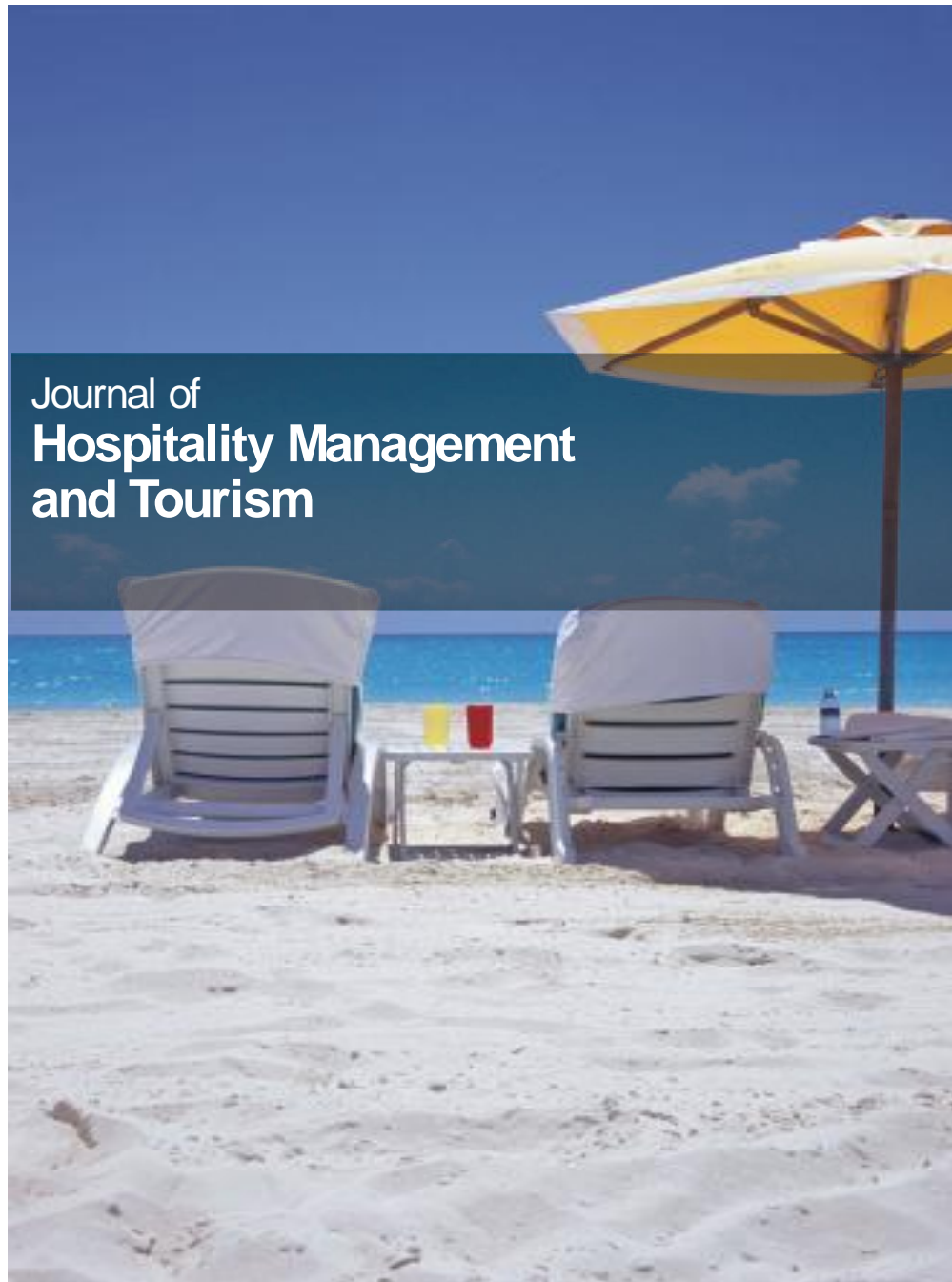


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Table of Content

Review on ecotourism potentials, challenges and opportunities in Ethiopia	9
Degefa Alemu Kenasa* and Alemayehu Mammo Haile	
Strength-weakness-opportunities-threats (SWOT) analysis of Cross River monolith sites for strategic tourism management	24
Joy Nneka Uchenye Ejikeme	

Full Length Research Paper

Review on ecotourism potentials, challenges and opportunities in Ethiopia

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Ecotourism is defined as intentional activity to natural and cultural areas to appreciate nature. The main objective of this review was to examine ecotourism potentials, challenges and opportunities in Ethiopia. To achieve the objective, relevant published scientific literatures were used as data sources. These data were obtained from freely accessible search engines. The review paper was done using common and freely accessible search engines such as Google Scholars, Science Direct and Research Gates. The result of empirical review shows that natural resources and landscape, cultural heritage, battles (historical places), archaeological sites are among ecotourism potentials in Ethiopia. Human induced factors and demographic changes (overgrazing, deforestation, illegal hunting, uncontrolled fire, and population growth, conflicts of interest over resource use, industrialization and agricultural expansion) are the main constraints for ecotourism development in the country. Lack of facilities (such as inadequate infrastructure, financial problems, lack of accommodation, inaccessible market, and low income), poor qualities of human resources and lack of awareness and coordination among stakeholders, institutional problems, climate change, invasive species and diseases are also challenges of ecotourism in the country. The presences of natural, cultural resources, historical sites as well as policies, legal and institutional frameworks are opportunities for ecotourism development in the Ethiopia. Therefore, based on the review result, incorporating different stakeholders, implementing the established polices, legal and institutional frameworks should be made so as to make strong tourism sector in the country. The review also recommends meeting ecotourism facilities, capacity building and creating awareness for local communities and staff members, conducting different mitigation strategies should be made by concerned bodies.

Key words: Ecotourism, challenges, cultural heritages, opportunities, prospect, protected areas.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most important industries which provide goods and services for long term economic development of a country (Aratuo and Etienne, 2019). It

is acknowledged on a global scale as one of the most important and rapidly expanding economic sectors, and it is considered an alternative to other established

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economic sectors like industrialization for promoting economic development and reducing poverty (Meyer and Meyer, 2015). As an export category, tourism ranks fourth after fuels, chemicals and automotive products in the world (Shavkatovich and Ismailovna, 2018). Increased tourism can have a favorable impact on a country's GDP and employment possibilities, among other things (Manzoor et al., 2019). Tourism and foreign exchange earnings interact positively to induce economic growth (Manzoor et al., 2019; Seok et al., 2021; Khalid et al., 2022). In global economy, tourism contributes 9.5% of the world's GDP and 7% of jobs, 6% of the world's exports and 30% of the world's exports in services where as it generates 45% of the total exports in developing countries (Kreishan, 2015; Navarro-Drazich and Lorenzo, 2021).

For many developing countries, tourism plays a significant role in economic development (Kim et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2020). It is one of the main sources for foreign exchange income and the number one export category, creating various employment opportunities for development. For many developing countries, and not only, tourism is one of the main sources of foreign exchange income and the number one export category, creating much needed employment and opportunities for development (SMEDESCU and FÎNTÎNERU, 2013; Dwyer, 2022). It is the largest and fastest growing industry which generates many new jobs (Ranasinghe et al., 2020).

Ecotourism has not a single definition. It is a purposeful travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people (Eshun and Tichaawa, 2019; Alisa and Ridho, 2020). Ecotourism represents an approach to tourism that focuses on environmental and cultural preservation (Cobbinah, 2015; Chandel and Mishra, 2016; Cobbinah et al., 2017; Ramírez et al., 2019; Chai-Arayalert, 2020; Baloch et al., 2023).

The International Ecotourism Society (1990) defined ecotourism as ethical travel to unspoiled areas that enhances the welfare of locals and safeguards the environment (Bricker, 2017). Additionally, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) defined ecotourism in (1996) as a responsible travel and visitation to natural areas to experience and admire nature (as well as any related cultural features, both ancient and contemporary) that encourages conservation and invariably also has a minimal visitor impact and offers beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples, enhancing their regional sustainability (Tesfaye, 2017a). Since the idea of ecotourism is relatively new, it can be challenging to explain why it has become so significant in Ethiopia (Birhan and Gebreyes, 2015). But Ethiopia is rich in mosaic culture of people, impressive geological events, scenic beauty landscape, and cradle of humankind formed by complex and old aged natural and anthropogenic factors. The rich biodiversity intriguing

landscape with unique historical events and hospitable cultures are designated for attraction of tourists and historical researchers" expedition (Geremew and Gondar, 2019; Asefa, 2020).

According to Getahun and Yeshanew (2016), Woldu (2018) and Gebreyesus (2022), despite having abundant tourism resources, the country has not fully benefited from this sector in terms of attracting international tourists and generating foreign earnings. Several authors have tried to conduct researches on area of ecotourism potentials, challenges and opportunities in Ethiopia. But from the search of different literatures, the documentation of the natural, cultural, heritage sites are lacking. The conducted researches mainly concentrated to natural tourist attraction area with a little consideration of cultural heritage, historical, archeological sites. There are still untouched potentials of natural, cultural, heritages, archeological sites in the country. The management of these resources didn't get much attention and most of them are under threat. Therefore, this review highlights examining potentials, challenges and opportunities of ecotourism in Ethiopia. This review has various significances. It helps the researchers and professional relevant to this field as a data sources for their research. It also helps policy makers to plan different development activities in tourism sectors in the country. The review of this paper also helps the whole community by creating job opportunities, employment and also contributes nation's GDP by attracting tourists and travelers who visit the area.

Objective of the review

General objective

The main objective of this review paper was to examine potentials, challenges and opportunities of ecotourism in Ethiopia.

Specific objectives

- 1) To assess major natural and cultural resources of ecotourism potentials in Ethiopia
- 2) To assess the existing challenges for ecotourism development in Ethiopia.
- 3) To assess the existing opportunities for ecotourism development in Ethiopia.

