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Maximizing the Eco Tourism Potentials of the Wetland Regions through Sustainable Environmental Consumption: A Case of the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Abstract: At the turn of the millennium, the management and preservation of human, animal and plant species forms a major strand of the sustainable development agenda, defined as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generation from meeting their own needs. However, one major contention which requires scholarly attention and policy discourse is the sustainable maximization of the tourism potentials of the wetlands in the periphery coastal regions such as the Niger Delta in Nigeria, the third largest wetland in the world. The paper engages in the policy relevance of eco-tourism from a Marxian political ecology perspective. Using sets of primary and secondary data sources, it examined two Islands in the Niger Delta namely; Opobo and Bonny to demonstrate incidence of under-utilization or otherwise of the tourist potentials of the islands. Findings suggest that ecotourism has not been given adequate policy attention as the Niger Delta wetlands which ought to have been tourist destinations are unsustainably consumed with deleterious crude oil resource exploration by the Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs). The paper argues that tourism should be prioritized as a central concept in resource sustainability and proposes policy discourse aimed at ecological justice as integral to eco-tourism.

Keywords: Eco-Tourism; Wetlands; Ecology; Sustainable development; inequality.

1. Introduction

Eco tourism focuses on ecological issues associated with tourism. The year 2002 was designated by the United Nations as the "International Year of Ecotourism", which renewed relationship about Ecotourism and Sustainable Development. Eco-tourism relates to the preservation of natural resources e.g. flora and fauna - plant, animal and natural resources.

There are growing evidence of improvements in international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors). This grew by 5% worldwide in 2013, reaching a record 1087 million arrivals, after topping the 1 billion mark in 2012. Asia and the Pacific has some growth with a 6% increase in arrivals, followed by Europe and Africa (both +5%) (UNWTO, 2015).

Similarly, in the Americas, international arrivals grew by 3%, while in the Middle East they were flat. International tourism receipts reached US\$ 1159 billion worldwide in 2013, up from US\$ 1078 billion in 2012 (UNWTO, 2015).

With a 5% increase in real terms, the growth in international tourism receipts equalled the growth in arrivals. China has consolidated its position as the number one tourism source market in the world, spending US\$ 129 billion on international tourism (UNWTO, 2015). Forecasts prepared by UNWTO in January 2014 point to growth of 4% to 4.5% in international tourist arrivals in 2014. By UNWTO region, prospects for 2014 are strongest for Asia and the Pacific (5% to 6%), followed by Africa (4% to 6%) (UNWTO, 2015).

Novel trends and changes in international tourism suggest that tourism has the potential to meaningfully provide economic transformation of both the rich and poor societies. As one of the most rarely employed terms in sustainability debate, eco-tourism has become a central theme in recent debates. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2010), defined tourism as the activities of people traveling away from their usual environment for leisure, business and other purposes. Tourism has been identified by the United Nations (UN) as one of the ten sectors to drive the change towards a Green Economy and was included in the Rio+20 Outcome Document as one of the sectors capable of making a significant contribution to the three dimensions of sustainable development, and has close linkages to other sectors, and can create decent jobs and generate trade opportunities (UNWTO, 2013).

Despite these prospects, it is only recently that sustainable tourism gained visibility in international development discourse (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1992). Several

studies have employed tourism to describe mixed fields of study and social interactions. However, sustained treatments that theorize eco-tourism as a development tool and ecological instrument remains rare. To some extent, this scant study mirrors the paucity of development scholarship directly engaging eco-tourism in the coastal areas in particular. Although one can find a few articles based on post Ramsar 2012 convention on Wetlands, the convention shows that it is only recently that the challenges of the Wetlands and sustainability binary was given a global attention ([The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2012](#)). Nevertheless, regular discussions of tourism at post recent global summits such as the 2012 Rio +20 point to an emerging scholarship and policy expediency of eco-tourism in development discourse.

More critical beyond this offshoot is the fact that there are relatively few relics of eco-tourism projects in practical terms to uphold the core tenets of sustainable development among the poor coastal societies.

There is a number of urgent policy relevance of eco-tourism. More than 70% of the world's fish species are being depleted ([UN, 2006](#)). There is increasing rate of disappearance of primary tropical rainforests projected in the excess of 140,000 km²/year ([Worldwatch Institute, 2003](#)).

Recent reports show the increasing relegation of the tourism potentials of the wetland Niger Delta which beyond crude oil has rich vegetation, terrestrial and aquatic habitats that could drive the economy of Nigeria. However its under-utilization has rendered the tourism sector redundant and unproductive as the country relies solely on crude oil which contributes about 95% of the GDP. The narrow or monolithic resource base of the country has made it a primary exporter.

