

Measuring the Potential of Agri-tourism Development in Rural Nigeria – An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a country endowed with agricultural resources and that is the reason with the green represented in the national flag. The purpose of this work is to assess the potentials of Agri-tourism in the southeastern zone of Nigeria. To achieve this goal, qualitative research methods were used including documentations reviews, oral surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and focus group techniques to collect data from 500 participants randomly selected from 15 communities, which were randomly selected from 45 communities in the study area. The study reveals that there are various farm products in the area that require more consumers. Therefore, if Agri-tourism is developed many farm owners will depend more on diversifying farm operations to include services and products like flowers, fish, pure honey, farm crafts, fruits, vegetables and sales of live chicken and livestock will start to thrive. Beside foods, fruits and flowers, the sale of native costumes and textiles which many rural areas exhibit during agricultural festivals will become a potential to boost the rural economy. Therefore, the study calls for a blue-print to consolidate the resources available to promote Agri-tourism development in rural Nigeria.

Key words: Nigeria; Agricultural resources; Agri-tourism; Documentations; Diversifying farm operations;

Agri-tourism involves a diversified farming practice with many important purposes such as recreational, entertainment and educational at a farm, ranch or agribusiness operation in order to allow consumers to take part in various aspects of agricultural industry, natural resources and heritage (Dooley, 2010; Nilsson, 2002). One of the policy thrusts of Akwa Ibom State is to diversify its economy. Agri-tourism in Akwa Ibom State is therefore meant to provide an enabling environment to attract investors to the state and to sustain a private sector driven economy.

Nelson and Pade (2005) observed that agri-tourism can include educational tours, camping sites on farms, sales of farm produce and meat, farm festivals and other related events. According to McGehee and Kim (2004) respondents in Virginia farm families indicated their most popular agri-tourism activities to include, farm festivals, children's educational programmes, Christmas tree sales and pick-your own

produce. It is expected that findings from this study can avail the opportunity for farmers in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria to introduce some of the above agri-tourism activities into their farming systems which can even improve their economic well being. For according to Colton and Bissix (2005) and Sharply (2002) agri-tourism can contribute to overall farm income, cash flow and profitability of a farm providing alternative income through farm products. This work therefore examines the socioeconomic characteristics of the resident respondents in the selected agri-tourism areas and the perceived effects of agri-tourism on livelihood of the area.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State (Latitude 4o30' and 5o53'N and Longitude 7o25' and 5o25'E) in the southeastern humid rainforest zone of Nigeria. The State population according to National Population Commission (NPC, 2006) is 3.92million with

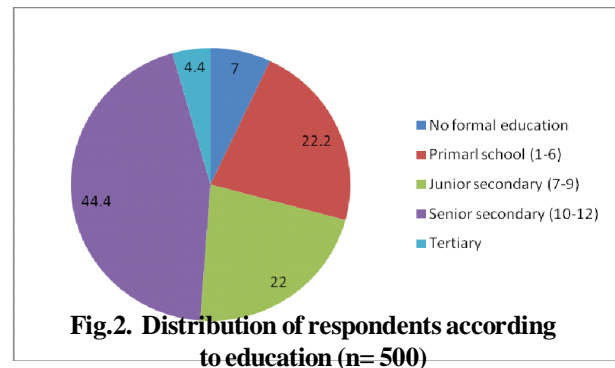
an average population density of 350 persons per square kilometer. Data for the study were collected through documentation reviews, oral surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and focus group technique where 500 participants were randomly selected from 15 communities, randomly selected from 45 communities in the study area. Thirty respondents were randomly selected from 10 communities making a total of 300 and 40 randomly selected from the remaining five communities making a total of 200 and a grand total of 500 that took part in the study. A stratified random sampling technique was used in the study. Percentage calculation on the respective variables was used to present information regarding the data on socioeconomic variables, cultural values, community symbols and crafts produced in the area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal and socioeconomic variables: A high percentage frequency of the respondents, 46.4 were within the age range of 21 – 40 years. This is followed by 28.8% with a range of 41 – 50 years and with 24.8% within a range of 51 years and over (Fig. 1). The result shows that a bulk of young people took part in the study. These groups of young people are willing to invest in Agri-tourism projects if given the proper environment. The data also show that 68.4% of the respondents were males while 31.6% were females. The percentage of women represented is quite significant.

The rural population is characterized by a low level of education perhaps due to the small number of schools and other educational facilities coupled with low income level of the rural population. The data in Fig. 2 show that 7% of the respondents did not have any formal education while 22.2% had 1-6 years of primary

education. However, 22.0 and 44.4% of the respondents had 7 – 9 and 10 – 12 years of junior and senior secondary education respectively. Finally, only 4.4% of the respondents had tertiary education.



Though there is a low proportion of highly educated respondents, there is a high proportion of educated respondents in the secondary school level with a high value of labour force therefore making the development of agri-tourism in the area more prospective. Orskov (1995) maintains that education itself, and knowledge in general can be a source of security which can help farmers to access risk and to accept innovations involving more risk.

