

Opinion of Stakeholders on the Management of Ecotourism in the Benue National Park of the North Region of Cameroon

Jean Baurel Atchombou^{1*}, Abubakar Ali Shidiki¹, Martin Ngankam Tchamba¹, Kamgang Serge Alexis²

¹Department of Forestry, Faculty of Agronomy and Agricultural Sciences, University of Dschang, Dschang, Cameroon

²Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, School of Wildlife Garoua, Garoua, Cameroon

Email: *jeanatchombou@yahoo.fr

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Abstract

Local communities living around protected areas stand high chance of benefiting from economic development and livelihood improvement through ecotourism if well planned. The objective of this study was to contribute to the understanding of stakeholders' opinions on the valorization of ecotourism in order to propose alternative sustainable strategies. The study used a research method based on purposive sampling. Semi-structured questionnaires were administered to 125 household heads and 10 stakeholders were also interviewed with a question guide. The results were inputted into a student statistical package (SPSS) version 16. The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square was used to compare means. The results revealed that the test of dependence (Chi²) between the variables showed a significant difference at ($p < 0.05$). 51.9% of the respondent in ZIC 5 said that ecotourism has increased employment while respondents in the other sectors (ZIC 1, 4 and 9) who make up 76% of the respondents said ecotourism-related jobs in the park are seasonal and not frequent. Regarding the dependence of local communities on the park's resources, 25% of ZIC 5 is highly dependent on the park, whereas, in the other sectors, only 18% are dependent on the park for their household income. This result is explained by the inaccessibility of local communities to the parks. The results of the impacts of ecotourism on the livelihoods of communities in localities reflect a general feeling of dissatisfaction with 88.8% of respondents manifesting their dissatisfaction with park authorities. Thus, 87.2% of respondents think that ecotourism does not bring significant economic benefits to the host communities. If ecotourism was planned, the benefits that accrue from activity could boost the economy of the area and support the conservation of the park, which so far remains in-

significant. However, the strategy for enhancing ecotourism should be a participatory approach.

Keywords

Ecotourism, Opinions, Strategies, Sustainable Development, Local Communities

1. Introduction

Cameroon is located in sub-Saharan Africa and dubbed “Africa in miniature”, Cameroon has significant potential for ecotourism development. Due to its rich biodiversity, the country represents almost all the Ecosystems found in Africa, including a very wide variety of landscapes (Snyman, 2013). Over the years, research has shown that the perception of economic benefits can sometimes outweigh the actual financial benefits. Equity is a key issue in terms of the long-term sustainability of ecotourism in protected areas. Franks et al. (2018) discuss equity in terms of conservation objectives overall, but the concept also applies to the sharing of benefits from conservation and tourism in protected areas. (Franks et al., 2018) define equity as “fairness” or “social justice”, which has three dimensions: recognition, process and distribution. Indeed, ecotourism is usually followed by economic benefits of varying degrees, which contribute to sometimes accelerating local development. Tardif (2003) states that most of the jobs created by the ecotourism sector are generally seasonal and play a role of secondary occupation of locals. Also, according to WTO (2004), the economic benefits from the ecotourism sector are negligible to finance environmental protection projects aimed at providing better quality ecotourism products. It is worth mentioning that the ecotourism industry is one of the most important economic sectors for employment (Chan et al., 2021). Ecotourism generating benefits for residents in the vicinity of protected areas can encourage respectful management and local support for the protected area (Pegas et al., 2008); cited by Biggs et al. (2011). Authors such as Eagles et al. (2002), Teifer and Sharpley (2008), Mitchell and Ashley (2010) and Snyman (2013) said that local community development can occur in a number of ways, including through ecotourism with good planning, design and decision making while improving conditions and quality of life of communities living around protected areas.

Today, one of the major challenges to protected area conservation in developing countries is the lack of a financing mechanism for the sustainable management of these ecosystems. Thus, the state’s capacity to finance the protection of wildlife in protected areas is low (Barraud & Périgord, 2013). Faced with these difficulties in mobilizing funds, it is essential to resort to alternative strategies, including the promotion of ecotourism in protected areas. Ecotourism should be one of the strategies in protected area management, even though, as a strategy, its aim should not only focus on income as the risks may be developed into cultural, economic and historical disconnect (Barraud & Périgord, 2013). For any

ecotourism experience to be viable, it is necessary to fully integrate local populations into the management of these protected areas, an effective need assessment of surrounding communities should be carried out with an aim of integrating these communities in the management of the respective parks (Barraud & Périgord, 2013).

