

Community-Based Strategies for Leveraging Local Assets to Promote Sustainable Tourism Development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State

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ARTICLE INFO

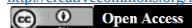
Keywords:
community-based tourism,
local assets,
sustainable tourism,
cultural heritage,
eco-tourism.

Vol.01, No.04, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22672277>

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ABSTRACT

This study examined community-based strategies for leveraging local assets to promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State. Three objectives, three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. The descriptive survey design was adopted. The population comprised 3,640 members and leaders of registered community-based organisations, from which 333 respondents were sampled. A structured questionnaire titled Community-Based Strategies for Leveraging Local Assets to Promote Sustainable Tourism Development Questionnaire (CBSLLAPSTDQ) was used for data collection. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while z-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives promoted sustainable tourism development to a very high extent among leaders and high extent among members; eco-tourism initiatives promoted sustainable tourism development to a high extent; and capacity building through tourism education promoted sustainable tourism development to a very high extent among leaders and high extent among members. The three null hypotheses were accepted, indicating no significant differences in the ratings of leaders and members. It was recommended that community heritage programmes, eco-tourism initiatives and tourism education programmes should be strengthened.

Introduction

Tourism has increasingly become an important avenue through which communities can diversify their economies, strengthen cultural identity and generate opportunities from resources that are locally available. Sustainable tourism goes beyond attracting visitors; it requires tourism activities to be economically beneficial, socially inclusive, culturally respectful and environmentally responsible. For communities whose livelihoods and identities are closely connected to natural and cultural resources, the sustainability of tourism depends substantially on the extent to which local people participate in identifying, managing and benefiting from those resources. This relationship has already been established within Rivers State, where the participation of young people was found to bear directly on whether community development projects in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni and Ahoada East survived beyond their launch, which indicates that participation is not merely desirable but is the condition on which a project endures (Dokubo et al., 2020).

In Nigeria, the potential of tourism is considerable because of the country's cultural diversity, historical sites, festivals, landscapes, waterways and ecological resources. Yet the availability of tourism resources does not automatically produce sustainable tourism development. Where communities are excluded from planning, lack the skills required to participate, or have limited control over tourism resources and benefits, tourism can remain externally driven and its developmental contribution can be weak. This makes a community-based approach important because it places local knowledge, institutions, skills and resources at the centre of tourism development.

Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas provide important examples of riverine communities with substantial tourism assets. Their waterways, mangrove environments, historical narratives, traditional institutions, festivals, masquerade practices, oral traditions, artisanal skills and other cultural

resources can provide the basis for distinctive tourism experiences, and the study of community based resources for promoting sustainable tourism in the neighbouring Andoni and Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Areas showed that riverine communities of this kind already hold the resources on which a tourism sector can be built, provided the communities themselves retain a hand in how those resources are used (Dokubo et al., 2024). At the same time, the communities face challenges associated with environmental degradation, infrastructure limitations, inadequate tourism facilities, limited capacity and the need for stronger community participation in development decisions. These conditions create a need to consider tourism development not simply as the utilisation of attractions, but as a community development process.

A major dimension of this process is community-driven cultural and heritage preservation. Cultural heritage provides identity and can distinguish one destination from another. In Okrika and Bonny, traditional festivals, masquerade activities, historical places, oral traditions and indigenous knowledge constitute resources that can support cultural tourism when they are properly protected and interpreted. Community involvement is particularly important because local people are the custodians of the meanings attached to these resources. Preservation that excludes the community may weaken ownership and may also encourage inappropriate presentation of cultural practices. The weight of inherited practice in this respect has been established elsewhere, since customs and traditions were found to shape how far rural communities would mobilise their own resources behind a community development programme, which indicates that cultural resources function as working community assets rather than as inert attractions (Nwoye et al., 2021).

A second dimension is the development of eco-tourism initiatives. The mangrove forests, creeks, wetlands and waterways of the study area provide opportunities for nature-based tourism. However, these resources also require careful management because tourism can only be sustainable when the natural environment is protected. Community-governed eco-tourism can provide incentives for conservation while creating income-generating opportunities through guiding, boat services, environmental education and other tourism activities. This pairing of conservation with livelihood is not new to the riverine communities of the state, as the study of indigenous adaptation strategies among the fisherfolks of Kalabari Kingdom demonstrated, where inherited local knowledge supplied the working rules by which a shared natural resource was used and conserved at the same time (Taylor et al., 2025).