The [Nigeria Tourism Master Plan \(2006\)](#) recommended five tourism clusters namely; Tropical Rainforest (Cross River and Akwa Ibom States), Conference Capital (FCT Abuja), Atlantic Gateway (Ogun and Lagos States), Scenic Nature (Plateau, Bauchi and Gombe States), Sahara Gateway (Kano and parts of Kaduna) the Wetland areas were neither highlighted nor given particular attention.

The wisdom of economic diversification could propel Nigeria to economic prosperity through huge investment in tourism. On the contrary over dependency on oil has led to communal crisis, resource conflicts, corruption, environmental degradation etc. The state is also responsible for formulating and implementing macroeconomic policies which, depending on its substance, focus and scale, more often have unintended negative or positive incidence on the environment ([UNDP, 2006](#)).

The dearth of studies and policy discourse on this subject matter do not match the actual importance of the tourism potentials of the wetlands. Within the political ecology dialectics, eco-tourism and natural resource sustainability become, inextricably related to the people and society that use them. This also means avoiding a single hypothetical explanations of unsustainable environmental consumption. Thus, a key challenge to eco-tourism namely; unsustainable environmental consumption remains at issue.

[Stern \(1997\)](#), provides a vortex of perspectives and meanings consumption had acquired in recent scholarship from the economists, physicists, sociologists, ecologists etc, but finds better expression from environmental perspective and argues that; "consumption consists of human and human-induced transformations of materials and energy. Consumption is environmentally important to the extent that it makes materials or energy less available for future use, moves a biophysical system toward a different state or, through its effects on those systems, threatens human health, welfare, or other things people value." (p. 20).

Unsustainable environmental consumption and tourism nexus have also been the centre of debates contending that sustainability concepts reflect the interests of the affluent societies more than the sites and communities they claim they protect ([Davidson and Hatt, 2005](#)).

In this article, our central argument is that research on eco-tourism oftentimes appears to be at best descriptive, noncritical and superficial as concrete expression of the needs of the poor Wetland regions are rarely met or effectively articulated in global policy discourse. To that end, this article revisits eco-tourism and sustainability binary in the context of a series of evidence of ecological relapse supportive of the enormous challenges of unsustainable environmental consumption that threatens the maximization of eco-tourism potentials of the coastal Niger delta region.

The article takes the responsibility of possible repositioning of tourism in the Niger Delta and indeed Nigeria and draws the attention of international development discourse and policy makers to policy initiatives that could mitigate the ongoing deleterious effects of anthropogenic resource exploitation in the Niger Delta like most wetlands in the Third World.

It presents a critical analysis that concludes that failure to address tourism challenges of the Niger Delta region will catalyze amplified depletion of natural resources, such as the eco system.

1.1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The most influential framework to understand the dynamics of inequitable natural resource exploitation is the Marxian political ecology approach. Political ecologists seek to explore the critical challenges posed by poor and unjust natural resource management. The origins of the field in the 1970s and 1980s were as a result of the development of radical development geography and cultural ecology ([Bryant, 1998](#)). Historically, political ecology has focused on phenomena affecting the developing world; since the field's inception, "research has sought primarily to understand the political dynamics surrounding material and discursive struggles over the environment in the third world" ([Bryant, 1998](#)).

In the interaction with natural environment within societies and communities, nature provides the material conditions and opportunities for life however, it does not contain an inexhaustible reservoir available to be transmuted to human needs (Giddens, 1981). Natural environment provides both enablement and constraints which can only be defined in connection with social praxis (Cohen, 1989).

There is an inherent contradiction in the relation between human social life and the material/organic aspects of the human condition. Human social life is predicated upon nature, yet it has a non-conformity to the natural order and, therefore, it is set off against it (Cohen, 1989). Much of this debate finds relevance in explicating sustainable tourism and development potentials among the wetlands in the Third World societies such as the Niger Delta.

Primary and secondary data sources were deployed. Primary data on eco-tourism potentials of the wetland Niger Delta was collected through self-administered primary survey conducted between May 2011 and January 2013. The population of the study was derived from traditional rulers, community leaders; youth and women groups in two major Islands in the Niger Delta namely; Bonny and Opobo Islands both are located in Rivers state. Bonny Island is located at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean facing the Bight of Bonny. It is made up of two main areas the mainland and the hinterland. The mainland comprises the Township, Sandfield, Iwoama, Orosikiri, Aganya, Ayambo, Akiama, Workers Camp, Finima and some outlying fishing settlements lying along the Bonny River's coastline. The hinterland includes the villages that serve as home to indigenes of Bonny kingdom. Bonny Island-Finima is surrounded on the west and south by long stretches of beaches. The beautiful beaches attract tourists and fun seeking inhabitants alike on sunny days and festive periods. Opobo Island is also located at the edge of the Atlantic ocean. It is made up of Opobo and Nkoro and other adjoining communities. The rural communities have mangrove swamps, rich alluvial soil, fishing pots etc which are features of the riverine settlements.