2. Methodology

2.1. Description of the Study Area

The Benue National Park is located in the Northern region of Cameroon. It was first created as a wildlife reserve in 1932, then elevated to national park status in 1968 (Tchindjang et al., 2005). It covers an area of 18,000 hectares (MINFOF, 2019). The Benue National Park is located between 7°55 and 8°40 North latitude and 13°33 and 14°04 East longitude. Administratively, it is located in the Tcholliré sub-division of the Mayo Rey division (Langoya et al., 2016). The name of the park comes from the fact that the Benue River runs through the park and extends for more than 100 km along the park's eastern borders. This national park is home to a large number of plant and animal species, some of which are threatened. It is the last remaining solid block of savannah in the Central African region with huge concentrations of large mammals such as elephants, hippos, Derby elands, antelopes, black rhinos, African wild dogs, buffalo and giraffes. Its biodiversity includes 22 vegetation types with 965 plant species, over 40 species of diurnal mammals, 300 types of birds and some 77 species of fish. The buffer zones of this park are also divided into nine professional hunting zones (area of hunting interest), whose French acronym is ZIC (area of hunting interest), with a total area of 520,378 ha (MINFOF, 2019). **Figure 1** shows the study area.

2.2. Sampling Procedure

Simple two-stage random sampling was used for this study. The intention was to make a purposive selection from the 16 villages on the periphery of the park. Following the convenience method, 11 of the 16 villages around the park were selected for the study. The choice of localities was based on proximity, and existing interrelationships between the communities and the park (**Table 1**).

2.3. Sample Size

During the baseline survey, 125 household heads were interviewed out of the 244 household heads that were randomly selected for the survey which accounted for 51.2% of the respondents.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

In this study, the definition of ecotourism that will be considered is that of Jolin (2001): a development approach that promotes the conservation and preservation of natural resources for future generations while contributing to the improvement of the living conditions of local populations.