METHODOLOGY DATA SOURCES

This review work was mainly organized by searching of relevant published empirical findings of different scientific literatures. Based on the review objectives, secondary sources and works of various scholars published journal articles were reviewed. The review paper was done using common and freely accessible search engines such as Google Scholars, Science Direct and Research Gates. Key

words those are relevant to ecotourism, challenges, opportunities, prospect, and protected areas were used. Most of the literatures reviewed were concentrated to the recently cited materials.

RESULTS

This part of the study presents the finding of the reviewed paper presents potentials, challenges and opportunities of ecotourism development in Ethiopia. The major ecotourism potentials identified in this section are natural resources and landscape which include different biosphere reserves, national parks, protected areas, flora and fauna and water bodies. Cultural heritage, battles historical places, archaeological sites were also ecotourism potentials identified. Human induced factors, lack of ecotourism facilities, poor qualities of human resources, climate change, invasive species, diseases and other factors such as weak formal institution, weak environmental protection law were among ecotourism challenges identified by this review. The existence of abundance potentials of natural and cultural, historical resources, policy, regulation and institutional framework were presented as opportunities for ecotourism development in the country.

DISCUSSION

Major ecotourism potentials in Ethiopia

According to Economic Commission for Africa of 2011, ecotourism is one of the most growing global tourism industries, which contributes environmental conservation, socio-economic development and cultural objectives by providing livelihoods improvement for local communities (ONDICHO, 2018; Strydom et al., 2019). Ethiopia has enormous ecotourism potentials because of its unique characteristics in biodiversity, topographic features and cultural resources, cultural, archaeological and natural resources (Bushy and Kumar, 2020; Tesfaye, 2017a). Ethiopia's mountains, lakes, fauna, flora, colorful ethnic groups, historical and man-made sites, unusual geological features, local arts and artifacts of the country are among the major ecotourism potential resources (Fakana et al., 2019).

Natural resources and landscape

Ethiopia is a country blessed with biosphere reserves, protected areas, national parks, natural forests, game reserves and wildlife sanctuaries (Tefera, 2014). The Simien National Parks is one of the tourist spots of the country which contains the tourist spots of the country endemic biodiversity specie (Teshome, 2018; Admasu, 2020; Teshome et al., 2021; Teshome et al., 2023). Some of the animal species found in this area are Gelada, Ethiopian Wolf, Walia ibex, Mountain nyala,

hyena and baboons. Asefa (2020) stated that diversities of plant and animal species are found in Gorgora particularly, Northern shore of Lake Tana attract visitors.

The Bale Mountains National Park is one of the protected areas of Ethiopia containing the largest Afro-alpine habitat in the continent consists of 78 mammal species (22 are endemic) and 278 bird species (16 are endemic) is ecotourism attraction area (Gashaw, 2015; Lavrenchenko and Bekele, 2017; Wondirad and Ewnetu, 2019; Shafi, 2020; Mekonnen et al., 2022). The Danakil Depression which is situated under sea level which is located in the Northern Afar (Mohammed, 2020; Teshome et al., 2022; Getahun and Yoseph, 2022) is the deepest area in Ethiopia. Erta Ale Volcano (a basaltic shield volcano) is also found in this area (Zelenski et al., 2013). Tis Abay fall (the source of Blue Nile) and Lake Tana are famous tourist destination in northern Ethiopia, attracting both domestic and international visitors (Tamrat and Addis, 2016; Tessema et al., 2021; Wubalem et al., 2022).

Water bodies such as Lake Burey (unique natural lake found in Majang zone), Lake Nyimulu, Lake Thatha, Lake Wahigan, Baro Akobo River, Gilo River, Alwero River, Deretek Waterfall, Dike Waterfall, Jay Waterfall, Waki Waterfall), Jebebe, natural bridges, caves, valleys, landscapes, fauna and flora are Various natural tourism potentials (Fakana and Mengist, 2019; Menbere and Menbere, 2018; Bareke, 2018; Choudhary et al., 2021). Fakana et al. (2019) study also shows that Gambella National Park and Majang Forest Biosphere are enormous natural tourism potential of fauna and flora, water bodies (waterfalls, rivers, and lakes). Bishangari Eco-Logde, Village Ethiopia, and Wonchi Crater Lake are good potential for tourist attraction areas (Beyene, 2016; Tesema and Berhan, 2019; Geda, 2020). Plants and animals diversity of Dharti Walal National Park found in the Western Ethiopia is one of ecotourism potentials (Shanko et al., 2018) Central Ethiopia Rift Valley lakes are potentials of natural resources for ecotourism attraction (Amare, 2015; Getahun and Yeshanew, 2016; Menbere and Menbere, 2018; Haile, 2022a). There are abundance and diversities of bird, scenic landscape, ostrich farm, hot springs, attractions and some hotels or lodges at nearby areas were identified in and Around Abijata-Shala Lakes National Park (Gobena, 2008; Worku, 2018). Getahun and Yeshanew (2016) stated that the Awash National Park which is found in the Eastern parts of Ethiopia endowed with wildlife resources, hot spring water and tourist facility and services.

Cultural heritage, battles (historical places)

The Gumi Goyo (the general assembly of Borana Oromo) Kubi Corraa, Gumi Dibe, Futo, Adola, Hora Sama, Oda Dogi, Oda Bisil, Oda Bultum, Oda Nabe are the indigenous knowledge of Oromo people in the Gada System (Chimdesa, 2016; Mumina, 2018; Abeshu and

Baissa, 2019; Negari, 2018; Regassa et al., 2019). Jimma which is the origin of Coffee Arabica and its surrounding (Alemu, 2012; Bushi and Kumar, 2020), Ilu Abbaa Bora (the birth place of Abba Gammachis (Onesimos Nasib or Hika) who translated Holy Bible in to Oromo Language (Afan Oromo) is a beauty area which attracts ecotourism (Tolessa, 2012; Gerbi, 2017). The Oromo music dance and folklores, handcrafts, festivities and market places (Haile, 2022b), Palaces and museums (Kumsa Palace, Abba Jifar Palace, Jimma Museum, Wollega Museum, Addis Alem Mariyam Museum, small museums at Debre Libanos and Tullu Gudo in Ziway), the spiritual and traditional worship places (Irrecha, monasteries, churches, mosques, shrines, (Dirre Sheikh Hussein, Sheikh Umar; Qulubi, Ziquala, Adadi, Itisa, also others like Mendida Mariam, Duber Gebreal, Washa Michael, Melka Kunture, Sof Omer, are some of ecotourism attraction areas in Ethiopia (Mohanty, 2017; Kelkay et al., 2019; Worku Tadesse, 2023; Senbeto, 2022; Semu, 2022; Tola and Brimblecombe, 2022; Yazezew, 2022; Altamura et al., 2020; Beyene, 2016).

The Abune Yosef Massif of Northern Ethiopia (Takele, 2019; Mazengiya, 2022) and the Rock Hewn churches of Lalibela and Tigray (Klyuev, 2020), the Gondar of Emperor Fasilades (Wubneh, 2021), Ruins of Axum (Teshale, 2020), the Wolled city of Harar Medievales (Thomas and Asrat, 2018; Ziyenge, 2021), the Konso cultural landscapes (Kasho et al., 2022), Negash Mosque (Arefayne and Kindeya, 2017) are also potential tourism areas. Tiya, Debre Libanos, Gorgora, Debre Damo, Yeha, Adigrat, Mekele, Gedeo Cultural Landscape, Sacred Landscapes of Tigray, Adowa, Makdela, Boru Meda, Ankober, Alamata Road, Woldia, Dessie, Kombolcha, Hayk, Debre Berhan are most interesting sites for history loving Eco tourists (Alam and Mishra, 2013; Asefa, 2020; Hagos, 2011; Kabthyemer, 2008; Menbere and Admassu, 2020; Amanuel, 2023; Nigatu and Tegegne, 2021).

Ethiopian Epiphany and Christmas, the finding of the True Cross, colorful traditional festivals (Bayih, 2018; Bayih, 2019; Geda, 2020; Tessema and Haile, 2022; Mekonnen and Mekonen, 2023) are celebrated in Ethiopia. Thanksgiving of the Oromo Supreme God called Irecha, Sidama Nation New Year Festival called Fiche Cambala, Ashenda in Tigray, and Ashura in Harar, cultural music, dancing, clothes and dresses, artifacts style are potential cultural and historic resources are potentials of ecotourism attraction areas in Ethiopia (Semu, 2016; Bulu, 2021; Abate, 2022; Tasisa and Flores, 2022; Akbaba and Ahmed, 2021). The archeological sites of Hadar (where Lucy was discovered), Late Stone Age anthropological site, Chorora formation, the attractive culture, local handicrafts, ethnic groups of Karayu, Ittu and Afar and their indigenous knowledge and accommodation facilities are potential resources for sustainable ecotourism development (de la Torre et al., 2014; Getahun and

Yeshanew, 2016; Kappelman et al., 2016).

Challenges of ecotourism in Ethiopia

Human induced challenges

Human induced challenges for ecotourism development in Ethiopia include overgrazing, deforestation, population growth, illegal land marketing, uncontrolled fire, illegal hunting, conflicts of interest over resource use, industrialization (Beyene, 2016; Tesfaye, 2017b; Menbere and Menbere, 2017; Tesfaye, 2017a; Menbere and Menbere, 2018) (Teshome et al., 2020; Aseres and Sira, 2021; Mekonnen and Mekonen, 2023). Bogale (2015) result indicates that extensive farming and deforestation are the major problems affecting biodiversity of the Bahir Dar Nile River Millennium Park contributing to land degradation by exposing the soil to various agents of erosion which in turn greatly affects agricultural productivity directly affected the agrarian livelihood.

Getahun and Yeshanew (2016) finding indicates that agriculture and nomadic activities, population growth, loss of biodiversity and incompatibility among stakeholders are serious threat for the sustainability of Awash National Park.

Wondirad (2018) study shows that due to the exposure of the natural environment to various threats from different actors including private sector's poor environmental attitude, pressure from surrounding communities, and poorly planned government projects, the ecological diversity and richness are deteriorating in the South Nations and Nationalities. Land degradation, shortage of animal forage, low fertility of the soil, scarcity of cultivable land and absences of off-farm activities are among the critical socio-economic problems of the local community pose pressure on the park in the Borana Saynt Park (Amogne, 2010).