The survey was based on (Stern, 1997) whose earlier survey on consumption as a problem for environmental sustainability remains useful. Semi-Structured questionnaires were administered to respondents. A simple random sampling technique was used to collect primary data based on sample size of 1,500 respondents in the twenty randomly selected sample. The instrument of primary data collection was a semi-structured questionnaire titled; *Eco Tourism Potentials of the Wetland Regions and Sustainable Environmental Consumption* (ECTOPWERSE) with reliability index of 0.88. Percentages, weighted mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions.

Extensive review of relevant secondary data which covers the period 1990 to 2014 was undertaken to explore the dynamics of deleterious environmental consumption. The secondary data sources derived from texts, internet materials, seminal reports and relevant studies.

2. History of Study Area and Background to Tourism in Nigeria

The oil rich Niger Delta as now defined officially by the Nigerian Government, extends over about 75,000 km² and makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass. Historically and cartographically, it consists of present day, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Abia, Imo, Ondo, Edo, Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The region had a total population of 31.2 million by 2006 Census. It has more than 40 ethnic groups including the Efik, Ibibio, Anang, Oron, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Kalabari, and Igbo (Egbaji, 2007). The region is the product of both fluvial and marine sediment build-up since the upper Cretaceous period, some 50 million years ago. Over time, up to 12,000 metres of shallow marine sediments and deltaic sediments have accumulated, contributed mainly by the Niger River and its tributaries (Ukapanah, 1991). It is a densely populated region sometimes called the Oil Rivers because it was once a major producer of palm oil.

It is located in the southern part of Nigeria and bordered to the South by the Atlantic Ocean and to the East by Cameroun. The area is the 3rd largest wetland in the world. It has a coastline spread of over 540km. All the oil and gas activities in Nigeria takes place in the Niger Delta. The area contributes over 80% of Nigeria's revenue (Uyigue and Agho, 2007). It has diverse vegetation belts from the largest rain forests in Nigeria to mangrove swamps, savannahs, mountains and waterfalls with rare animals, including endangered species and unusual plant families, making it one of the world's richest biodiversity centres. The rich vegetation of much of the region has been documented. Ogoniland is characterized by typically deltaic features: uneven terrain, numerous creeks, shallow brackish water bodies and a variety of vegetation types including swamp forest (UNEP, 2011).

The Niger Delta like most wetlands has enormous tourist potentials. Egbaji (2007) noted that tourism development in Nigeria started in 1962. According to Ukapanah (1991) tourism in Nigeria started with the establishment of Nigerian Tourist Association (NTA) with the recognition of the International Union of Official Travel Organization (IUOTO), now known as World Tourism Organization (WTO).

Esu (2013) recounts that because of the pressure from NTA, Government in 1971 engaged the African Development Bank (ADB) to conduct feasibility study to ascertain the tourism potential of Nigeria. At the end of the exercise ADB report indicated that Nigeria has huge tourism potential that can fuel its economic development. Acting on the recommendation of the study, the Federal Government of Nigeria promulgated Decree No. 54 of 1976. The Decree established the Nigeria Tourism Board (NTB) to replace the erstwhile Nigerian Tourist Association.

In 1989 a national conference on tourism was held in Maiduguri. The objective of the conference was to appraise the state of tourism development in Nigeria visa-vis the performance of NTB. The recommendation from the conference led to the establishment of a department of tourism in the Ministry of Trade. In 1992, Decree No. 54 of 1976 was replaced by Decree 81 of 1992. The Decree replaced the erstwhile NTB and in turn established the Nigeria Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) (Esu, 2013).

In 2005 the Nigerian tourism master plan was set up and made its recommendation in 2006, however the wetlands were largely missing. This gap in the study of Nigerian tourism is what this study seeks to fill. Eco-tourism is now an issue of global scholarly and policy concern as a delicate balance exist between the people of the Niger Delta and their fragile ecosystem.

3. Literature Review

In the last two decades, debates on tourism have been central in sustainable development discourse. This novel research endeavour has had a profound impact on environmental and economic wellbeing of the poor societies. The essence of this research agenda is both policy driven, analytical and developmental by bringing to the fore sustainable, renewable and equitable ecological choices. Such rational and objective choices should as a matter of development expediency attract global attention and increase research on the subject as the Niger Delta region has rich tourism potentials which are poorly harnessed.