The Akwa Ibom State rural residents are mainly engaged in either crop farming or fishing with livestock as a supplementary activity to crop farming. Most of the respondents have been farming for most of their adult lives. Specifically, 42.4% of the respondents were mainly engaged in crop farming viz: cassava, maize, yam, plantain, banana and on green vegetables, and fruits and flower production. A few of them were also engaged both in crop farming and poultry production and keeping of bees and a few goats and sheep. About 21% were engaged in fishing. However, 17.8, 8.4, 6.8 and 4.0% were engaged in farming/marketing, sculpture/craft making, artisanery and civil service respectively. Development of agri-tourism in the area will enhance expansion into traditional farming and improvement of their farm products for consumers.

Household size varied among the respondents. The size ranged from 1 – 5 and above. About 30.4% had a household size of 1 – 3. This were followed by 32.8% and 21.0% with the size ranging from 4 – 6 and 7 – 9 respectively. While 13% and 2% had a household size of 10 – 12 and 13 – 15 and insignificant proportion of 0.8% had a household size of over 15 (Fig.4). The data

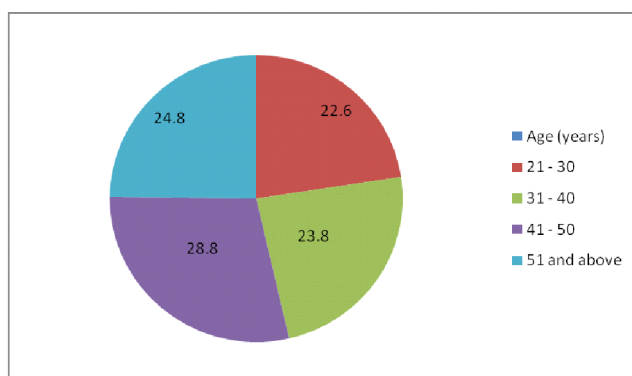


Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents according to age (n= 500)

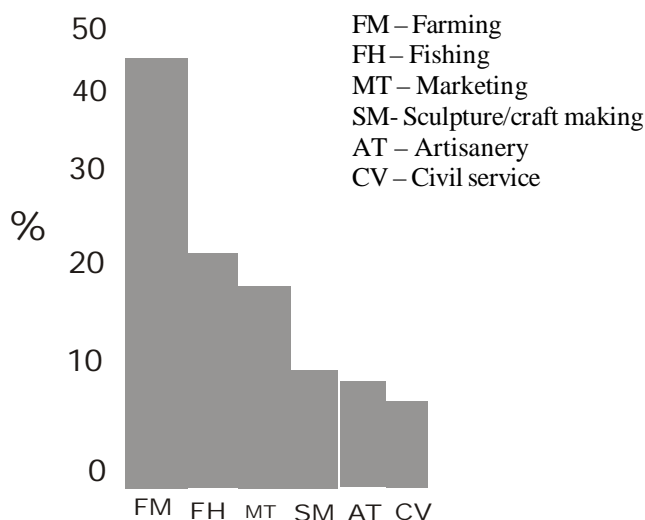


Fig 3. Occupational distribution of respondent (n=500)

indicate a high dependency ratio. This then calls for the development of the rural communities and one of such agent for developing the area is through agri-tourism, which will go a long way to create jobs and empower the residents with their households.

The annual income distribution of the respondents is shown in Fig 5. A significant proportion of 35.4% of the respondents earned an annual income of N20, 000 – 29,000. This is followed by 22.4% of the respondents who earned an annual income of N30, 000 – 39,000. However, about an equal proportion of 18.2 and 18.6% of the respondents earned N40,000 – 49,000 and N50,000 – 59,000 respectively. Finally, 5.4% of the respondents earned N60,000 and above per annum. The study reveals that about 88.8% of the respondents were not satisfied with their present level of income while only 10% indicated that they were satisfied with the state of their income. The respondents see the enterprise of agri-tourism as a source of income flow into the rural economy as well as providing income tax and value

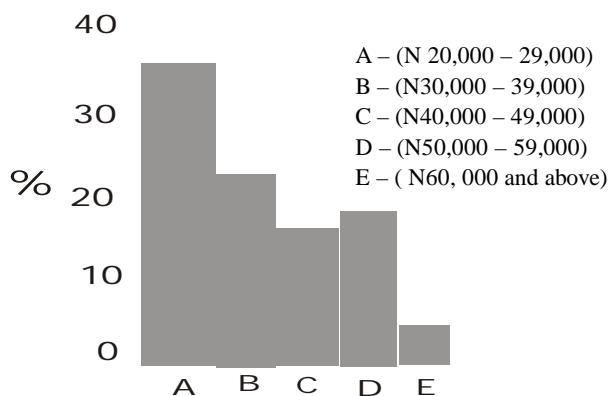


Fig. 5. Annual income of respondents (n=500)