Lack of ecotourism facilities

Different constraints have been identified for ecotourism development in Ethiopia. Lack of infrastructure, low level of accommodation facility and hospitality, financial administration and profit sharing problems, marketing and promotion problems, lack of stakeholders' collaboration, lack of developmental activities like road, electricity and telecommunication networks are among the main challenges encountered in the Yosef Massif, of northern Ethiopia (Lema, 2016; Meniga and Ousman, 2017; Tesfaye, 2017b; Teshome et al., 2020; Wondirad, 2020; Ambecha et al., 2020). The study conducted by Menbere and Menbere (2017) shows that inadequate infrastructure and lack of accommodation were the main ecotourism facility problems. Lack of marketing and promotion

activity, low level of knowledge and attitudes of local community towards community based ecotourism, lack of cooperation among stakeholders, absence of professional guides, lack of major infrastructure and facilities such as accommodation, electricity, and clean water supply are barriers identified in the Meqdela Amba community based ecotourism (Teshome et al., 2020).

Poor qualities of human resources

Ecotourism is constrained by the absence of qualities of human resources. Lack of skilled human resources is a bottleneck for ecotourism development (Mekonnen and Mekonen, 2023). Poor qualification of the staff, lack of park managers, shortage of tourism professionals and tourism experts in culture and tourism offices, lack of market and promoting expert are among constraints for community based ecotourism (Tesfaye, 2017a; Tesfaye, 2017b; Morrison, 2023).

Climate change and intensive species

Climate change has increasingly becoming a major threat affect essential resources on which ecotourism depends (Hornoiu, 2015). Climate change and invasive species are the two main threats for both plant and animal species. The consequences of climate change are range shifts that may cause the species to move out from the range of protected areas (Mengist, 2020). Climatic factors specially rainfall altered the species composition of semi-arid areas and it had positive relationships with plant species diversity, richness, and a groundcover of rangeland types in the semi-arid area of Ethiopia (Asfaw et al., 2020). The wetlands in the country are impacted by a combination of social, economic, development related and climatic factors that lead to their destruction in Ethiopia (Menbere and Menbere, 2018).

Asmamaw et al. (2019) stated that climate change is a major threat to National Park Conservation and Management in Ethiopia. Land use Land Cover Change contributed to 32% of climate change on Lake Dandi, Ethiopia (Dega et al., 2022). Invasive alien species are non- native species of plant and animal origin, and widely recognized among the greatest threats to ecosystem biodiversity and productivity. According to (Cole and Landres, 1996; CBD, 2005), cited in (Temesgen and Warkineh, 2018) these non-native or alien species pose a significant threat to protected areas by their direct and indirect impacts to native species, and by their effects on broader scale ecological patterns and processes.

Water hyacinth, *Eichhornia crassipes* (Martius) (Pontederiaceae), which is a one of the free moving marine herb, is currently a major problem in and its increase hunk inhibits ship travel, disorderly trade, fishing and recreational activities of Lake Tana (Abera, 2018).

Goshu and Aynalem (2017) study shows that soil and water degradation manifested in different forms: sedimentation, clearing of wetland, canalization of the tributaries, increased trend of eutrophication, toxigenic cyano bacteria, occurrence of invasive species like water hyacinth (*Eichornia crassipes*) are major problems of the Lake Tana.

Other challenges

Fast growing construction, weak formal institution, weak environmental protection law, socio-economic, cultural, legal and environmental and institutional problems are constraints for community based development in Ethiopia (Tesfaye, 2017a; Bantider et al., 2023). Teressa (2015) study revealed that there is lack of social network, norms and social trust in the Wenchi community based ecotourism. Instability, terrorism in the Horn Africa, drought and famine incompatibility of interest among stakeholders, challenges related to cultural sustainability, lack of security and safety were the main challenges for community based ecotourism development (Asmare, 2016; Abdel-Latif and Mokeddem, 2016; Shaw, 2016; Gottert, 2016; Wondirad et al., 2020).

Disease posed another challenge. During the COVID-19 crisis in 2019, tour operators in Addis Ababa were found to have implemented crisis management practices to a lesser extent. The absence of tourists, lack of preparedness, and economic and marketing challenges were identified as factors contributing to the limited implementation of these practices among tour operators in Addis Ababa during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tekalign, 2023). Ayalew (2021) stated that however marketing practices of tourism in Addis Ababa during COVID-19 place, price, people, process, partnership and promotion were found to be practiced well, the product, programming, physical evidence and packaging exhibited inferior insufficient during COVID-19. Poor positioning strategy was found in terms of its tourism strategy. Ambaw et al. (2022) study shows that about 60.9% of the heritage sites in the study area were closed, 71.7% of staff who worked in the conservation area, and 71.7% of staff who worked in the conservation and custodian were not able to work during the pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic has also affected by delaying heritage conservation projects works especially in Lalibela, Dessie Museum, and Mereho Palace.

Opportunities of ecotourism development

Abundance potentials of natural and cultural, historical resources

Several studies indicate that there are diversities of wildlife, large wild mammals, bird, scenic landscape, hot

springs, natural, cultural, traditions, and historical places, of ecotourism resources in different parts of Ethiopia (Amare, 2015; Yilma et al., 2016; Menbere and Menbere, 2017; Nino et al., 2017; Teshome, 2018; Ambecha et al., 2020; Teshome et al., 2023). There are amazing physical landscape and various natural resources, rich biodiversity, cultural and archaeological resources are some of the opportunities for ecotourism development (Eyassu and Chekole, 2018; Haddis, 2018; Mohammed, 2020).

Policy, regulation and institutional framework

For the development of ecotourism policies and policy implementation frameworks, several key documents have played a significant role, including the Growth and Transformation Plan (Tamene and WONDIRAD, 2019), the Environmental Policy of Ethiopia in 1997 (Bekele, 2008; Tesfaye et al., 2015), and the Millennium Development Goal (Gabay, 2015).

Tourism development strategy, destination development plan, standardization and quality grading of hospitality industry, support and prioritization of the tourism industry are opportunities of ecotourism development in Ethiopia (Robinson and Jonker, 2016; Mehret, 2019), Tourism Transformation Council made by Prime Minister (Mohammed, 2016; Robinson and Jonker, 2016; Gebreyesus, 2017; Degarege and Lovelock, 2019; Tessema and Haile, 2022), Tourism Board and Tourism Organizations policies, legal and institutional frameworks are opportunities of ecotourism in Ethiopia (Tamir, 2015; Ayalew, 2016; Degarege and Lovelock, 2019). Presence of various conservation organizations, local communities' enthusiasm for ecotourism, presence of ample labor force, existence of higher education institution, scientifically valuable areas and economic growth, development, and existence of infrastructural advancement are ecotourism opportunities (Menbere and Menbere, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper aims to examine potentials, challenges and opportunities of ecotourism development in Ethiopia. The result of the review identified noticeable natural, cultural, historical, and archaeological ecotourism potentials in Ethiopia. The natural resources (land scape, the National Parks, the wild life protected areas, lakes, rivers, the diversity of plants and animals), the cultural heritages, the battles, historical sites are tourist attraction areas in the country. Even though the country has abundant ecotourism resources, it is constrained by different factors. Most of the ecotourism potential areas are threatened by anthropogenic factors. Overgrazing, deforestation, population growth, agricultural expansion, illegal land marketing, uncontrolled fire, illegal hunting) are human induced factors identified. Additionally, lack of

facilities (inadequate infrastructure, financial problems, lack of accommodation, market problems, poor qualities of human resources, low income), lack of awareness, weak institution and coordination are among challenges of ecotourism development identified by this paper. The review also examined the presences of abundance potentials of natural, cultural, historical resources, the existence of policy, regulation and institutional framework as opportunities for ecotourism development in the country.

Recommendations

Based on the review result, the following recommendations were made.

- 1) Local communities are the key actors in the ecotourism development. Incorporating them in the planning to implementation, awareness creation, and educating them can enhance the sustainability of the ecotourism.
- 2) The established policies, legal and institutional frameworks should be implemented by responsible bodies.
- 3) Meeting ecotourism development facilities such as roads, electricity and telecommunication, market access and tourism offices should be full filled for sustainable ecotourism development in the country.
- 4) Capacity building for staff members, managers and employing tourism expert in the tourism industry should be done.
- 5) Implementation of different mitigation strategies should be carried out to reduce the adverse effect of climate change.
- 6) The government should have to give more attention to the tourism sector practically.
- 7) This review is only confined to only some potentials, challenges and opportunities of ecotourism development in Ethiopia. Therefore, investigating and promoting the huge natural and cultural tourist attractions of the country to the world community is essential to join ecotourism development stakeholders from different corners of the world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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- Ziyenge VT (2021). Unlocking the potential of religious tourism in Zimbabwe: a case for Harare city.

Full Length Research Paper

Strength-weakness-opportunities-threats (SWOT) analysis of Cross River monolith sites for strategic tourism management

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A monolith site is a unique heritage site with potential for heritage and cultural tourism due to its unique features. Ten monolith sites investigated were Alok, Emaghabe, Nlun, Ntolshi, Edankono, Agba, Nkirigom, Ntol, Njemitop, and Nebrokpa in Cross River State. A prospective appraisal of the sites is important for them to effectively contribute to tourism. The study analyzes the sites' SWOT analysis to determine the best strategic tourism management for tourism development in the study area. SWOT means the assessment of strength (S), weakness (W), opportunity (O), and threat (T). The research utilized in-depth interviews, observational, and ethnographic methods to gather data from community members, heritage managers, and government workers, which was then analyzed qualitatively. Through the findings, a SWOT analysis reveals monolith sites' strengths are their distinctive traits, while their weaknesses include a sensitive environment and inadequate environmental management. Based on the findings and the SWOT analysis, the strategic plan adopted includes baseline information, accessibility, collaboration, improving the living standard of the host community, environmental education and research, community participation and marketing.