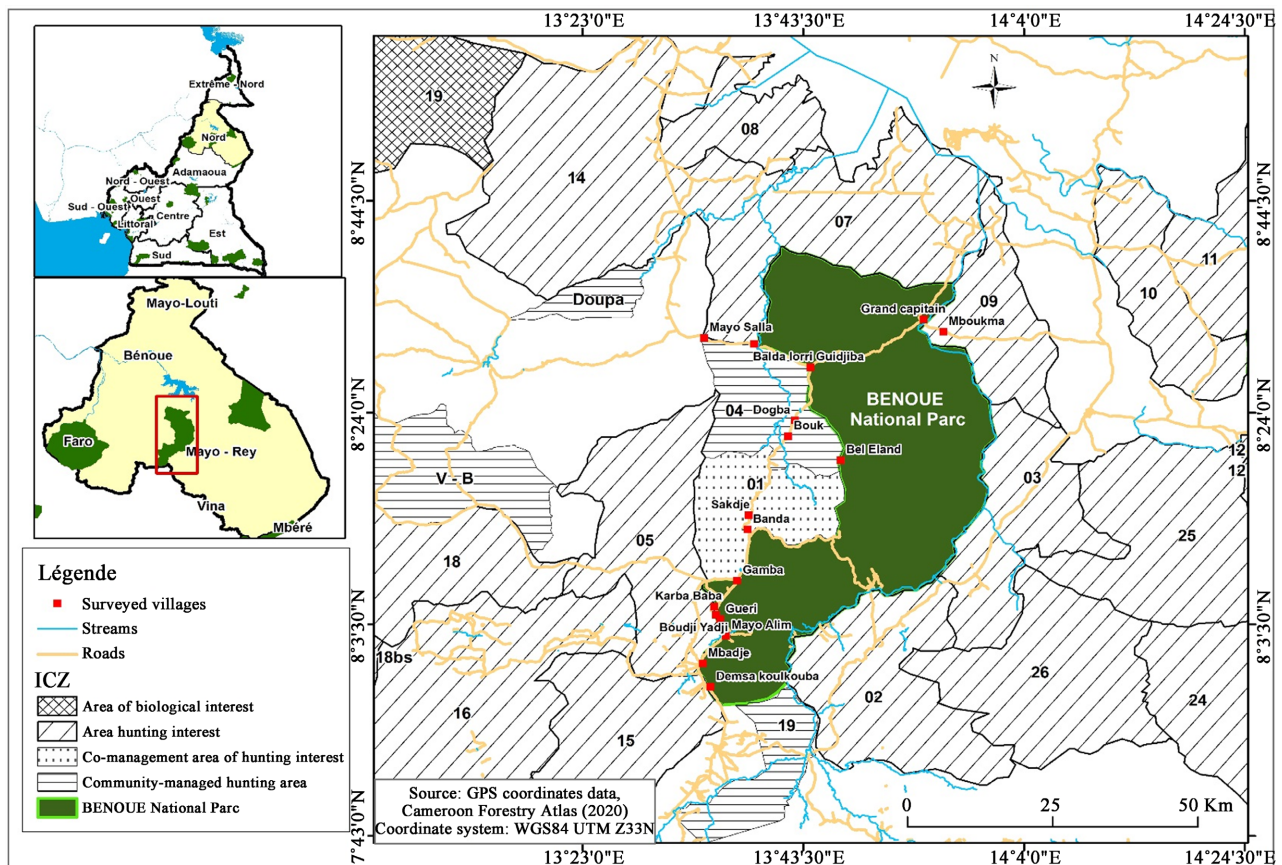


Figure 1. Location map of study sites and sampled villages.

Table 1. Proportion of households surveyed by village.

S/N	Villages	Household population by village	Number of households surveyed	% of households surveyed
1	Banda	28	15	54
2	Bouk	32	16	50
3	Boukma	22	09	41
4	Demsa	10	04	40
5	Dogba	26	13	64
6	Gueri	18	10	56
7	Guidjiba	30	16	53
8	Mayo Sala	11	05	45
9	Mayo Alim	12	04	33
10	Mbadje	15	09	60
11	Sakje	40	24	60
	Total	244	125	51.2

However, the following dimensions can be considered as the essence of the concept: nature-based tourism, an educational approach and a need to meet the criteria of sustainability, economic development, environmental protection and community well-being (Mao & Bourlon, 2011). The definition of ecotourism used in this study is based on three axes: demand, the host community and the resource. Based on these three axes, our analytical framework groups the six fundamental components of ecotourism (Figure 2).

The aim is to analyze ecotourism from a development and biodiversity conservation perspective in the Benue National Park. This approach will allow the analysis of ecotourism as an endogenous regional development strategy by focusing on the interactions between ecotourism and the ecological, economic, political and socio-cultural forces in the region (Figure 3)(Jolin, 2001).

2.5. Data Collection

Primary data were collected from 125 households using a semi-structured

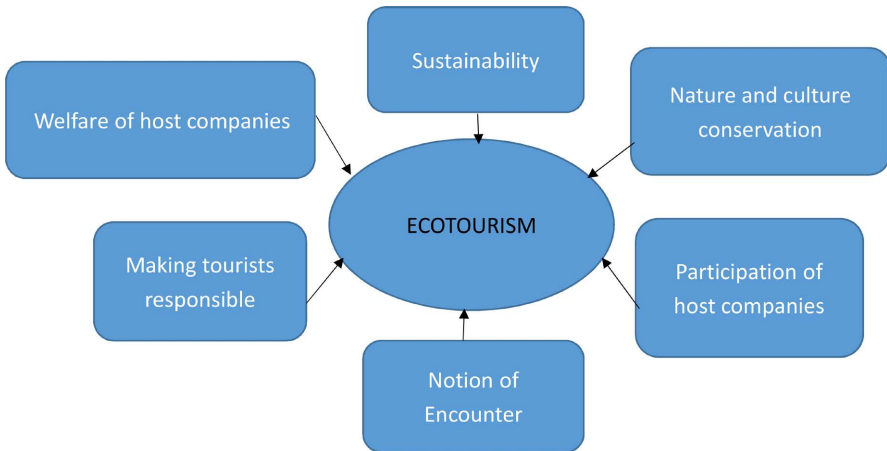


Figure 2. Basic components of ecotourism adapted from (Dehoorne, 2011).