According to UN's World Tourism Organization, Africa continued to enjoy sustained growth, attracting 5% more international tourist arrivals in 2013, corresponding to an increase of 3 million. The region welcomed a total of 56 million tourists (5% of the world) last year after surpassing the 50 million mark in 2012. International tourism receipts remained at US\$ 34 billion (Hall and Lew, 1998). The region maintained a 5% share in worldwide arrivals and a 3% share in receipts. North Africa (+6%) had another year of robust growth. Morocco (+7%) is the first African destination to have surpassed the mark of 10 million international arrivals, while Tunisia (+5%) recovered further. Arrivals growth in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at 5%, though individual destinations with data available show a mixed picture. South Africa, the largest destination in the sub region, reported 4% growth. Seychelles (+11%) and Gambia (+9%) reported strong growth, while Mauritius (+3%), Zimbabwe (+2%) and Uganda (+1%) posted more modest increases (UNWTO, 2014). Nigeria is conspicuously absent from the above data.

Government policy that promotes equity is especially worth examination not only do many consider morally undesirable the gross inequities that presently characterize most societies and the world as a whole, but various lines of evidence suggest that these inequities are biophysically (as well as socially) *unsustainable* (as in original) (Daily and Ehrlich, 1996; Holdren *et al.*, 1995). The existing inequality perpetuates poverty, including deleterious impacts on biophysical components of Earth's life-support systems (Dasgupta, 1993).

This hinders possible cooperation among parties of differing socioeconomic status required-to avert potentially disastrous population and environment-related problems and informed a renewed focus on sustainable environmental consumption as a key enabler for maximization of eco - tourism potentials of the wetland region. This dynamic which has been poorly explored within the theoretical and conceptual analysis of tourism calls for scholarly attention.

A number of literature are discussing aspects of tourism, such as the geographical perspectives of sustainable tourism (Eja *et al.*, 2011). Bramwella and Laneb (2010) explored sustainable tourism in the context of an evolving global approach and identified the plausibility of a global discourse on tourism as integral to sustainable development.

The challenges and prospects of ecotourism which has gained relevance in recent debates in the Third World has been aptly captured. For instance, Cater (1993) observes that ecotourism is a strand of tourism which is undoubtedly a thriving sector which "offers tourism companies and Third World destinations alike the prospect of capitalizing on the comparative advantage of these nations in terms of unspoiled natural environments"(p1). She underscored the latent threats posed by unsustainable environmental use to tourism.

According to Swarbrooke (1999) issues of sustainable tourism and the wider debates on ethics of business are central to the understanding of the enormous challenges of sustainable tourism he observed that "sustainable tourism is not just about protecting the environment it is also concerned with long term economic viability and social justice"(p.vii). He argued that there is need for more critical evaluation of existing thinking and techniques in the area of sustainable tourism. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) opine that there are too many sacred cows that are not being challenged rigorously enough or ..for instance where is the evidence that small scale tourism is inherently more sustainable than mass tourism regardless of the environment in which it takes place? (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003).

Tourist destinations have also been seen as a competitive destination within a comparative analysis across countries and regions of the world (Swarbrooke, 1999). Much of the resourcefulness of tourism beyond leisure and entertainment is reinforced in subsequent scholarship (Kester, 2003).

In most African countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Algeria, Morocco, Gambia and Egypt and South Africa the tourism sector contribute hugely to the annual GDP (Eja *et al.*, 2011).

In the Nigerian context, Archibong (2004) identified "Success Factors Determining Nigeria as a Tourist Destination" and concluded that for Nigeria government to further reap from the tourism sector, government must stabilize their macroeconomics and provide functional socio-economic amenities that would move the tourism industry to greater height. Such "poor macroeconomics" are replete in the patterns of unsustainable environmental consumption (Akpan and Obang, 2012). Such deleterious environmental consumption are evident in the multinational oil companies (MNOCs) and associated environmental degradation in oil extraction and the liquefied natural gas (LNG) in Bonny Island.

Lee Niedringhaus Davis argues that "despite ambitious industry expansion plans, people in general know very little about what liquefied gasses are, or about the nature of their deadly white umbrellas"

Baggio (2008) delineated tourist sites in Nigeria to include festivals and cultural celebrations (such as Durbar festivals), national parks (as in old Oyo, Yankari and Akamkpa), as well as other geographical sites (such as Aso Rock). Baggio (2008) argued that tourism destination (TD) “is a geographical location (city, region, resort, etc.), with a pattern of attractions, facilities, and services, which tourists choose for a visit”. The vulnerability of tourist destinations in the Niger Delta such as water ways is readily discernible as a result of militants and attacks by sea pirates. These potential vectors are equally threats to sustainable tourism.