Key words: Heritage sites, distinctive qualities, strategic management, monolith sites, Cross River State.

INTRODUCTION

Historic and cultural sites have become increasingly popular tourist attractions, drawing families, seniors, groups, and international visitors for vacations (Hargrove, 2002). The tourism industry should prioritize the development of cultural and heritage tourism for optimal growth. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, heritage tourism is defined as a journey that authentically represents past and present stories and people through places, artifacts, and activities (Hargrove,

2002). This type of tourism not only boosts the economy of underdeveloped countries but also creates job opportunities for the local communities in the destination area. Tourism is a rapidly expanding global industry that significantly contributes to public activities and foreign exchange. Ajake and Amalu (2012) emphasize the substantial growth of tourism as a remarkable economic and social phenomenon of the past century. The Cross-River monolith sites are among the destination areas that

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attract a significant number of tourists. These monolithic sites are regarded as models and national icons, representing authenticity and integrity. They are priceless and irreplaceable treasures of the area under study (Ejikeme, 2020). Unfortunately, some of these sites are now abandoned in the forest, vulnerable to harsh weather and human activities. During a visit to the study area, it became evident that the Cross River State government has neglected these heritage sites for tourism development, despite the considerable number of tourists visiting, especially to see the monolithic stone monuments. These sites hold immense potential for both heritage and cultural tourism due to their unique features, which draw tourists, grant global recognition, and their proximity to major towns. In addition to the great potential of the monolithic sites, an assessment was conducted to identify their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, with the aim of evaluating their effectiveness and areas for improvement. To be considered a heritage site, it must possess qualities of high quality and significance, preserving it for the benefit of present and future generations. The Cross River monolith sites embody such qualities. Ezeah (2006) notes that tourists often seek what they lack in their usual place of residence or compare it to their surroundings, leading them to search for items connected to the host community's history, culture, or environment. Ajalla (2007) emphasizes that tourism does not spontaneously occur; it must be planned, controlled, and developed to have a meaningful future and gain visitor appreciation. The Nigeria Tourism Association was established in 1962, followed by the Nigeria Tourism Board in 1976. In 1990, Nigeria introduced a new tourism policy that prioritized employment, integration of rural and urban areas, and promotion of cross-cultural exchanges to generate foreign exchange (Chigbu et al., 2013:13). Heritage tourism can significantly contribute to these aspects of tourism. Ajake and Amalu (2012) emphasize that heritage management educates host communities and tourists about preserving history, benefiting tourism by safeguarding cultural practices and legacies. Sustainable tourism necessitates collaboration among community representatives, conservationists, operators, property owners, legislators, and site managers to enhance preservation for future generations (Ejikeme et al., 2020).

SWOT analysis is a vital tool for comprehending an organization, situation, and decision-making. It helps in identifying opportunities, mitigating threats, transforming weaknesses into strengths, and optimizing strengths and opportunities (Duran, 2013; Saaty, 1987). The Nigerian government should employ SWOT analysis in its strategic planning, with a focus on the efficient development of monolithic sites. However, the tourism potential of these sites remains largely untapped, leading to neglect and a loss of originality, which poses a threat to their effective management. This research is rooted in developmental theory, which emphasizes tourism as a

tool for social change, fostering economic independence, employment, and cultural identity, and promoting tourism development through infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and healthcare facilities (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). The purpose of this paper is to conduct a SWOT analysis of the ten monoliths to inform strategic tourism management.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Cross-River monolith sites have not published a comprehensive SWOT analysis utilizing empirical methods and secondary sources to identify weaknesses and threats. The study employed an ethnographic method for data collection, involving visits to various monolith sites and host communities to gather valuable information. The research commenced in September 2014 and continued through 2021, with a follow-up site visit in February 2022 for further investigation. Interviews were conducted with local residents and social groups, utilizing in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations involving 50 participants, including government officials, heritage managers, local residents, and curators at Alok and Old Residency Museums and the Cross River Tourism Bureau. Each interview lasted for 45 min and was recorded for later documentation, which was subsequently used as data for the research. The researcher utilized purposive sampling to select site locations and snowball technique to select knowledgeable participants, conducting interviews in a relaxed environment for mutual interaction. The study utilized online sources and literature reviews, using primary and secondary data for the theoretical foundation and participant interaction. GPS was used to physically map the sites and relative positions of the stones (Table 1).

The study of the area

The study focuses on monolithic sites in Cross River State, distributed among the six main clans in the Ikom Local Government Area (Ejikeme et al., 2020; Ejikeme, 2020, 2016). These include Nta, Nselle, Abanjom, Nde, Ekajuk and Nnam. The researcher studied monolith from Nta, Nselle and Nnam clans. These clans appear as the representative of the study domain. The ten monolith sites investigated were Alok, Emaghabe, Nlun, Ntolshi, Edankono, Agba, Nkirigom, Ntol, Njemitop, and Nebrokpa. The monoliths are called according to the names of the communities (Ejikeme, 2016). The researcher made a judgment based on the information gathered from the initial participants during site identification using the purposive sampling method. Figure 1 shows tribal distribution of monolith sites.

The Ikom people, also known as Ejagham, Bakor, and Ekoi, are a group from Cross River State with a population of 163,691 in 2006. They are located between latitude $6^{\circ} 30'1$ North and longitudes $8^{\circ} 20'11$ and $8^{\circ} 40'11$ East. Cross River State lies within latitude $5^{\circ}45'N$, $8^{\circ}30'E$, and longitude $5.75^{\circ}N$, $8.5^{\circ}E$ (Ejikeme et al., 2020; Ejikeme, 2020, 2016). The capital city of Cross River State is Calabar with population of 93,092 male and 90,589 female (CRSG, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Monolith sites and tourism development

Sustainable development encompasses human and natural

Table 1. Location, height/girth and level of development of the monoliths.

Site/No. of monolith/site	Latitude (N)	Longitude (E)	Height of the monoliths (cm)	Girth of the monoliths (cm)	Elevation (m)	Distance apart of the monoliths (ft)	Development/Accessibility
Alok (33)	06°19.22'11.0	008°38.08.8'11	71	106	138	27.2	Slight Development. Block fenced with dilapidated gate and accessible. Close to village play ground
Emaghabe (17)	06°19'42'.0'11	008°39'07.8'11	83	119	103	14.10	Slight Development. Block fenced with dilapidated gate and accessible. Behind the health centre
Nlun (14)	06°18' 46.8'11	008°09'17.5'11	65	104	107	12.2	Not developed. Accessible. Along the road to Nlun11 village
Ntolshi (16)	06°20'16. 0'11	008°38' 17.1'11	91	122	94	12	Not developed Accessible. Along the road to Ntolshi village
Edamkono (8)	06°20' 39.2'11	008°38'39.3'11	84	142	91	45	Not developed. Accessible. Along the road to Edamkono village
Agba (26)	06°2'09.5'11	008°37'24.2'11.	99	155	50	4.6	Not developed. Accessible only by motorcycle. In the forested land of Ekaju. People
Nkirigom (27)	06°17'58.8'11	008°36'30.6'11	81	183	28	14.5	Not developed. Accessible only by motorcycle. Near to Aye River. In abandoned settlement of Nkirigom. People
Ntol (30)	06°18'23.8'11	008°35'49.2'11	150	183	65	4.6	Not developed. Accessible only by motorcycle. In abandoned settlement of Ntol People
Njemitop (7)	06°12'33.1'11	008°31'13.6'11	66	74	47	0.8	Not developed. Accessible. At the village playground.
Nebroka (10)	06°11'31.0'11	008°28'08.1'11	33	58	63	11.2	Not developed. Accessible. Near the village playground and football field.

Source: Ejikeme (2016).

development, economic growth, social life, and community development, ensuring present needs are met without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Sustainable development aims to enhance people's quality of life while preserving natural resources by establishing laws and procedures that balance the needs of the environment, society, and economy (Abdel-moneim, 2010: 70). Monolith sites are recognized as heritage sites due to their significance in cultural identity and creativity, and their preservation is crucial for current and future generations (Ejikeme, 2016).

Heritage resources offer continuity to communities, encompassing diverse natural and cultural places, lifestyles, traditions, objects, history, and values passed down through generations. For Mawere et al. (2012), heritage sites are significant cultural landmarks that were abandoned by technocrats due to resource exhaustion, succession disputes, and the search for greener pastures. Scholarly studies reveal heritage sites as hubs for recreation, tourism, leisure, education, culture, and religious activities, depending on the investigator's perspective (Olukole, 2009). Ijaiye-Orile heritage sites attract tourists and archaeologists with historical sites, migration evidence, defensive walls, and traditional industrial heritage, including an iron slag mound and furnace (Olukole, 2009). Archaeological reports are crucial for tourism resource development and conservation, serving as icons for

numerous countries and influencing current values (International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), 1999). The World Heritage List, established by an international agreement, is increasingly utilized in national tourism marketing campaigns to attract visitors and boost destination visibility through promotional policies (Drost, 1996). Africa's World Heritage Sites attract millions of tourists annually due to their cultural and natural heritage properties. The African World Heritage Fund is implementing a program linking these sites to sustainable tourism (African World Heritage Fund, 2013: 3).

The Zambian tourism industry is primarily based on heritage and nature tourism. The Zambian government has opted for private sector leadership in tourism development, with the public sector providing necessary policy measures and infrastructural improvements (Ministry of Tourism Environment and Natural Resources (MTNER), 1999). Zambia has become a significant tourist destination in East Africa due to the commitment of both the government and the private sector (Talor and Bande-Hole, 2013). They ensured the implementation of policies for tourism growth in these regions and provided necessary infrastructure facilities. Zambia's Tourism Policy, rooted in the Poverty Reduction Strategy (2002) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy (1999), focuses on rural areas to reduce poverty (African World Heritage Fund, 2013). Giza, Egypt's Great Pyramid, a World Heritage Site since 1979, attracts millions

of visitors annually due to its universal admiration for its antiquity and exceptional civilization (Ifedigbo, 2012).