The third dimension is capacity building through tourism education. Local assets become more useful for tourism when community members possess the knowledge and skills required to manage them. Training in hospitality, tour guiding, cultural interpretation, environmental management, entrepreneurship, digital promotion and tourism governance can strengthen residents' ability to participate meaningfully in tourism enterprises and decision-making. Capacity building therefore links the existence of local resources with the ability of communities to convert those resources into sustainable opportunities.

The fourth dimension is participatory tourism planning and decision-making. Tourism development affects land, culture, livelihoods, natural resources and community identity. Residents therefore need meaningful opportunities to contribute to decisions concerning tourism priorities, implementation, governance and benefit-sharing. Participation can strengthen legitimacy, improve the use of local knowledge and increase community ownership of tourism initiatives. It is particularly important in riverine communities where external plans may not adequately reflect local realities. Work on the Ikwerre people of Rivers State supports this, since community-based organisations drawing on established local standing drew citizens into development activity in numbers that arrangements introduced from outside could not achieve (Deekor et al., 2022).

The fifth dimension is sustainable infrastructure development. Tourism requires infrastructure that supports accessibility, visitor comfort, sanitation, accommodation, communication and other services. In Okrika and Bonny, water transport and other forms of infrastructure are especially relevant because of the riverine environment. Infrastructure development must, however, be planned in ways that protect ecosystems, respect local cultural character and remain affordable and manageable over time.

These dimensions are interrelated. Heritage preservation can create attractions, eco-tourism can connect natural resources with conservation and livelihoods, education can provide the skills needed to manage tourism, participatory planning can give communities greater influence over development, and

sustainable infrastructure can provide the physical conditions necessary for visitors and local enterprises. The effectiveness of one dimension can therefore reinforce the others.

Consequently, this study focuses on five interrelated community-based strategies through which local assets can be leveraged for sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas. The first is community-driven cultural and heritage preservation, which examines how communities can identify, document, protect and appropriately utilise their cultural resources for tourism. The second is the development of eco-tourism initiatives, which considers how the natural environments of Okrika and Bonny can support tourism while contributing to environmental conservation and community benefits. The third is capacity building through tourism education, which focuses on equipping community members and organisations with the knowledge and skills required for meaningful participation in tourism. The fourth is participatory tourism planning and decision-making, which considers the involvement of community members in determining tourism priorities, governance, implementation and benefit-sharing. The fifth is sustainable infrastructure development, which addresses the provision of tourism-support infrastructure in ways that are environmentally responsible, culturally appropriate and beneficial to the host communities. The study therefore proceeds from the position that sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny depends not merely on the availability of attractive resources, but on the ability of communities to preserve, develop, manage and collectively govern those resources.

Statement of the Problem

Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas possess cultural, historical, environmental and human resources with considerable potential for tourism development. Their riverine environments, waterways, mangrove ecosystems, historical narratives, festivals, traditional institutions and indigenous knowledge provide a foundation for developing distinctive tourism experiences. However, the existence of these resources has not resulted in a correspondingly strong community-based tourism sector. The benefits that could arise from tourism remain largely unrealised, while some cultural and environmental resources face neglect, inadequate management and gradual deterioration.

One major concern is the limited systematic preservation and utilisation of cultural and heritage resources. Cultural practices, oral histories, traditional festivals, historical sites and indigenous knowledge constitute important assets of Okrika and Bonny, yet their value for sustainable tourism depends on deliberate documentation, preservation and appropriate presentation.

Where cultural resources are not adequately protected or where decisions concerning their presentation are made without community involvement, there is a risk of cultural erosion, misrepresentation and loss of community ownership.

The natural environment presents another challenge. The mangrove forests, creeks, wetlands and waterways of the two LGAs could support eco-tourism and nature-based recreational activities. At the same time, these environments are vulnerable to pollution, habitat degradation and other pressures. Without properly organised community-based eco-tourism initiatives, the natural environment may continue to be viewed mainly as a resource for extraction rather than as an asset capable of generating sustainable tourism and conservation benefits.