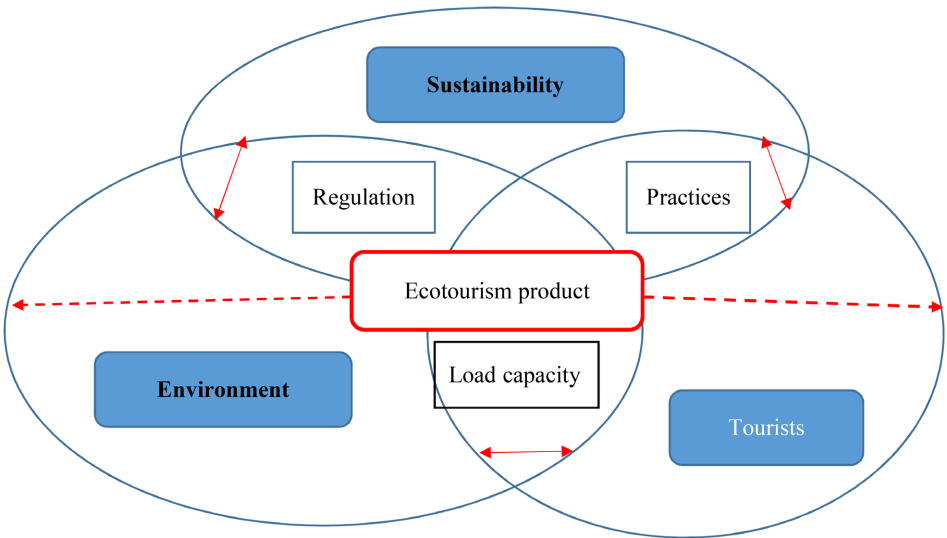


Figure 3. Conceptual framework for ecotourism, adapted from Clarke (2014).

questionnaire. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with the targeted stakeholders in order to analyze the stakeholders' opinions on ecotourism development. In addition to surveys at the village community level, interviews were conducted with resource persons (tourist guide, tracker, co-managed hunting area manager, cook and community guard) and the sectoral officials in charge of tourism in the region: (the Divisional officer of Benue and the Sub-divisional officer, the Regional Delegate for Tourism in the North and the Divisional Delegates for Tourism, the Conservator of the Benue National Park and the chief of the forestry posts at the park) in order to obtain their opinions on the development of ecotourism.

A triangulation of the information collected was made in order to elaborate strategies for sustainable ecotourism development. This triangulation of information allowed was used to elaborate the strategies for the valorization of ecotourism thanks to the participatory planning by objective (PPPO), and finally, a propose synthesis on strategic orientations with six pillars (PESTEL) (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal) was made.

2.6. Analysis

The coded data were entered into Excel 2013 and then exported into R version 4.0.3 in order to bring out the different views of the stakeholders on ecotourism development in the park. The chi-square test was performed. This test is used to verify the absence of a statistical link between two variables X and Y . The two are said to be independent when there is no statistical link between them, in other words, knowledge of X does not allow us to make any statement about Y . The null hypothesis (H_0) of this test is that the two variables X and Y are independent. In terms of p -value, the null hypothesis is generally rejected when $p \leq 0.05$. X and Y are assumed to take a finite number of values, I for X , J for Y . We have a sample of N data. Let us note O_{ij} the observed number of data for which X takes the value I and Y . The following equations were used:

$$E_{ij} = \frac{O + i \times O + j}{N} \quad (1)$$

where

$$O + i = \sum_{j=1}^j o_{ij} \quad (\text{Number of data for which } X = i) \quad (2)$$

and

$$O + j = \sum_{i=1}^i o_{ij} \quad (\text{Number of data for which } Y = j) \quad (3)$$

The distance between the observed values O_{ij} (or empirical values) and the values expected if there were independence E_{ij} (or theoretical values) was calculated using the formula:

$$T = \sum (i, j) \frac{(O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}} \quad (4)$$

This equation shows that the distribution of T asymptotically follows a χ^2 dis-

tribution with $(I - 1) (J - 1)$ degrees of freedom. A synthesis of the six-pillar strategic orientations (PESTEL) (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal) was then proposed.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education

Figure 4 presents the level of education of the population located on the periphery of the Benue National Park. It can be seen that 90 respondents have a primary education, 31 respondents have a secondary education and 4 respondents have completed university. It should be noted that the level of schooling is fairly low (72%). This rate is justified by the inadequacy of school infrastructure and teaching staff; poverty; and a lack of will on the part of learners in the various localities. This lack of willingness is due to the involvement of learners in the agricultural activities (main activity) of the local communities but also in pastoral activities. **Figure 5** presents the socio-economic activities of the respondents.