Sustainable tourism should be viewed in three ways-in terms of social, economic and environmental. This study emphasise the later, encompassing ecological sustainability which argues that natural resources should be harnessed in such a way that it could not cause harm to both the environment and human population (Daily and Ehrlich, 1996; Davidson and Hatt, 2005; Hart, 1997).

This article will define “sustainable tourism” as the tourism that meets the needs of the present generation without causing environment degradation and consequent tainting of the ecosystem for the future generation. Sustainability implies not only ecological responsible but as well as socially just, equitable, gender fair and economically beneficial use of resources. Sustainable resource use is closely related to the concept of the carrying capacity of a given ecosystem, the limit of exploitation of an area beyond which the ecosystem is in danger or suffers degradation (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2006; Goodland, 1995; Swarbrooke, 1999).

In the closing years of the last millennium, ecologists and development experts have come close circle that tourism sector could be an influential resource hub of the coastal regions in the Third World (Swarbrooke, 1999). Importantly, the Niger Delta is one of such regions.

According to the Niger Delta Human Development report UNDP (2006), a major concern is the region’s longstanding exclusion from the mainstream of Nigeria’s socio-economic and political activities. Equally, natural resource degradation such as land implies a loss in the intrinsic value or quality resulting from both natural and human process over a period of time.

Existing literature shows evidence of unsustainable environmental resource use in the region which has been a challenge to eco- tourism. Amadi *et al.* (2014) observed that poor people are vulnerable to environmental dynamics because social, political and economic exclusion indicates they are left with few choices about where they live.

It is pertinent to understand how the perceptions of the corporate world are shaping or undermining tourism. Ecologist, Juliet Schor had demonstrated this growing concern and argued that first, it is important to remember that all manufactured goods have environmental effects associated with their production and in some cases, consumption (Schor, 2005).

In the particular case of the Niger Delta, there are several multinational oil companies (MNOCs) whose activities are at variance with environmental sustainability and greening. Hennchen (2011) shows that there is a paradox in Nigeria. Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) a major multinational oil company (MNO) in the Niger Delta and its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts are counter-productive because, on the one hand, they build hospitals and schools, but, on the other, they are not doing enough to counteract the negative impact their core business has on the environment. Similarly, the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) in Bonny contributes to deleterious environmental consumption which taints the environment through its gas extraction.

Opukri and Ibaba (2008) provide some explications of the effects of these activities and argued that they (communities) bear the adverse effects of natural hazards, biodiversity loss and forest depletion, pollution and the negative impact of industrialization vis-à-vis oil exploration.

Environmental degradation issues are of topical concern to communities in the Niger-Delta as it is a major cause of productivity losses (Amadi, 2013).

Drawing from the perceptions of the local people on tourism, Ijeomah and Esaen (2011) observed that the perception of the local people towards identified tourism potentials; packaging of these tourism virtues into products together with the management and marketing of the products, are functions of culture and attitude of the people.

The focus on tourism reveals not only the marginalization and under-utilization of the resources of the region but shows the multi-dimensional importance of the Niger Delta region to economic development of Nigeria.

Amadi (2013) identified ecological effects of the 2012 flood disaster in the Niger Delta arising from anthropogenic activities and its impact on the peasants and decline in rural food production. The question is; How do we create sustainable and innovation enhancing eco-tourism in the poor wetland regions?. The debate on eco-tourism rages on and requires effective policy framings.

The literature on tourism suggests that there are scant studies on the wetland regions. Adequate policies should be made by the federal government to fully maximize the tourism potentials of the wetland Niger Delta region. The paper suggests that eco-tourism theories have the greatest potential for advancing this field of inquiry and institutionalizing long term economic wellbeing of the wider society including rural women who are the most vulnerable. While this study needs further research, the empirical validity of challenges of eco-tourism arising from deleterious environmental use is glaring (UNDP, 2006; UNEP, 2011). Recent interest in tourism gave rise to alternative perspectives such as eco-tourism, eco labelling, eco-efficiency, de-materialism, green tourism, (Swarbrooke, 1999), which have gained increasing currency in tourism debates.

Further theoretical exploration of the term includes the core lineaments of concepts such as “culture tourism” which has also become a major strand of tourism and a practice that emphasizes ecological preferences.