Nigeria's tourism policies have been inconsistent since the Mohamed/Obasanjo regime, hindering exploration of monolithic sites. The government, the Nigerian Tourism Development Commission, and private tour operators can help develop these attractions, provide infrastructure, and fund projects.

Charles Partridge, a District Commissioner at Obubura in 1903 and 1904 in Cross River State, first reported on monoliths in groups at Agba, Alok, Etinta, Nkirigom, Nselle, Eja, and Nkum Ikpambe, whose carved stones were later displayed at the Lagos Museum (Allison, 1968). Allison traced Partridge's mentioned stones, except for a single stone at Okumuru and a carved specimen at Ofun Bongha, while Partridge published photographs of Agba and Eja stones. Onor (1994) highlights Partridge's archaeological research on monoliths in Ekajuk, Agba, Etinta, and Alok, highlighting their central role in socio-political life and the connection between people and their ancestors, seeking their blessings.

Allison's study on Cross River monoliths highlights the use of natural rock fragments and boulders as cult objects in West Africa, with artificially shaped rocks found in Gambia, the Niger Bend, and the Southern Sahara. Stone sculptures of human figures are found in five localities, mainly in steatite, and hard crystalline rock. Archaeologists Anozie, Ray, Andah, and Eyo are studying monoliths in the

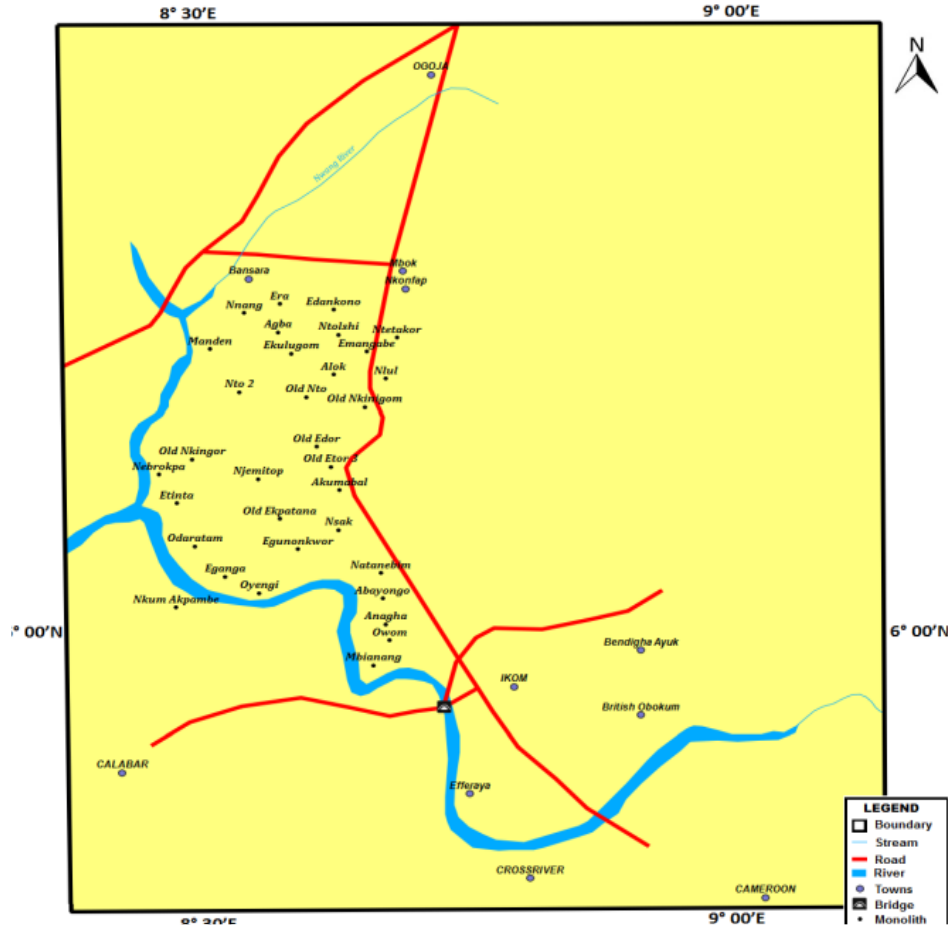


Figure 1. Tribal distribution of monolith sites.
Source: Adapted from Allison (1968) in Ejikeme (2016).

north, boundary zone between Nigeria and Cameroun, and Nta/Nselle and Abanyom/Nnam areas. Their goal is to link monolithic forms to Nok, Nri, and Bantu civilizations (Onor, 1994).

In 1983, Ekpo Eyo, the first Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, conducted an archaeological dig identifying Stone Age artifacts, including cowries and charcoal designs. The monoliths dated about 200AD through carbon dating (Allison, 1968). Eyo and Allison used charcoal samples and the birth and death dates of chiefs to date the monoliths, which were acquired in 1903 and are currently housed in various museums, including those in Lagos, Jos, Oron, Volkerkunde, and Berlin. Monoliths and stone circles hold cultural significance, attracting experts from various fields, including historians, mathematicians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and tourism experts, as evidence of their alignment with celestial movements (Esu and Ukata, 2012). Nigeria's Director-General warns against the loss of nation's rich heritage due to ignorance, devastation, and neglect, suggesting more effort to conserve and preserve heritage sites, which are considered national icons.

FINDINGS

This information is based on data obtained from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct

field observations. Interviews conducted at the Alok Open Air Museum confirmed the division of monolithic sites among the six major clans in the Ikom Local Government Area, which are Nta, Nselle, Abanjom, Nde, Ekajuk, and Nnam. Nta has seven locations, Nselle has two, Abanyom has three, Nde has five, Nnam has twelve, and Ekajuk. During the fieldwork, the researcher discovered that some of the monolith sites no longer exist, while the remaining sites have lost a significant number of monoliths. The focus group discussion revealed local communities view monoliths as ancestors, called Akwanshi or Atal in the Ejagham dialect. They believe they gathered stones from the river and shaped them into faces, representing dead chiefs. The monoliths are named according to the names of the communities.

The ten monolith sites and their features

Alok Akwanshi

Alok monolith is 30 min from Ogoja when driving from

Vandeikya in Benue State (Ejikeme et al., 2020; Ejikeme, 2016). The Alok market, Alok village entrance was marked by the Alok monolith signboard. The playground in Alok Village is roughly 200 m away from the location. The Alok monolith, which was placed in a semicircle, has a diameter of 50 yards. The savannah is the source of the green grasses and herbs that make up the vegetation. On the west side of the site is an effective Nyamamgbe shrine, and there are big silk cotton canopies on the site near some monoliths (Ejikeme et al., 2020; Ejikeme, 2016). The shrine symbolizes the people's ritual life, as evidenced by the presence of animal blood on the monolith. The site features various trees including akpu (*Bombax buonopozense*), called Nkam kam in Alok dialect, palm oil (*Elaies guinnensis*), mango (*Magifera indica* Linn), and bush mango (*Irividia gabonensis*) (Ejikeme, 2016).

Cultural materials found on Alok site are potsherd, slags, manilla, copper rod and lower grinding stone (Ejikeme, 2016). Slag heap and deposit were seen as one trek down to Alok site. Because silk cotton trees form canopies over the site, there is a constant, mild wind at the Alok monolith site, especially throughout the day. The National Commission for Museums and Monuments has block-fenced a site with a gatekeeper's house to protect remaining monoliths, despite littering and domestic animal breeding. The Alok Circle monoliths at the site are deteriorating due to abiotic factors like rain, light, heat, and lack of water. At Alok Circle, microbes have covered some monoliths with corrosive white dust. Chief Olando Akong, the Nnam clan's chief priest, was appointed as the senior technical officer of antiquities but passed away in 2021. The government has not employed any other curators.

Emaghabe site

The Emaghabe site, located 1 km east of Alok village and 100 m from the Ikom/Ogoja road, houses grassland vegetation with stone-arranged monoliths. The site is behind the Emaghabe health center, block-fenced with an entrance gate, but some sections have collapsed. Potsherds, slag, and upper and lower grinding stones are among the cultural artifacts discovered at the site. Visitors can enjoy shade from a mango tree. The site is impacted by nearby farms. The design of monoliths stand at one of the roundabout in Calabar was adapted from Emaghabe site.

Nlun site

The Nlun site is on the major road leading to the Nlun village settlement. It is found in an abandoned settlement of the Nlun people. The vegetation of the area is grassland, whose height is between 3 and 4 m in the rainy season. Farming and bush burning are the major

factors that lead to damage to the monoliths. These activities made the land porous and soft, thereby making some monoliths fall. Some have major and minor cracks on them. Flakes have fallen off of them due to heavy bush burning with dry elephant grass ("*Pennisetum purpureum*") as a combustible material. The abandonment leads to insecurity about the site. The monoliths are also exposed to theft and vandalism. A lot of pottery rimsherd and bodysherd were found at the site.

Ntolshi site

The Ntolshi site is an abandoned settlement of the Ntolshi people. The vegetation of the area is derived from savannah. At Ntolshi, the stones stand haphazard among the houses before the abandonment. Presently, the monoliths at Ntolshi are found in a cultivated farmland. This is the reason the majority of the monoliths at this site are lying on the ground without standing erect. The area has been affected by farming, bush burning, and the heat of the sun. The deforestation of the area in search of firewood has exposed the monoliths to danger. The effect is that certain designs have been defaced and many broken into parts, while others have been catered to.

Edankono site

Another site, Edankono, is located in the abandoned settlement of the Edankono people, just a 5 min drive from Mbok junction.

Trees had seemingly grown in the area before deforestation of the monolith site, and there is substantial evidence of climatic change. Human activities in the area have altered the vegetation to a derived savanna landscape. Monolith ED1 displayed signs of deterioration, including a ring crack, flaking, and spall marks (Plate 1 (5a)). Many of the monoliths at this site are now lying down due to the effects of bush burning, soil porosity, and thermal weathering. They are also covered with black stains, likely from bush burning. Monoliths that were initially upright have been toppled, with one partially buried near a road, attracting vehicles and motorcyclists.