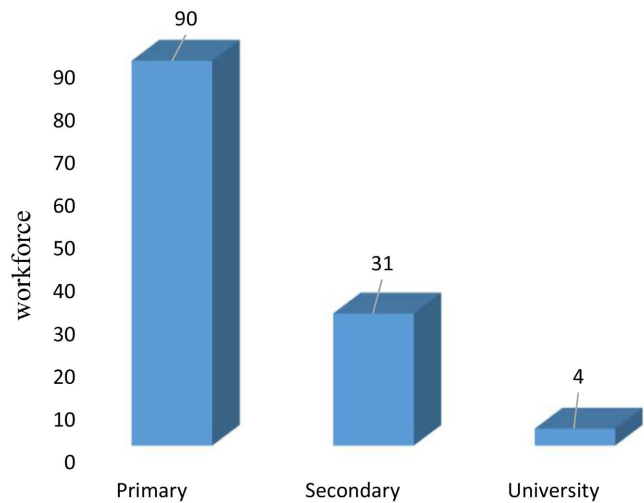


Figure 4. Education level of respondent.

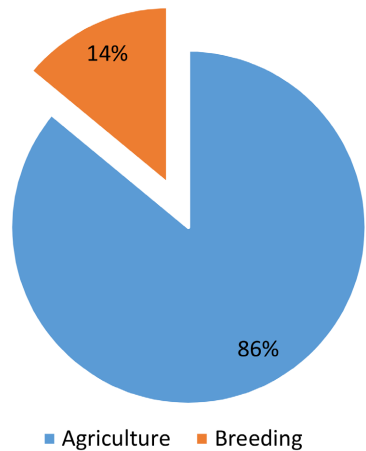


Figure 5. Socio-economic activities of respondents.

It is clear that 86% of the households surveyed on the periphery of the park practice agriculture as their main activity. 14% of this population is engaged in livestock production. Agriculture is the main means of economic growth and subsistence for the communities bordering the Benue National Park. Agricultural production is centered around crops such as cotton, oilseeds (groundnuts), tubers (cassava and yams), and cereals (millet, maize, soya and sorghum). On the periphery of the Benue National Park, three types of livestock are observed: family livestock (goats, poultry), extensive livestock (cattle) and transhumant livestock, which is the most common and threatens the biodiversity of the Benue National Park.

3.1.2. Stakeholders' Opinion on Ecotourism Development in the Benue National Park

Table 2 provides information on the stakeholders' opinions on the valorization of ecotourism according to the defined characteristics. The dependency test (χ^2) between the variables of the questions and the sector reveals that 3 variables depend on the sector ($p < 0.05$). In other words, local people's views on these three variables are not the same in all sectors. Indeed, half (51.9%) of the populations in ZIC 5 consider that ecotourism increases employment, but in the other sectors (ZIC 1, 4 and 9) the majority (76%) suggest the opposite and state that employment in the park is seasonal and not frequent.

Similarly, regarding the dependence of local communities on the park's resources, one-quarter of the population in ZIC (Area of Hunting Interest) No. 5 is highly dependent, whereas in the other sectors less than one-quarter of the population is dependent. This result can be explained by the inaccessibility of local communities to the park's resources. In addition, 48.8% of the population in ZIC (Area of Hunting Interest) No. 5 and ZIC (Area of Hunting Interest) No. 4 mention concerted management of the park, while 51.2% of the population in ZIC (Area of Hunting Interest) No. 1 and ZIC (Area of Hunting Interest) No. 9 have no concerted management. Overall, although there are many similarities between the different areas of Hunting Interest, in terms of the socio-economic impact of ecotourism on the livelihoods of communities living near the park, there are also differences in terms of alternative livelihood strategies. It should be noted that there are slight differences and nuances in the results depending on the geographical location of the communities concerned. The effect of distance and the co-management system implemented in the different communities influence the way ecotourism is managed in the park.

The results regarding the impacts of ecotourism on the livelihoods of communities in the different localities, as presented in **Table 2**, reflect a general feeling of dissatisfaction with (88.8%). This result shows the lack of involvement and participation of the communities in ecotourism activities, which are directly related to their livelihoods and, therefore, to any alternative livelihood strategy they might engage in.

Apart from the 3 sector-dependent variables, the other variables are not

Table 2. Local communities' perception of ecotourism development in the Benue National Park.