A review of the literature shows that gap exists in the current research on strategies to maximize eco-tourism potentials of both Bony and Opobo Islands in the wetland Niger Delta. While there appears to be agreement that eco-tourism practice is integral to socio-economic and environmental sustainability, there is little consensus in the literature on what practicable policy discourse aimed to uphold and strengthen the tourism potentials of the region. This calls for urgent policy discourse.

3.1. Environmental Unsustainability and Challenges of Tourism in the Niger Delta

A number of studies and reports have provided ample evidence of environmental challenges to tourism in the Niger Delta region (Amadi, 2013; Amadi *et al.*, 2015; Duke and Burns, 1999; UNEP, 2011). The rich vegetation of the region, the aquatic and terrestrial animals are threatened. There have been enormous implications of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta such as distortions in the ecosystem, biodiversity loss, deforestation and pollution. UNEP (2011) observed that the oil industry, in the Niger Delta has both an urban and a rural presence, as oil wells are located throughout the rural areas. Chronic leaks have resulted in widespread destruction of fishing and agricultural resources and contributed significantly to the deforestation that have completely destroyed marine life in affected areas.

Duke and Burns (1999) explore the “Fate and Effects of dispersal of Oil on Mangrove Ecosystems”, they contend that such imminent threats have negative effects on human and non-human species inhabiting a given ecosystem.

This is pollution of farmlands and fresh groundwater found in the shallow, sandy and unconfined aquifers of the coastal beach ridges, river bars and islands in the mangrove belt, as well as at varying depths in confined aquifers. There is ground water thus aquifers are a crucial resource upon which the region’s entire population depends for drinking water. The protection of these aquifers is therefore vital (Amadi, 2013; UNEP, 2011).

Industrial fishing through toxic substance has also been an issue. Deforestation has been another challenge including bush burning. Rural hunting and quest for bush meat have reduced wild life potentials of the region. There is vulnerability of climate change, corrosive erosion (Amadi and Ogonor, 2015) and other woes have all been traced to the oil exploration and production activities of the oil companies.

Studies have shown that non-timber forest products, such as firewood, snails, medicinal plants and spices, have significantly declined in recent years due to pollution, deforestation, coastal flooding and erosion (Amadi *et al.*, 2015; Emuedo and Emuedo, 2014). Women in upland areas engage in farming of food crops while those in the riverine areas engage in fish and gather sea foods; periwinkles, oysters, snails, shrimps, and crayfish. Women are thus, —food producers, procurers and preparers (Amadi, 2013; Emuedo and Emuedo, 2014).

However, tourism potentials of the Niger delta seem largely constricted by the negative impacts of oil activities. In the aquatic environment, the mangrove forests, the basic nurseries for all aquatic species have been negatively impacted. Niger Delta mangroves have the highest rate of depletion in the world (FAO, 2012). Light crude, produced, in the region impacts more adversely on mangroves than heavy crude (Proffitt *et al.*, 1995; UNEP, 2011) and regeneration of impacted mangroves take about 20 years (Duke and Burns, 1999).

Unabated oil spills have led to poor water quality in the region. Studies have shown that poor water quality impacts on species composition, assemblages and distribution of fish. A large number of wells drilled in the coastal area produce brackish (salty) water which is not fit for drinking. In some areas, brackish groundwater can be found at depths greater than 200 metres below ground level (UNEP, 2011).

Original vegetation consists mainly of mangroves. The coastal area comprises three vegetation zones: (i) beach ridge zone, (ii) saltwater zone and (iii) freshwater zone. The beach ridge zone is vegetated by mangroves on the tidal flats and by swamp trees, palms and shrubs on the sandy ridges. The saltwater zone is mainly vegetated by red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) (UNEP, 2011). The coastal plain and freshwater zone is vegetated by forest tree species and oil palm. The Niger River floodplains are covered by rainforest trees, oil palm, raffia palms, shrubs, lianas, ferns and floating grasses and reeds (UNEP, 2011). Mangroves have traditionally provided a variety of ecosystem services and products to the community, including fishing grounds, timber for housing, and fuelwood. Tree and shrub cover remains important in uncultivated areas. Other non-timber forest products which are important, especially for poorer households, include grass cutters, bamboo for staking of yam (edible perennial herbaceous vines), medicinal plants, vegetables, fruits and snails (UNEP, 2011).

4. Discussions

The article has explicated some of the salient issues raised on the deleterious natural resource use which undermines the maximization of the tourism potentials of the Niger Delta. The data gleaned from both primary and secondary sources confirm the increasing environmental degradation and poor harnessing of the tourism potentials of the region. This is consistent with the UNDP Niger Delta human development report which shows that majority of the people in the delta live on the margins. Reducing exclusion and achieving more even handed development will depend on the empowerment of socially marginalized groups and individuals, stronger social institutions and infrastructure, and the development of the capacity of existing local groups (UNDP, 2006).

