
Female	178	43.2
Age		
0-14	4	1.0
15-24	122	29.6
25-50	245	59.5
51-64	38	9.2
65 and above	3	0.7
Marital Status		
Single	167	40.6
Married	221	53.6
Divorced/Separated	8	1.9
Widow/Widower	16	3.9
Religion		
Christianity	306	74.3
Islam	101	24.5
Traditionalist	5	1.2
Occupation		
Public sector	120	29.3
Self employed	109	26.4%
Students	86	20.8%
Private sector	54	13.0
Retired	24	5.9
Unemployed	2	0.5
Others	17	4.1%
Monthly Income		
1000-20000	86	20.9
21000-40000	79	19.2
41000-60000	50	12.1
61000-80000	35	8.5
>80000	119	28.9
No income	43	10.4
Membership of NGO on conservation		
Yes	79	19.2
No	333	80.8

Table 2: Visitors' perception of destinations image

Perceptual Statement	Mean	SD
The quality of the environment in terms of safety, security, cleanliness, hospitality, tranquility and pleasant weather is satisfying.	4.53	0.69
There is adequate provision of amenities in terms of accommodation, electricity, water communication and recreation at the destination	4.04	0.92
Infrastructure (i.e. restaurants, cuisine, shop facilities and accommodations) are crucial aspects of destination image.	4.23	0.88
Accessibility and the entire transportation system such as routes, traffic flow, trails, boat parking information and parking facilities is adequate.	4.18	0.87
Climate/weather contribute significantly to destination image	3.90	0.87
Outdoor activities at the destination need to be improved upon.	4.09	0.89
Destination image influences tourist's behavior.	4.04	0.88
Perceived attitude of the destination's hosts community does not affect its image.	3.81	1.11
Destination image influences destination selection process.	4.03	0.90
Information about ecodestination is important in travel decision making	4.13	0.88
Promotional activities using articles and reports significantly affect destination's image.	4.09	0.94
Price and value (i.e. food, accommodation), good value for money, attractions and activities and good bargain shopping are considerable aspects of destination image	4.19	0.92
Tour guide and information is adequate.	4.11	0.85
Information about the history, culture, heritage, artifacts and relics are essential aspect of destination image formation.	4.37	0.70

Table 3: Visitors' satisfaction with ecotourism destination

Satisfaction Statements	Mean	SD
Satisfaction statement on communication		
Information and availability of brochures in English, French and local languages.	3.99	0.98
Sufficient information to enjoy the attraction.	4.35	0.71
Detailed information about forbidden and limited behaviors at the attractions.	4.36	0.78
Activities of tour guides in providing relevant explanation on the attraction.	4.43	0.69
Satisfaction statement on Responsiveness		
Feeling welcome and free to explore the destination without restriction	4.45	0.71
Convenient open hours and waiting time for service at the attraction.	4.30	0.74
Courtesy, efficiency and attitude of staff at helping and promptly attending to visitors' requests and complaint	4.41	0.73
Satisfaction statement on assurance		
Accessibility of the attraction.	4.40	0.71
Visitor safety and Security at the attraction.	4.40	0.71
Sufficient and comfortable place to sit and relax.	4.36	0.77
Parking facility available.	4.36	0.74
Satisfaction statement on empathy		
Personal attention provided to visitors when needed.	4.40	0.74
Facilities and equipment offered at convenient location.	4.26	0.82
Good viewing and comfortable facilities available.	4.37	0.74
Consideration needs for elderly and disable visitors.	4.15	0.85
Satisfaction statement on natural resources		
Presence of fauna and flora at the attraction.	4.34	0.73
Tranquility of the attraction as a rest area.	4.33	0.72
Uniqueness and authenticity of the attraction.	4.35	0.72
Unspoiled nature resources and availability of variety of species.	4.12	0.87

Table 4: Difference in visitors' perception of destination image and their satisfaction with the destinations

Variable	F-value	P-value	Decision
Perception	4.189	0.002	S
Satisfaction	2.031	0.089	NS

DISCUSSION

Major findings in study indicate a significant difference in visitors' perception of destinations' image. Visitors perceived the image of selected ecotourism destinations differently in terms of the quality of the environment as regards safety, security, cleanliness, hospitality, tranquility and pleasant weather. The observed differences could be due to selected destinations' peculiarities in the exhibition of natural and cultural values, historical significance, natural or built beauty offering leisure and amusement.