Variables	Sectors				Total	Chi ²
	ZIC 1	ZIC 9	ZIC 5	ZIC 4		
Ecotourism has increased employment opportunities for local communities						
No	81.8	100.0	48.1	82.4	76.0	0.001
Yes	18.2	0.0	51.9	17.6	24.0	
Ecotourism brings significant economic benefits to community residents						
Disagree	89.1	100.0	74.1	91.2	87.2	0.105
I agree.	10.9	0.0	25.9	8.8	12.8	
Views of ecotourism stakeholders in terms of the park's resource conservation efforts						
No effort	58.2	100.0	44.4	50.0	56.0	0.388
Patrol	16.4	0.0	22.2	17.6	16.8	
Awareness raising	9.1	0.0	14.8	14.7	11.2	
Monitoring	16.4	0.0	18.5	17.6	16.0	
Management of the park's resources						
Concerted	41.8	0.0	51.9	70.6	48.8	0.001
Non-concerted	58.2	100.0	48.1	29.4	51.2	
Dependence of local communities on the use of park resources						
Strong	9.1	11.1	25.9	2.9	11.2	0.037
Low	90.9	88.9	74.1	97.1	88.8	
Threats to the promotion of ecotourism in the park						
Insecurity	3.6	0.0	3.7	2.9	3.2	0.518
Gold panning	18.2	44.4	22.2	29.4	24.0	
Transhumance	43.6	22.2	40.7	32.4	38.4	
Poaching	23.6	0.0	22.2	20.6	20.8	
Fields	9.1	22.2	11.1	14.7	12.0	
No idea	1.8	11.1	0.0	0.0	1.6	

ZIC: Area of hunting interest.

sector-dependent ($p > 0.05$). In other words, local people's views on these non-dependent variables are the same across the sector. Thus, 87.2% of local communities believe that ecotourism does not bring significant economic benefits to the host communities. If ecotourism was well planned, the economic benefits derived from the ecotourism activity could help boost the economy of the region and promote the conservation efforts of the park's resources, which remain insignificant (56%) despite the efforts, put in place, namely: patrols, surveillance and awareness-raising of the local communities. This low level of conservation is due to various illegal activities: transhumance (38.4%), gold washing (24%),

poaching (21%), the presence of fields (12%) and insecurity (3.2%), which hinders the quality of the park's landscape. The local communities perceive ecotourism as an income-generating activity that could contribute to the development of the locality through the establishment of reception facilities, the creation of permanent jobs, the strengthening of the conservation of the park's resources and a socio-cultural opening. This argument is supported by the words of the chief of the locality of Banda, who stated that: "the development of ecotourism would be a form of development and harmonization of cultures throughout the world for our communities, and it is an opportunity to sell our local know-how and our riches to the tourists who come to visit our locality". However, for better development of ecotourism, it would be wise to minimize the pressure on the resources by reinforcing the surveillance, by involving more of the riparian communities in the different activities.

3.2. Strategies for Enhancing Ecotourism in the Benue National Park

3.2.1. Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of Ecotourism in Benue National Park

Table 3 shows that Benue National Park is rich in biodiversity, which is crucial for the development of ecotourism in the region. The region reflects a landscape favorable to the development of the activity through the multiple facets it offers to the visitor (sandbank on the Benue River, crocodile pond). However, several

Table 3. SWOT Analysis of ecotourism.

Internal factors	
Positive	FORCES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rich biodiversity of flora and fauna; • A picturesque and extensive landscape favourable to the development of ecotourism (sandbank along the Benue River); • A rather remarkable cultural diversity; • Extraordinary know-how of local communities
	WEAKNESSES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information and promotion of the ecotourism product; • Poorly developed and dilapidated infrastructure; • Insufficient ecotourism facilities (no tour route); • Insufficient staff and advanced equipment for park monitoring; • Absence of ecotourism promotion companies
Negative	OPPORTUNITIES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economically: economic growth of the region through the inflow of income from ecotourism activity • Social: Poverty reduction and development of related activities for local communities and tourism businesses • On the cultural level: openness and compartmentalization of values, skills and traditions between tourists and the host community • On the environmental and scientific front: preservation of resources and development of scientific research
	THREATS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transhumance (38.4%), • Gold panning (24%) • Poaching (21%) • Encroachment of hunting areas by fields (12%) • Increasing insecurity (3.2%)
External factors	

human activities hinder the park's survival. Transhumance (38%), gold panning (24%) and poaching (21%) are the main activities affecting the park's biodiversity. Extreme poverty is the cause of the development of human activities (transhumance, gold panning, poaching, agriculture with the presence of fields, insecurity and wood cutting) undermining the ecotourism potential of the park. These threats are becoming more and more acute and are hindering the development of ecotourism in the region. Despite the socio-economic benefits of the park through ecotourism, ecotourism stakeholders state that conservation efforts remain insignificant due to insufficient surveillance staff, the lack of mobility means to carry out patrols and the low level of community awareness of the threats to the park. Some initiatives remain commendable, namely: the seasonal patrols carried out by Park eco-guards, the financing of surveillance by private organizations and the existing relations between minorities of villages concerned with preserving biodiversity and increasing tourism activity to develop the region and reduce poverty. If ecotourism is done well, development will follow on several levels:

- Economically: economic growth of the region through the inflow of income from ecotourism activity.
- Social: Poverty reduction and development of related activities for local communities and tourism businesses.
- On the cultural level: openness and compartmentalization of values, skills and traditions between tourists and the host community.
- On the environmental and scientific front: preservation of resources and development of scientific research.

For a better and more sustainable development of ecotourism, it is essential to orient the strategic management according to the logic of external factors impacting on the development of ecotourism in the region.

To contribute to the sustainable management of ecotourism, strategies were focused on three programs, 11 outcomes and 25 activities. The strategies were developed using the Participatory Objective Based Planning (POBP) tool, including the problem, objective and strategy tree.

The overall objective of the strategy is to sustainably develop the park's natural resources through ecotourism and improve the living conditions of the local communities.

3.2.2. Program for the Promotion and Development of Ecotourism Potential

The main objective of this program is to promote and develop ecotourism potential. The promotion of ecotourism will require the involvement of all stakeholders in activities and decision-making, equitable distribution of the socio-economic benefits of tourism, and the implementation of and compliance with ecotourism legislation in order to limit pressure on the region's potential. However, the main strategy for enhancing ecotourism is one based on participatory and integrated management of all stakeholders at all levels, monitoring and evaluation of the

region's ecotourism potential, and clear implementation of ecotourism circuits that allow the diversity of the landscape to be appreciated. The sustainable development of ecotourism must be done taking into account the six strategic pillars of ecotourism (political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, environmental and legal) for good resource management and effective ecotourism governance. Activities under this programme focus on:

- Implement a system of communication, local community information and ecotourism outreach;
- Develop the park's trails and tourist routes;
- To provide the park with a multifunctional center for the dissemination of tourist offers and the recording of activities taking place there for scientific purposes;
- Enhance the cultural heritage of the park in order to reduce the poverty level of local communities and limit illegal activities;
- Improving the governance of ecotourism in areas of Hunting Interest.

The development of ecotourism activity should be directed towards harmonizing the existing cultures in the locality in order to improve the quality of the tourists' visit. Some attractive landscapes and the know-how of the local communities, such as traditional dances and art making, should be taken into account in the policies for implementing ecotourism.

The sustainable development of leisure and discovery sites in the Benue landscape is essential for local development. Taking into account local customs and knowledge allows for an opening to the outside world and is a major force in the development of ecotourism activities. Therefore, a synergy must be established between the stakeholders to achieve the objectives of sustainable conservation of the park's resources and to increase the harmonious and equitable development of local communities. This strategy will require a clear definition of tourist circuits in and around the park, and the establishment of a local cultural center that takes into account the dances, crafts, traditional rites and gastronomy of the local communities.

3.2.3. Monitoring and Funding Program for Resource Conservation

The monitoring and funding program for the conservation of the park's resources aims to optimize the monitoring and conservation of the park's resources for ecotourism purposes. It is appropriate to conduct dialogues with local communities on the importance of conserving the park's resources, and to seek national and international partners who fund community-based projects to conserve the ecotourism potential. To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Promoting participatory management;
- Increasing partnerships and projects in resource conservation;
- Funding community-based resource conservation initiatives;
- Retrain and strengthen supervisory staff;
- Equip the conservation department with state-of-the-art infrastructure to facilitate monitoring;

- Redistribute the benefits of ecotourism in an equitable manner to enable communities to better conserve resources;
- Providing stable employment for the communities along the river;
- Raise awareness of the need to protect biodiversity among local communities.

3.2.4. Program for the Development, Revision and Implementation of Texts and Laws on Ecotourism

The aim is to strengthen the ecotourism management system through the revision of regulatory texts, the enforcement of laws and the planning of ecotourism activities in line with management principles and standards. For concerted planning and decision-making in management, enforcement and regulation, there is a need to:

- Reviewing the texts on co-management of local communities;
- Implement and enforce a platform for dialogue between ecotourism stakeholders;
- Develop and implement village community statutes on resource use;
- Clarify the role of each stakeholder in ecotourism development;
- Revise the statute on participation and decision-making in ecotourism activities;
- Adopt an integrated stakeholder approach to ecotourism activity.