Agba site

Agba site, an abandoned town on Akaju Land, features Atal Shrine and rain forest vegetation. Prior to the abandonment, the Agba monoliths were located in the heart of the village (playground). Despite strong religious prohibitions, bush burning and dry grass buildup during dry seasons have led to increased bush burning. At Agba monolith sites, there are a number of beneficial trees and medicinal plants. The Agba location is roughly 200 m away from Ekajuk village.

The site is accessible by foot and hosts annual sacrifices to the monoliths.



1a



1b



2a



3a



3b



3c



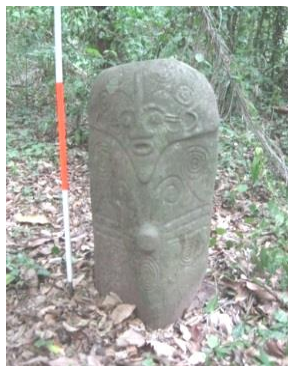
4a



5a



5b



6a



7a



7b



8a



9a



9b



9c



10a



10b

Plate 1. Examples of the ten locations' stone monoliths: Alok (AL) (1a&b), Emaghabe (EM) (2a), Nlun (NL) (3a-c), Ntolshi (NT) (4a), Edamkono (ED) (5a-b), Agba (AG) (6a), Nkirigom (NK) 7a&b), Ntol (NTO) (8a), Njemitop (NJ) (9a-c), Nebrokpa (NE) (10a and b).

Nkirigom site

Nkirigom is a deserted village site that stands now in a forest reserve. The inhabitant moved to the neighboring village of Alok because of the new construction road that linked Ikom and Ogoja towns. The site is located about 70 m from the Aya River. The old Nkirigom site is surrounded by government forestry tree plantations. During the rainy season, the great discharge from the Aya River affects the soil and water conditions at the site. The area is covered by rain forest vegetation. The Nkirigom monolith site is home to various tree species, with the microclimate being influenced by heavy bushes, canopies, creepers, and overhanging trees. The soil is sandy with porous organic top soil. The site is under severe environmental stress, including human activities such as farming, hunting, and forest exploitation. Such practices have resulted in severe degradation of the vegetation of which the monoliths and sites are integral parts. At Nkirigom, Akwanshi exhibit features such as an open mouth, wedge-shaped beard, protruding navel, and facial marks. There is evidence of theft and vandalism at the site, as one head of a monolith is found outside the entrance of the site.

Ntol site

Ntol site is a deserted village site about a mile from Old Nkirigom. It is a thick forested area of about 100 km². It is connected with the forest of Nkirigom site. Ntol has perfect circle of thirty monoliths, of which many have fallen down due to constant bush burning and the porosity of the soil. Since it is a thick forest the soil is moist and porous which also testifies the total collapse and half buried of some monoliths. They are arranged in a very regular circle of about 45 yards diameter with two carved stones standing at the centre. Ntol has the longest and big sized monoliths (Table 1).

The Ntol site is in a forest area and only accessible by motorcycle. The area is abundant in economic trees, medicinal plants, and forest vegetables. Aye River cuts across the Ntol site. The sea level of the Aye River rises seasonally, typically rising significantly during the rainy season and falling during the dry.

Njemitop Akwanshi site (Nselle clan)

Njemitop site is located in Njemitop village. Some

Akwanshi stones have been moved from their original position in the Ekpatana farm settlement, about a mile away, to where they are today. The clan head of the Nselle community noted that this was done for easy accessibility and preservation of the remaining monoliths. The site was covered with Awolowo plants. Some important trees include the silk cotton tree (*Cieba pentandra* Lin. Gacrtn.), the masquerade plant (*Polyalthia longifolia*), the ogirisi (*Newbouldia laevis*) called bukunku, and Moringa (*Moringia*). Akpu (*Bombax buonopozense*) called Eben and Ofonane called Ogbu (*Ficus species*) in Igbo dialect are found at the site.

Nebrokpá Akwanshi site (Nta clan)

Nebrokpá *Akwanshi* is in Nebrokpá village. The monolith at Nebrokpá has been abandoned in the bush along the Etinta to Nta road as one is entering Nebrokpá town. It is about 40 m to the house of Chief Mgbe Mgbe. Some Nta monolith stands are in heaps, signifying the place of production. The site is close to a village football field. The carving lacks distinction and is less deeply incised. The area is covered with Awolowo plants. Many monoliths have been catered to, while others are still in the bush and cannot be explored. Some samples of monoliths are represented in Plate 1.

Village heads and community leaders discussed the semiotic interpretation of monolith marks, stating each stone's significance is determined by its inscription, according to Chief Olando Akong and Chief Vincent Sabon. Figure 2 shows the map of Ikom in the monolith sites.

Table 1 shows number of monolith per site, the height/girth location and level of development of the monolith sites. The average height, girth, and distance apart of monoliths in each site were represented, respectively. The physical observation and measurement of the monoliths shows that they vary in sizes and shape. The stone figures are 3 to 4 feet high, with the largest being 6 feet. Their considerable sizes make one to imagine how these stones were transported to their different locations. It was deduced that the cavers must be strong people that had sophisticated technology. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the monolith sites. Figure 3 shows the statistics of monoliths per site.

From the field observation, Alok site has 33 monoliths, Emanghabe has 17, Ntolshi has 16, Edamkono has 8, and Nlun has 14 monoliths. Numbers 4 and 13 have been transferred by an elderly man called late Dick Ekoma in his compound Nlun 1, Agba has 26, Nkirigom has 27, Ntol has 30, Njemitop has 7, and Nebrokpá has 10 monoliths stand (Ejikeme, 2016).

Monoliths at different sites consist mainly of shaped and decorated basalt boulders, with a few worked in volcanic rock and limestone. The researcher observed

that the carved features appear mainly on the front, facial features, breast, and navel. The monoliths are designed in stylized human or animal figures, and some have tattoos and nsibidi features or spiral marks on them, as was observed in all the sites. The researcher observed that stones capture various emotions or conditions, including bold, sober, regal, wise, happy, feminine, and childlike looks. Few have a triangular inscription called Ufok Ekpe. The monolith stones are connected by their Nsibidi writing code, which is considered Africa's first alphabet.

For Chief Olando Akong, the tattoo marks are given for easy identification of an individual's origin. Facial features like the human fingerprint, arms, two ears, an open mouth, notable two noses, a stylized pointed beard, a breast, and an elaborately marked navel are prominent decorations and other shapes of facial marks as have been observed from the monoliths. The carving appears to indicate male characteristics, despite the beard extending beyond the navel. Chief Olando Akong, the curator of the Alok Open Air Museum, said that the monoliths with protruding navels are said to represent fertility, therefore they are female in nature. Although this assertion is not concrete evidence that all monoliths with protruding navels indicate fertility, other variables like breast size and hair style should be considered in order to reach the conclusion. Some have a cap on them that represents the title of a king called Ntun-Emang, according to elders in the Nnam clan. The carvings are believed to be metaphysical elements that reveal a level of spiritual energy.

In Alok, there are groups of stones known as "Etalabaen," which mean children's stones (AL1h-j). They have a lot of concentric circles in them. The concentric circles on them stand as a symbol of peace and unity in the form of anti-clockwise or clockwise. Chief Akong posited that these circles are believed to be connected to the cultural calendar of the time. Children and adults gather around the stones and dance during the new yam festival. These stones were usually painted with five colors during the new yam festival in Bakor. Cross River State Tourism Burue's logo and colour scheme were inspired by the monolith, symbolizing peace (white), victory (yellow), war (red), fertility (blue), and agriculture (green). At the Alok site, a peace stone (Plate 1(1b)) and an Akpaya stone were found. The peace stone is without inscriptions and has a unique beauty, while Akpaya represents a woman with a shield. Another important monolith stand in Alok is called the wisdom stone (Plate 1(1a)), which signifies fertility. The community believes that any prayer said in front of the stone will be answered.

In all the sites, the monoliths exist as groups of standing stones in the form of a circle or semicircle of about 45/50 diameters made of an inner and outer section, as was observed in each site. They were usually found at the central meeting place. This evidence was