Similarly, UNEP (2011) identified massive environmental pollution and raised the issue of clean up.

The increasing environmental threats posed by LNG in Bonny Island is buttressed. For instance, Davis (1979) argues that “LNG poses a greater threat to the public than any other liquefied gas-not so much because it is

inherently more flammable or explosive than they are, but because it is transported and stored on such a tremendously large scale”(p.3).

In Nigeria, the recognition of the socioeconomic benefits of tourism has been endorsed by the Federal Government of Nigeria with the formulation of the Nigeria Tourism Development Master Plan in 2005. The plan has suffered delay in implementation. Moving forward, the Federal Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation in September, 2011 held a sensitization meeting in Abuja for tourism managers in the public sector on the implementation of the Nigeria Tourism Master Plan.

This has not been given required policy attention. In particular, the wetland Niger Delta region is missing in the plan as discussed. Over time, resource use in a given environment may lead to one of the four following situations of the ecosystem: under-use, optimal use, over-use and depletion. The distinction between non-renewable and renewable resources has important implications on the question of sustainable tourism as a number of aquatic and terrestrial species are extinct.

Unsustainable tourism is both part of a disequilibrium process between exploitation and availability of resources. Such as forests, plant and animal species, natural habitats, resources etc. Spatial and temporal scales are significant in the analysis of sustainable tourism including cultural practices on resource uses and policy priorities. Equally important to sustainable tourism is physical and social effects of unsustainable tourism as most youths in present times are socially disoriented on issues of tourism potentials. The causes may lie not in the present regime of tourism practices but overtime the poor orientation on tourism calcifies.

Pressure of population on resources (PPR), is equally associated with unsustainable resource consumption which negatively affects tourism. Nigeria's population as African's most populous nation is equally a factor necessitating the need for eco-tourism.

The government and policy makers should play various roles which are relevant to the process of sustainable tourism. It can intervene for better tourism management. It can regulate unsustainable resource use or give more freedom to resource equality and ecological justice. The numerous actions of the state can impact on the range of choices on tourism management and development. One of its most important roles is defining the distribution of natural resources and access to resources.

4.1. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The central goal of this research inquiry is to ensure that plant, animal and environmental elements of the wetland regions are preserved within the carrying capacity of the ecosystems. Failure of which could be counter-productive as some species could go extinct and human lives in the long run might equally be negatively impacted.

It presents a critical analysis that concludes that failure to address tourism challenges of the Niger Delta region will catalyze amplified depletion of natural resources, such as the eco system, enhance levels of global poverty and impair humanity's capacity to rectify these problems in the future. This analysis makes some primary policy contributions to the field of tourism and development policy.

It theoretically demonstrates why tourism should share top priority with poverty alleviation policies and natural resource sustainability as the two over-arching objectives of international development strategy. The article introduces a theoretical analysis that questions the verity of theories and assumptions that justify existing unsustainable eco system exploitation. In particular, the wetland Niger Delta.

There should be periodic re-evaluation of tourism development policies to understand and mitigate resistance to sustainable resource use and to promote tourism improvement policies. The paper puts forth avenues of further policy discourse and research to facilitate effective operationalization of tourism development both in the Niger Delta and Nigeria. It demonstrates that policies at achieving eco-tourism necessitates ecological justice.

There are debates that achieving a sustainable balance between per capita environmental consumption could bolster sustainable development (Daily and Ehrlich, 1996; Hawken *et al.*, 1999).

Considering massive poverty in the Niger Delta (UNDP, 2006) more care should be taken on the preservation of plant and animal species. Although the elite and the capitalist accumulation ethos often leads to deleterious use of the environment which affects tourism. However tourist centres in the Niger delta could be transformed through a check in deleterious resource consumption and fixing the environmental priorities right.

The Oloibiri oil field in Bayelsa State where crude oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in 1956 is supposed to be transformed and developed as a tourist destination. Invalidating the viability of achieving a sustainable tourism through a balance involving lower environmental use and higher resource conservation could propel commitment to ecological conservation and efficient use of the tourism potentials which could represent economically effective strategies for ameliorating prevalent environmental degradation.

It is evident that only policies directed at sustainable tourism development that limits unsustainable natural resource use and habitat exploitation could strike a balance in the long term to put sustainable tourism strategy in practice.

Such balance could be replicated in developing two key Islands in the Niger Delta as international tourist centres namely; Opobo and Bony Islands.