There is also a human-capacity problem. Sustainable tourism requires people who can provide quality hospitality services, guide visitors, interpret cultural heritage, manage tourism enterprises, promote destinations and participate effectively in tourism governance.

Where community members lack relevant knowledge and skills, tourism opportunities may be captured by external operators, leaving local residents with limited roles and benefits. Possessing tourism resources without developing the capacity of residents to manage and utilise those resources may therefore limit the contribution of tourism to community development.

Infrastructure constitutes another major constraint. The predominantly riverine nature of Okrika and Bonny makes transportation and other basic services particularly important to tourism development. Poor or inadequate water transport facilities, limited visitor accommodation, sanitation challenges, inadequate visitor facilities and weak digital connectivity can discourage visitors and limit the ability of local enterprises to compete effectively. Infrastructure development also needs to be sustainable so that it does not damage sensitive ecosystems, weaken cultural character or create long-term maintenance burdens.

Furthermore, the extent to which community members participate meaningfully in tourism planning and decision-making remains a concern. Tourism development decisions can affect land, culture, natural resources, livelihoods and community identity. If such decisions are dominated by government institutions, private investors or other external actors, local knowledge and community priorities may receive inadequate attention. Limited participation can reduce community ownership and increase mistrust over tourism resources and benefits.

These problems suggest that the challenge facing Okrika and Bonny is not a simple shortage of tourism resources. Rather, there appears to be a gap between the resources available within the communities and the strategies and institutional arrangements required to transform those

resources into sustainable tourism opportunities. Without community-driven heritage preservation, environmentally responsible eco-tourism, appropriate capacity building, sustainable infrastructure and meaningful participation in planning and decision-making, the tourism potential of the two LGAs may remain underdeveloped.

Although existing literature recognises the importance of community participation, local assets, cultural heritage, eco-tourism and capacity building in sustainable tourism development, there is limited empirical evidence that brings these dimensions together within the specific context of Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas. This creates a need for empirical investigation into the extent to which these community-based strategies can promote sustainable tourism development in the study area. It is this gap that the present study seeks to address by examining community-driven cultural and heritage preservation, eco-tourism initiatives, capacity building through tourism education, participatory tourism planning and decision-making, and sustainable infrastructure development as strategies for leveraging local assets for sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine community-based strategies for leveraging local assets to promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the extent to which community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State;
2. determine the extent to which development of eco-tourism initiatives promotes sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State; and
3. determine the extent to which capacity building through tourism education promotes sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H0₁: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of leaders and members of community-based organisations on the extent to which community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

H0₂: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of leaders and members of community-based organisations on the extent to which development of eco-tourism initiatives promotes sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

H0₃: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of leaders and members of community-based organisations on the extent to which capacity building through tourism education promotes sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The study was conducted in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State. The population comprised 3,640 respondents consisting of 3,600 members and 40 leaders of registered community-based organisations. A sample of 333

respondents comprising 300 members and 33 leaders was selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table and multistage sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled Community-Based Strategies for Leveraging Local Assets to Promote Sustainable Tourism Development Questionnaire (CBSLLAPSTDQ). The instrument was validated by the researcher's supervisor and two experts in Adult Education and Community Development, Rivers State University. Reliability was established using Cronbach Alpha, producing cluster coefficients of 0.77, 0.81, 0.86, 0.76 and 0.77, with a cumulative coefficient of 0.79. Of the 333 copies administered, 323 copies comprising 293 members and 30 leaders were successfully retrieved and used for analysis, representing a 97.0% retrieval rate. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while z-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Leaders and Members of Community-Based Organisations on the Extent Community-Driven Cultural and Heritage Preservation Initiatives Promote Sustainable Tourism Development