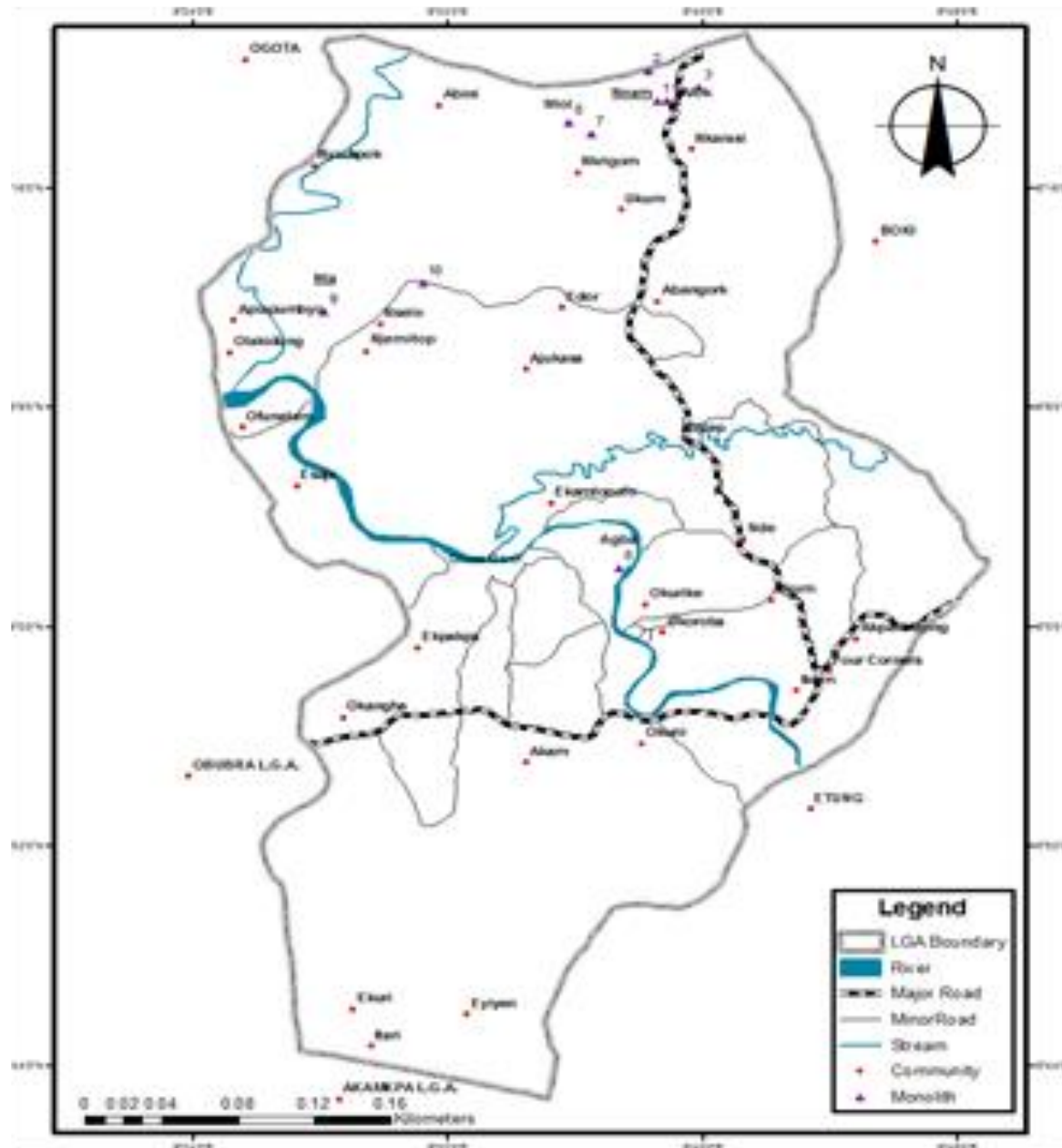


Figure 2. Map of Ikom showing the monolith sites. Source: Ejikeme (2016).

supported by the elders in the Nnam, Nselle, and Nta clans. The monoliths face each other standing erect, except where they have been tampered by weather or man. People far and near visit monolithic sites to look at these stones.

Alok and Emaghabe attract more tourists due to their proximity to major roads in Ikom and Ogoja, with Alok being the main port of call for both domestic and international tourists, according to an interview. Alok and Emaghabe sites offer tourism facilities, hotels, restaurants, health centers, and markets. The Alok

Market, which starts in the evening and ends the next day, sells perishable goods like okra, pepper, vegetables, and garden eggs.

The eve of the market is called Egba, and the real market day is called Nkam. People from nearby towns come to buy these goods. The security of the sites should be considered in the development of the heritage site since some are found out of the village settlement. The roads leading to certain sites are generally good, but there are instances where one must stop and complete their journey on foot or motorcycle.

Table 2. Characteristics of the monolith sites.

Site/Geo. location/rock type	No. of monoliths	Other assemblages	Vegetation	Topography	Contour line	Soil	Threat
Alok (B&V)	33 monoliths in semi-circle formation	Postsherd, slag, rock fragment, lower grinding stone, cultural trees, tombs and Nyamgbe shrine with Nyamgbe statue, body sherd, copper rod and manillas.	Scattered trees with grass and herbs	Gently undulating	350m above sea level	Laterite soil and black brown in colour	Traditional use of the site and thermal weathering
Emaghabe (B)	17 monoliths in circle	Potsherd, slag, one upper and two lower grinding stones.	Derived savannah	Gently undulating	200m above sea level	Sandy soil with organic deposits. Reddish brown in colour	Bush burning, and thermal weathering
Ntolshi (B&L)	16 monoliths in circles	Pot sherd that is the same like Nlun	Derived savannah	Level land	250m above the sea level	Humus and reddish brown	Bush burning, farming, thermal weathering
Edankono (B&L)	8monoliths in circles	None	Derived savannah	Level land	150m above sea leel	Humus black brown soil	Bush burning, thermal weathering
Nlun (B)	14, while no 13 and 4 was transferred to a chief's compound	A lot of pot shered and bodysherd	Grass land with elephant grasses " <i>Pennisetum purpureum</i> "	Flat land	250m above sea level	Loamy and dark brown	Farming and bush burning
Agba (B)	26 monolith in a semi circle form	Potsherds that are the same like Alok own.	Rain Forest with economic trees and medicinal plant	Flat land	150m above sea level	Clayey and reddish brown	Bush burning, Collection of firewood and bush fire
Nkirigom (B)	27 monoliths in circle formation	Rock fragments	Forest dense with creepers	Level ground, always waterlogged during rainy season	150m above sea level	Sandy soil with porous organic top soil	Intense bush burning, tree felling, timber collection, collection of pulp for paper making.
Ntol (B)	30 monoliths. in a complete circles, while king and queen is at the center	None	Rainforest Area	Flat land	150m above sea level	Humus dark brown soil and moist	Felling of trees, bush burning and hunting
Njemitop (L)	7 monoliths removed from the original placeto the town hall site.	None	Savannah with Awolowo grass.	Flat land	200m above sea level	Clayey soil that is reddish in colour	Hunting and bush burning
Nebrokpá (B)	10 monoliths in semi-circle	Body Sherds that are the same of Alok	Derived savannah	Level land	150m above sea level	Humus reddish brown	Bush burning
Total	188						

B: Basalt, L: limestone, V: volcanic.
Source: Ejikeme (2016).

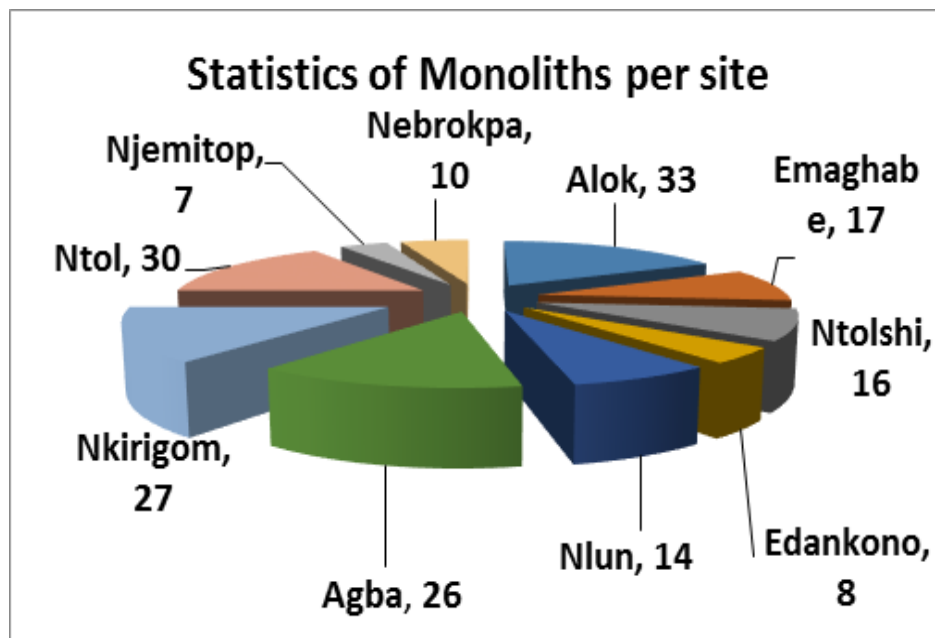


Figure 3. Statistics of monoliths per site.

DISCUSSION

Strength-weakness-opportunities-threats analysis of monolith sites

A study of 188 monolithic stones from ten sites was conducted using SWOT analysis, fieldwork observations, interviews, and focus group discussions to assess the sustainability. The SWOT analysis headings offer a comprehensive method for evaluating a company's strategy, position, and direction (Popa, 2010). The analysis of external opportunities and threats evaluates an enterprise's ability to seize opportunities and avoid threats in uncontrollable environments, while assessing internal strengths and weaknesses in management, efficiency, research, and development (Chang and Huang, 2006: 158).

A SWOT analysis was conducted on monolith sites to assess their performance and prospects, identifying internal and external factors that contribute to their success. This information helped identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, achieving the research objective.

Understanding the challenges and management advantages of monolith sites is crucial for optimizing their potential and enhancing operational procedures (Table 3). SWOT analysis is also utilized for decision-making, problem-solving, and informing employees of the need for change (Heritage Edinburgh World, 2005). From SWOT Matrix, the monolith sites have unique features, of which the strength and absence of good heritage management were found to be the weaknesses. The external

opportunities were the creation of a database for monolith tourism development and packaging, the creation of job opportunities, attracting tourists, the provision of tourism facilities, the preservation of cultural heritage, community development, and an increase in the economic base of the state. Monolith deterioration, lack of facilities, vandalism, and lack of funds were found to be the threats.

The SWOT analysis indicates that monolithic sites can be effectively utilized for tourism development if properly managed. The region's rough topography, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of lodging facilities and services, particularly within the site, pose significant vulnerabilities and dangers. Site integrity threats include lack of funds, lack of policy, bush burning, farming, hunting, wood gathering, thermal heat, microorganism attack, lumbering, and encroachment activities. The weaknesses and threats should be studied carefully so as to find a way of converting them into strengths or opportunities. Stakeholders should minimize threats or weaknesses in tourism development to increase visitation and revenue. Enhancing strengths and mitigating weaknesses can boost monolith site revenue.

However, Camara (2003) asserted that Kerr Batch Stone Circles in Gambia generate significant revenue for the government and locals, with a museum showcasing their rich history (Esu and Ukata, 2012). The entrance fee to the circle cost 1.40 pounds and generated millions of dollars for the country's economy (UNESCO World Heritage Center, 2010).

Table 3. Evaluation of the monolith sites using Swot analysis.