Different types of tourism destinations (ethnic, cultural, historical, environmental and recreational tourism destinations) serve the goal to meet tourists' needs and purposes according to geographical location, environment and nature or man-made structures in urban and rural destinations. Safety and security are strong elements of concern to visitors and also are cleanliness of the environment, hospitality, tranquility and pleasant weather. This simply affirms that image is important for the decision to visit a place. Tourists' perception of a destination's image as a preferred choice for travel is crucial. The finding is consistent with similar study conducted by Rajesh (2013) who reported that destination image construct has been influenced by factors such as infrastructure and facilities, attraction, safety and security, cleanliness, friendly host community, rejuvenation and service, price and affordability. This is an indication that the various marketing information disseminated by staff of the destinations to visitors is effective to influence the formation of cognitive images. Destination images according to Naidoo, Ramseook and Ladsawut (2010) affect tourists travel decisions and behaviour towards that destination as well as the level of satisfaction, recollection and the tourism experience. In contrast to this finding, it

has to be understood that the projected image and the received image are not always the same. The discrepancy might be due to alteration and modification of the message either by the source of communication or by the receiver.

On visitors' satisfaction of the destinations, the study has found that there is no significant difference in visitors' perception of destination image and their satisfaction. This suggest that satisfaction statement relating to communication, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and natural resources dimensions have significant effect on overall satisfaction of visitors. The finding is consistent with Naidoo *et al.* (2010) in their study on assessment of visitor satisfaction with nature based attraction in Mauritius. On responsiveness, visitors were satisfied by feeling welcome and free to explore the destination without restriction. Staffs at the destinations are courteous, efficient and responsive. Satisfaction statement on communication also revealed that visitors had detailed information to enjoy the attraction as well as information about forbidden and limited behaviour at the destination. It was also found that the destinations are accessible, safe and comfortable while personal attention is provided. Tasci and Boylu (2010) indicated that safety and security of a destination are seen to have a big impact on the level of satisfaction with a tourist trip. In contrast to this finding however, Tse and Wilton (1988) suggests that consumers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product can be assessed only by examining their evaluation of the actual performance. The implication of the result is that the level of satisfaction attained by an individual may influence their future intentions, in terms of revisiting a destination and/or recommending it to other people. Again, destination managers need to know how their consumer groups define satisfaction and then interpret satisfaction scales to accurately target,

report, and respond to satisfaction levels. Results suggest that different ecodestinations may need to use different satisfaction scales, or tailor scales to different types of consumers. Rather than looking at all aspects of choice/consumption experience, managers can concentrate on those that are of direct interest or are directly controllable. As a result, managers are able to obtain "true" consumer responses that are relevant to managerial decision making. Having a clear understanding of the causes and nature of visitor satisfaction and dissatisfaction can assist in the promotion and development of tourism destinations and enterprises.

CONCLUSION

Major findings in study indicate a significant difference in visitors' perception of destinations' image. It is found that visitors perceived the image of the destination differently in terms of the quality of the environment in the areas of safety, security, cleanliness, hospitality, tranquility and pleasant weather. Observed differences could be as a result of an individual's mental representation of knowledge, feelings and overall perception of a particular destination's image arising from effectiveness of the marketing

information gathered by visitors to influence the formation of cognitive images and the uniqueness of the attraction. Also, selected eco destinations have their peculiarities in the exhibition of natural and cultural values, historical significance, natural or built beauty offering leisure and amusement.

Different types of tourism destinations (ethnic, cultural, historical, environmental and recreational tourism destinations) serve the goal to meet tourists' needs and purposes according to geographical location, environment and nature or man-made structures in urban and rural destinations. On visitors' satisfaction with the destinations, the study showed that there is no significant difference in visitors' perception of destination image and their satisfaction with the destination. This suggest that satisfaction statement relating to communication, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and natural resources dimensions have significant effect on overall satisfaction of visitors. The findings in this study could assist in effective design of ecotourism attractions, as well as improving marketing strategies to fulfill the needs of ecotourist and other tourism industry stakeholders.

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