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Leader (N)		Members (N)	
				Rmks	Mean	SD	Rmks
1	Community involvement in identifying and documenting local cultural heritage has strengthened tourism appeal	3.52	0.61	VHE	3.47	0.63	HE
2	Traditional festivals and masquerade activities organised by the community attract visitors	3.61	0.55	VHE	3.53	0.58	VHE
3	Preservation of historical trade houses and landmarks has promoted tourism development	3.48	0.64	HE	3.39	0.71	HE
4	Community-led cultural education programmes have helped sustain heritage practices relevant to tourism	3.57	0.57	VHE	3.44	0.66	HE
5	Intangible heritage such as oral traditions and indigenous knowledge is actively protected and presented for tourism purposes	3.45	0.67	HE	3.36	0.69	HE
6	Community ownership of heritage governance has increased residents' pride and willingness to support tourism	3.55	0.59	VHE	3.41	0.65	HE
Grand Mean		3.53		HE	3.43		HE

VHE = Very High Extent; HE = High Extent.

The data in Table 1 show that all six items recorded high or very high extent ratings. The grand mean scores of 3.53 for leaders and 3.43 for members indicate that community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives promote sustainable tourism development to a very high extent among leaders and high extent among members.

Research Question 2: To what extent does the development of eco-tourism initiatives promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Ratings of Leaders and Members of Community-Based Organisations on the Extent Development of Eco-Tourism Initiatives Promotes Sustainable Tourism Development

S/N	Items	Leaders Mean	S.D	Remarks	Members	Mean	S.D	Remarks
7	Organised visits to mangrove forests and creek networks have generated income for the communities	3.38	0.70	HE	3.29	0.73		HE
8	Eco-tourism activities have created incentives for community members to protect and restore natural ecosystems	3.45	0.64	HE	3.37	0.68		HE
9	Community-guided nature-based tourism experiences have attracted environmentally conscious visitors	3.40	0.66	HE	3.31	0.70		HE
10	Eco-tourism revenues have been used to finance conservation and community development activities	3.33	0.74	HE	3.24	0.77		HE
11	Environmental education programmes linked to eco-tourism have increased awareness of ecological sustainability	3.50	0.62	VHE	3.38	0.67		HE
12	Community-governed eco-tourism enterprises have ensured equitable distribution of tourism benefits	3.35	0.73	HE	3.27	0.75		HE
Grand Mean		3.40		HE	3.31			HE

VHE = Very High Extent; HE = High Extent.

Table 2 indicates that the respondents rated all the items at either high or very high extent. The grand mean scores of 3.40 for leaders and 3.31 for members indicate that development of eco-tourism initiatives promotes sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State to a high extent.

Research Question 3: To what extent does capacity building through tourism education promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean Ratings of Leaders and Members of Community-Based Organisations on the Extent Capacity Building Through Tourism Education Promotes Sustainable Tourism Development

S/N	Items	Leaders Mean	S.D	Remarks	Members Mean	S.D	Remarks
13	Tourism training programmes have improved the ability to provide quality services to visitors	3.55	0.59	VHE	3.42	0.66	HE
14	Skills acquired through capacity building have enabled participation in tourism enterprises	3.48	0.63	HE	3.35	0.70	HE
15	Tourism education has increased knowledge of sustainable tourism practices	3.58	0.56	VHE	3.46	0.62	HE
16	Training in hospitality and guiding services has improved visitor experiences	3.44	0.67	HE	3.33	0.71	HE
17	Capacity building programmes have strengthened community governance of tourism activities	3.51	0.61	VHE	3.39	0.68	HE
18	Tourism education has improved confidence in engaging visitors and tourism investors.	3.46	0.65	HE	3.34	0.72	HE
Grand Mean		3.50		HE	3.38		HE

VHE = Very High Extent; HE = High Extent.

Table 3 shows that capacity building through tourism education was rated positively across all six items. The grand mean scores of 3.50 for leaders and 3.38 for members indicate that capacity building through tourism education promotes sustainable tourism development to a very high extent among leaders and high extent among members.

Test of Hypotheses

H0₁: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of leaders and members of community-based organisations on the extent to which community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives promote sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

Table 4: Z-Test Analysis of Leaders and Members on Community-Driven Cultural and Heritage Preservation Initiatives and Sustainable Tourism Development

Respondents	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	df	α	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Leaders	30	3.53	0.60	321	0.05	1.45	± 1.96	Not Significant
Members	293	3.43	0.66					

Table 4 shows that the calculated z-value of 1.45 is less than the critical value of ± 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of leaders and members on community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives.