Equally, as we emphasize eco-tourism, there are a range of building blocks for policy discourse aimed at the transition to a green tourism which can be categorised as follows: (a) Minimizing environmental depletion and institutionalizing ecological justice (b) Investing in environmental infrastructure; (c) Incentive to eco-tourism and

wild life conservation (d) Innovation in natural resource management and investment (e) adoption of greening and eco-efficiency strategies by corporate organization(oil multinationals) and other stakeholders.

The relative emphasis on these different blocks depends on the national context. The current international environmental development paradigm centres on equitable and resourceful paradigm as could be found in UN development blueprints such as Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals as the later has been transformed to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)as a post 2015 development agenda. In these development discourses eco- tourism should be prioritised.

This paper explicates that developing and disseminating knowledge concerning the links between tourism trends are important for sustainable development. This could be institutionalized through;

- 1) Formulating integrated national policies for environment and development, taking into account tourism challenges as a development driver in the 21st century.
- 2) Implementing integrated, environment and development programmes at the local level, taking into cognizance the plights of the wetland regions of the world to mitigate their vulnerabilities.
- 3) (3)An inclusive poverty alleviation programme that could reduce undue natural resource exploitation is suggested.
- 4) UN and global stakeholders should prioritize tourism as paraphernalia to equitable and sustainable development in the Wetland regions.

The result of this research is the inevitability of a global tourism policy agenda for the wetlands as a number of unsettled ecological issues that cause environmental breakdown which are threats to the future of humanity abound. In most periphery societies, where ecological degradation is more severe, many countries are beginning to recognize the need to reinvigorate tourism in several universities such as in Nigeria, Tourism and Hotel Management has been introduced as course of study and several tourism centres including hotels are springing up.

In most advanced countries such as US, Australia, Canada etc, policies are framed to promote tourism. In Nigeria the state and federal ministries of tourism and tourism boards should be encouraged to fully integrate their policies and programs to the wider economic and social development of the nation and the wetland regions in particular.

In Malaysia, Singapore, Dubai, Estonia etc tourism provides a substantial part of their GDP as explicated. In Nigeria such innovations have been minimal. Incentives to citizens for engaging in ecological resource sustainable endeavours will not only preserve the natural resource base but create awareness for environmental sustainability.

Ultimately, effective tourism rests directly with the efforts of stakeholders and policy makers to make rational choices and decisions about the coastal environment. Much of the recent debates on tourism have focused attention on "green tourism" as paraphernalia for sustainable tourism. Mainstream developmental conceptions of this debate at post liberal order argue that the 1990s were marked by the dominance of neoliberal approaches. The problems were clear all along, certainly from social and development points of view, but as long as Anglo-American capitalism was thriving, much of the criticism fell on deaf ears ([International Chamber of Commerce \(ICC\), 2012](#)).The research organisation ETC Group argues that the corporate emphasis on bio-economy "will spur even greater convergence of corporate power and unleash the most massive resource grab in more than 500 years"(Hart, 1997).

Hart (1997) re-echoed that the achievements of sustainability will mean billions of dollars in products, services and technologies that barely exist today. Whereas yesterday's business were often oblivious to their negative impact on the environment and today's responsible business must strive for zero impact, tomorrow's business must learn to make a positive impact.

Schor (2005) points to the fact that unsustainable consumption is a global challenge to sustainable development. In the Niger Delta much of the environmental disasters which taint its tourism potentials is foreshadowed in several seminal studies and reports ([Amadi and Ogonor, 2015](#); [UNDP, 2006](#); [UNEP, 2011](#)).

Ulrich Hoffmann, in a paper for UNCTAD also says that the focus on Green Economy and "green growth" in particular, "based on an evolutionary (and often reductionist) approach will not be sufficient to cope with the complexities of climate change" and "may rather give much false hope and excuses to do nothing really fundamental that can bring about a U-turn of global greenhouse gas emissions ([Hoffmann, 2011](#)).

Similarly, based on the facts discussed, there is a clear need to manage wetland tourism wisely through sound policies, planning, and awareness-raising – in other words, by putting the principles of eco- tourism into action. The Ramsar Convention Secretariat and UNWTO launched at COP11 (July 2012) a publication that highlights the considerable value of wetlands for tourism and the economic benefits that tourism can bring for the management of wetland sites ([Hoffmann, 2011](#)).

Much of these benefits need to be properly integrated into development plans of the wetland regions such as the Niger Delta. Thus, policy discourse should focus on possible strategies to mainstreaming of sustainable tourism into all development planning, to foster and promote a culture of ecological justice and environmental accountability.

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