Strengths (internal factor and positive)	Weakness (internal factor and negative)
The people have pleasant welcoming disposition	The origin of the monolith is based on speculation
Outstanding world heritage site in 2005	There is no policy to safeguard the theft of monoliths from the sites
Good carved monoliths of cultural and historical importance	The government is not paying adequate attention to the care of the monoliths
The monolith sites are unique site for tourism development	They have no tourism facilities that can keep tourists especially international tourists
The Monolith sites are internationally known	Poor accessibility of some sites due to neglect
The sites are accessible.	Visit to some sites is seasonal due to some area is swampy
They are close to the urban town	-
They have central market in Alok and Emaghabe	-
They have nearby health centres in Alok and Emaghabe.	-
All the monoliths communities have electricity	-
They have large population in the area that can feed on the sites if developed	-
They have traditional laws that help to keep the area till date	-
Cultural festival and practices are performed in honour of the monoliths, which if developed and documented will attract a lot of tourists	-
The indigenes help to safeguard the area, which is good for development	-
Still in their original state	-
Helped to boost the cultural and social life of the entire community	-
Good site for educational tourists	-
Good for culture enthusiasts	-
It is the best found in Nigeria and good area for heritage tourism development.	-
Opportunities (external factor and positive)	Threats (external factor and negative)
Room for site database for monolith development and packaging	Many of the monoliths have been attacked by microorganism
They can add to economic base of the state and boost local economy through tourism	The monoliths are being defaced via bush burning, farming and thermal heat
They represent an identity of the past	Lack of fund from the government for the management of the sites
They will minimize unemployment in the state	Vandalism and theft
They will attract tourists from far and near because of their uniqueness	There are no clear policies, procedures and guidelines for the promotion of the potential tourism products
They bring to limelight the rich heritage of Cross River State	-
Cultural Preservation	-

The monolith stones' cultural significance to Europeans who appreciate culture raised their market worth to at least 20,000 euros (Obatala, 2011; Esu and Ukata, 2012). The federal

government and Cross River State acknowledge the importance of monoliths, but their protection efforts are hindered by insufficient funding, lack of tourism awareness, and political insecurities.

The response from people showed that the development of the monolith sites would bring a tremendous change in the community and state at large. Numerous individuals surveyed attested to

the fact that the expansion of enterprises in and near the monolith sites will improve the host community's quality of life. Some said that it will create economic opportunities, thereby diversifying the economic base of the state, while others are of the opinion that the harnessing of the monolithic sites helps to protect natural and cultural heritage. The good cultural practices and festivals would be harnessed sustainably in order to attract many domestic and international tourists. Indeed, the indigenous communities want the development of the monolithic sites, which represent their cultural identity. It is important to note that the monolith itself is the main attraction that carries other variables, like tourism development.

Developing the monolith sites using strategic tourism management

Strategic tourism management (STM) emphasizes enhancing tourism through factors such as electricity, infrastructure improvement, stable telecommunication, and consistent government policies (Ayodeji, 2018: 63). Effective management involves the execution of tasks, with sustainable tourism management focusing on preserving cultural heritage and fostering stakeholder commitment. Proper planning is crucial to prevent counterproductive and hazardous practices (Heritage Edinburgh World, 2005: 74). The proposed plans to be integrated into the study area's conservation plans aim to provide a framework for making principled and well-guided decisions for researchers. For the proper development of monolithic sites for heritage tourism, several strategies must be adopted. The first strategy involves reviewing the baseline information from the site. The host communities that house monolithic sites enjoy favorable weather conditions suitable for hosting both local and international tourists and the people are known for their hospitality. This initial review provides an understanding of the current state of the site, and the results revealed that two out of eight sites have seen some degree of development. Despite the challenges of deterioration due to human activities and adverse weather, monolithic sites continue to attract visitors from far and wide. The researcher observed cracks and flakes falling off the monoliths. Tourism development plays a crucial role in maintaining site integrity, protecting them from cultural object traffickers, and preserving their authenticity and quality. Therefore, it is essential to preserve, restore, and promote the authenticity of the heritage site.

Given the belief that the monoliths were created by their ancestors, it is advisable to manage them in a sustainable manner. The Alok monolith circle has traditionally served as a site for communal gatherings and sacrifices. Through conversations with indigenous people, they have expressed a desire for the development of the monolithic sites for tourism. This reflects the

potential income that such development can bring to the entire community, indicating that indigenous communities are receptive to the idea of developing the monolithic sites for tourism. Acceptance is the second key strategy for tourism development, as it helps preserve cultural resources and maintains community significance, ensuring that these sites are not entirely removed from their original context. Travel fosters cross-cultural interaction between visitors and locals, creating a unique and authentic atmosphere at the destination. Therefore, it is essential to blend traditional site management practices with modern approaches to establish an efficient management strategy. Additionally, the sites should be safeguarded against cultural traffickers. The third strategy involves fostering collaboration among the three tiers of government in Nigeria. Right from the initial stages of the development planning process, it is crucial for Nigeria's local, state, and federal governments, as well as the host community, to work together.

This approach aligns with the findings of Allen et al. (1993), who suggested that involving rural or host communities leads to the most effective development of tourism. Wall and Mathieson (2006) emphasized the importance of community participation in planning, implementation, and monitoring to enhance local tourism development. Additionally, the private sector should play a role in the development of this location; government involvement alone is insufficient.

The private sector can contribute to the development of a destination town by establishing infrastructure and amenities, and effectively promoting the site through tour guides and tour operators. The fourth strategy is centered on authenticity and quality, ensuring that high-quality tourism related to natural and cultural heritage accurately represents the native traditions of host communities. It's essential to maintain the monolith sites in their original state. The destination area should offer the necessary infrastructure and tourist facilities, including roads, internet services, power supply, piped water, guesthouses, lodge rooms, camping grounds, caravan parks, holiday cabins, hotels, playgrounds, refreshment rooms, shops, sports facilities, and more. These amenities facilitate easy access to and identification of the sites, ensuring the comfort and relaxation of tourists in their destination area. Tourism authenticity significantly impacts the quality of the tourist experience and the likelihood of future visitor returns, while the quality of a destination's infrastructure and superstructure plays a key role in its growth. Tourist satisfaction is a crucial factor for the success of destination marketing. Sustainable tourism strategies involve engaging communities, creating a profitable sector, welcoming visitors, and conserving the environment through community participation, environmental education, and research (Duran, 2013).

This approach helps communities to value the monolith sites in their domain. Finally, marketing strategies should be employed in the development of these monolithic sites

for heritage tourism. These strategies encompass sales marketing and advertising through both print and digital media, which can enhance the visibility of the destination. Television documentaries about these heritage sites and their tourism potential would be invaluable.

Furthermore, launching the site on the internet to reach a global audience is essential. The cultural practices associated with these sites can be documented for future generations and preserved in museums for research and other purposes. The younger generation finds this phenomenon fascinating and is eager to gain a better understanding of their past. Cross River State, with captivating attractions like monoliths, possesses significant potential that, if harnessed for heritage and cultural tourism, can contribute to the state's economic growth.

The study faced financial constraints stemming from the remote and abandoned nature of the sites, high transportation fares, uncomfortable guesthouses, and a lack of financial incentives. The researcher funded the study independently, and locals mistakenly assumed that an international organization sponsored the research, further complicating its success. Accessing documented data was challenging due to limited literature, biased responses, and unfriendly attitudes towards releasing vital records, including official documents. As a non-native of Cross River State, the researcher collaborated with a tourist guide and interpreter during interviews. They used a tape recorder to verify the interpreter's translations and to capture any missing information.

The research broadens people's knowledge of the abundance of heritage sites in Cross River State and their implications for tourism development. It has also exposed us to the dynamics of cultural values and norms in tourism planning development, particularly in specific locations. They help satisfy the curiosity of a potential cultural or heritage tourist. This research raises awareness about heritage sites' importance in tourism development, alters public perception of Cross River monolith site conservation, aids policymakers in heritage tourism implementation, and encourages future research on improving and conserving heritage sites.

The research suggests that monolithic sites possess unique features that make them attractive to tourists. These sites benefit from a favorable topography and are easily accessible, offering significant opportunities for sustainable tourism development (Ejikeme, 2020). Tourists from various locations are drawn to these cultural treasures, which Cross River State is richly endowed with. These monolithic sites serve as iconic attractions that can satisfy tourists' curiosity and create memorable experiences when properly developed. Unfortunately, the sites have been exposed to harsh weather conditions and human activities, posing a risk to their long-term preservation. Without proper management and assessment for tourism, there is a concern that these sites may deteriorate over time. To address this

challenge, the paper employs SWOT analysis to determine the best strategic tourism management approach for their development.

Conclusion

The monolith, as a cultural artifact, has attracted researchers from various fields, including historians, anthropologists, tourists, geographers, mathematicians, and other cultural enthusiasts. It is considered a model and a national icon that embodies authenticity and integrity. The findings indicate that these heritage sites have not been adequately developed for tourism, despite their abundant resources. Both the Nigerian government and the Cross River State government have allocated limited attention to the development of these pristine heritage sites for tourism. As a result, these sites have been subjected to competing land-use activities such as farming and road construction, with little consideration for mitigating the adverse impact on the heritage sites. These heritage sites merit special attention, particularly because they are included in the federal government's exclusive list. Proper development of these sites can ultimately provide an alternative source of revenue for the state, diversifying its income streams. Based on the assessment of the monolithic sites, they have the potential to be harnessed as cultural and historical heritage sites. Documenting the cultural practices of these sites can serve the purpose of preserving this heritage for future generations and making it available for research and educational purposes. The SWOT analysis reveals the strength and resilience of these heritage sites, indicating the importance of harnessing them for heritage tourism development, as their strengths outweigh their weaknesses. The study proposes two key recommendations. Firstly, there is a need for the proper management and preservation of these heritage sites to ensure their longevity and cultural significance. Secondly, to provide the best possible tourism experience, it is essential to coordinate efforts to establish necessary infrastructure, amenities, and services that cater to both visitors and host communities. While this study offers valuable insights, further research is necessary to fully understand these heritage sites and their contribution to tourism. The researcher recommends conducting a conservation and preservation study, along with archaeological investigations, to determine the age and historical context of the monoliths in Cross River State. This will extend the scope of the completed study and provide a more comprehensive understanding of these important heritage sites.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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