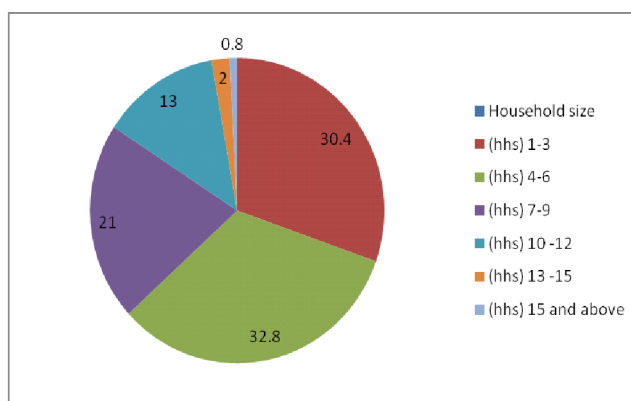


Fig 4. Household size of respondents (n=500)

added tax to government. According Veek *et. al.* (2006) agri-tourism can generate alternative and new sources of income from other tourism based resources. Therefore, the development of agri-tourism in the area will enhance the status of the people if their resources are well harnessed with the potentials of agri-tourism.

Cultural festivals and community symbols: There are a host of cultural festivals in the area some, which are: Ekong Ekpe, Akata, Atat, Nkim Itong, Abre, Ekpo, etc. These and in their respective magnificent display and costumes and traditional attire and with most popular traditional dances will again help to improve the economy of the area if properly harnessed for the consumption of the tourists. The study area has a lot of community symbols such as communal shrines and with identities which tend to strengthen families, groups and communities’ beliefs and norms over time. About 25.2% of the respondents mentioned Atakpo Ndem Uruan Inyang as a deity in a shrine that is recognized in the study area. This is followed by Abam Itak (as a messenger of harmattan) with 22.0%. Others are Ukana offot and Awa Itam (as the messengers of peace) with a frequency of 19.0 and 17.2% respectively; Eka Idio, Ubo Ekong, Iso Uman Enang and others with 6.60, 5.40

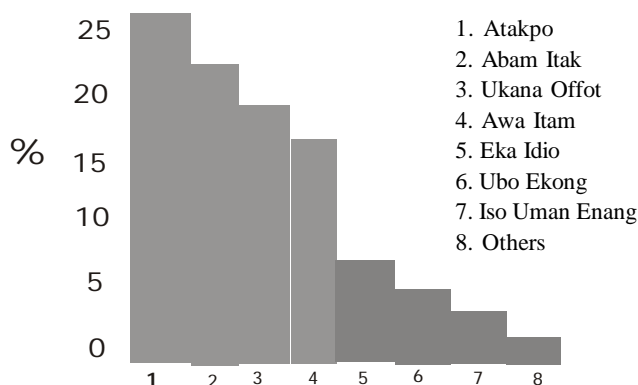


Fig. 6. Names of some shrines in the area

3.60 and 1.0 percent respectively (Fig. 6). But how will the beliefs help to mitigate the problems of rural development in the study area? The unique traditional customs in beliefs, norms and social values of the people can be transformed into exotic, popular, traditional music and dance for economic well being of the people in particular and for the state and the nation in general. Moreover, their belief in peace, protection and spiritual security from the deities can empower the community to limit all cases of conflicts in the area if their attention is strongly drawn through the elders who constitute a potent force in the community. This group is highly regarded as elders and mentors. In fact, they are the custodians of community values, norms and events that took place over 50 or more years ago and can actually inspire certain aspects in agri-tourism development. Over 90% of the respondents overwhelmingly maintain that agri-tourism development will enhance the stabilization of local languages and therefore soliciting for government and individual attention to protect and preserve the cultural heritage. Moreover, the group in the study area is more homogenous when considering the hospitality and socio-cultural.

Crafts produced in the area: The work reveals that the residents of the area produce from local raw materials abundant and various earthenware and ceramics. Other crafts from wood, fiber and metal adorn the area. Over 90% of the respondents agreed that with a significant

role of the crafts in the area, it will attract tourists to the area. This is evident during local and agricultural festivals in the area. Again, over 90% of crafts produced in the study area could be exported and the industries in the area will have an impact in agri-tourism. Tourist attractions and their influence on hand crafts will attract tourist and consequently increasing occupation and income in the study area. With influx of tourists into the area, the existing markets will be upgraded and as well the establishing of new market for rural crafts and arts. Besides the above, the study reveals that there will be a growing interest in the reception of the positive aspects of values and behaviour of the visitors by the host communities.

CONCLUSION

A study on agri-tourism was conducted in the Southeastern zone of Nigeria. Most respondents were farmers. Others were into fishing, sculpture/craft making and marketing of agro produce. Their annual income were basically low. There were various crafts from wood, fiber and metal and a host of cultural festivals in the area with their magnificent dances and costumes. It is feasible that with the natural resources and with the rich culture of the people, there are a lot of potentials for agri-tourism development in the area. The study calls for a blue-print to consolidate the resources available to promote agri-tourism development in rural Nigeria..

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