H0₂: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of leaders and members of community-based organisations on the extent to which development of eco-tourism initiatives promotes sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

Table 5: Z-Test Analysis of Leaders and Members on Development of Eco-Tourism Initiatives and Sustainable Tourism Development

Respondents	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	df	α	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Leaders	30	3.40	0.68	321	0.05	1.12	± 1.96	Not Significant
Members	293	3.31	0.72					

Table 5 shows that the calculated z-value of 1.12 is less than the critical value of ± 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. This means that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of leaders and members regarding the development of eco-tourism initiatives.

H0₃: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of leaders and members of community-based organisations on the extent to which capacity building through tourism education promotes sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

Table 6: Z-Test Analysis of Leaders and Members on Capacity Building Through Tourism Education and Sustainable Tourism Development

Respondents	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	df	α	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Leaders	30	3.50	0.61	321	0.05	1.08	± 1.96	Not Significant
Members	293	3.38	0.68					

Table 6 shows that the calculated z-value of 1.08 is less than the critical value of ± 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted, indicating that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of leaders and members on capacity building through tourism education.

Discussion of Findings

The finding on community-driven cultural and heritage preservation initiatives revealed that the strategy promotes sustainable tourism development to a very high extent among leaders and high extent among members. This suggests that documenting cultural heritage, organising festivals, preserving historical landmarks, protecting intangible heritage and involving communities in heritage governance can strengthen tourism development. The finding agrees with Garrod and Fyall (2000), who emphasised the importance of effective heritage management, and with the Asset-Based Community Development perspective of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), which recognises cultural resources as valuable community assets. It also agrees with UNESCO (2003), which emphasises community participation in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

The finding on eco-tourism initiatives revealed that the strategy promotes sustainable tourism development to a high extent among both leaders and members. This indicates that mangrove forests, creek networks, community-guided nature experiences, environmental education and community-

governed tourism enterprises can contribute to both conservation and community development. The finding is consistent with Okonkwo and Uche (2022), who identified the ecological resources of Niger Delta riverine communities as important eco-tourism assets and stressed the need for community participation and effective governance in their development.

The finding on capacity building through tourism education revealed that the strategy promotes sustainable tourism development to a very high extent among leaders and high extent among members. Tourism training, hospitality and guiding skills, knowledge of sustainable tourism practices, governance capacity and confidence in dealing with visitors and investors can improve residents' ability to participate in tourism development. This finding supports Cole (2006), who highlighted information and empowerment as important conditions for sustainable tourism, and reflects the broader community empowerment principle that local capacity is necessary for meaningful participation in tourism development. Behind this lies a question of fairness as well as of skill, since arrangements that advance social justice have been held to be what prepares people to take an active and productive part in the life of their community, which bears directly on who ends up holding the roles and the benefits that tourism creates (Alikor & Okachiku-Agbaraeke, 2025). Building that capacity into a standing local body is a further step, and the school-based management committees operating elsewhere in the state offer a working model, since decision-making responsibility there was deliberately shared among parents, community members and local administrators rather than retained by the institution alone (Nwanguma & Nwuke, 2024).

Conclusion

The study concludes that community-driven cultural and heritage preservation, development of eco-tourism initiatives, and capacity building through tourism education are important community-based strategies for promoting sustainable tourism development in Okrika and Bonny Local Government Areas of Rivers State. Cultural heritage preservation can strengthen local identity and tourism appeal, while eco-tourism can link natural-resource conservation with community benefits. Tourism education can further equip residents with the knowledge, skills and confidence required for effective participation in sustainable tourism activities.

Recommendations

1. Community-based organisations in Okrika and Bonny should strengthen community-led cultural heritage programmes through systematic documentation, preservation and promotion of festivals, historical landmarks, oral traditions and other cultural resources.
2. Government agencies, community organisations and relevant development partners should support community-managed eco-tourism initiatives around mangrove forests, creek networks and other natural attractions, with appropriate conservation measures and transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms.
3. Regular tourism education and capacity-building programmes should be provided for community members, focusing on hospitality, tour guiding, cultural interpretation, environmental sustainability, tourism entrepreneurship and community tourism governance.

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