Table 4 summarises the different strategies for the sustainable management of ecotourism in the Benue National Park.

3.3. Discussion

3.3.1. Stakeholders' Opinion on Ecotourism Development in the Benue National Park

The development of ecotourism is perceived by local communities as an income-generating activity that could contribute to the development of the locality through the establishment of reception structures, the creation of seasonal jobs, an increase in the conservation of the park's resources and a socio-cultural opening (social cohesion between tourists and the park's host populations). This is corroborated by [Eshun \(2014\)](#), who acknowledges that the nature of employment in the tourism sector is seasonal and therefore does not provide a reliable primary livelihood. The above may encourage people to engage in alternative livelihood strategies for the local communities, the development of their land for ecotourism purposes will lead to sustainable conservation of the park's biodiversity. This finding is closely aligned with that of [Pegas and Stronza \(2008\)](#) and [Biggs et al. \(2011\)](#) when they state that ecotourism generating benefits for residents in the vicinity of protected areas can encourage respectful management and local support for the protected area. Similarly, authors such as [Eagles et al. \(2002\)](#), [Teifer and Sharpley \(2008\)](#), [Mitchell and Ashley \(2010\)](#), [Snyman, \(2013\)](#) and [Forje et al. \(2020\)](#) mention that development of local communities can occur in a number of ways, including through ecotourism with good planning, design and decision making while improving the conditions and quality of life of local communities. [Langoya and Long \(2016\)](#) describe ecotourism as an income-generating

Table 4. Summary of ecotourism enhancement strategies according to pillars (PESTEL).

Policy	Economy	Socio-cultural	Technology	Environment	Legal
Implementing ecotourism development policies	Redistribute the benefits of ecotourism in an equitable manner to enable communities to better conserve resources	Providing stable employment for the communities along the river	Provide the conservation department with a mobile capacity for monitoring	Establish a sustainable consumption pattern by putting in place tools to monitor the impact on ecotourism development	Implement the agreement on co-management of the park in strict compliance with it
Redefining the resource management system	Funding community-based resource conservation initiatives	Strengthen the consideration of communities and their needs in the development of ecotourism activity	To provide the park with a multifunctional center for the dissemination of tourist offers and the recording of activities carried out there for scientific purposes	Strengthen the staff of the conservation department in order to optimize better protection of the natural heritage	Establish coordination between stakeholders in management and decision-making on activities
Review text agreements on the use of Park resources by riparian communities	To exploit and conserve resources sustainably through the implementation of an economic transition focused on the relationship between environmental preservation and regional development	To provide communities with reception infrastructures that will promote the economic and social development of the region	Rehabilitate the park with state-of-the-art facilities in various fields: (electrification, health, safety, tourist circuits, etc.)	Implement a system of ecological planning and monitoring	Designing and implementing regulations for ecotourism
Reviewing the status of the law on participation and decision-making in ecotourism activities	To enhance the culture and natural heritage of the park in order to reduce the poverty level of local communities and limit illegal activities		Establish a mechanism for the promotion and popularization of ecotourism offers	Provide communities with more sustainable livelihoods to encourage their direct involvement in environmental protection	Implement a system for monitoring, evaluating and controlling the strategy developed
Clarify the role of each stakeholder in ecotourism development	Adopting an integrated stakeholder approach in ecotourism activity				

industry with the potential to be the center of tourism industries in many developing destinations. For example, [Venkatesh and Gouda \(2017\)](#) argue that many developing countries, but especially those that lack the infrastructure and capital to support conventional tourism industries, are turning to ecotourism because of their abundance of natural ecological areas.

The second part of the local communities' opinion is oriented towards ecotourism as a factor of biodiversity conservation. 57% of the local communities mentioned that ecotourism does not contribute to the preservation of the park's

resources, but 43% thought that ecotourism is the only way to conserve the resources. This result is different from the one developed by (Imanishimwe et al., 2018) in their study where they show that 76% of the population adjacent to Nyungwe National Park thinks that ecotourism contributes to the conservation of protected areas. This gap is justified by the fact that the people of Nyungwe National Park are mostly included in ecotourism activities and decision-making, which is different from the park. The establishment of ecotourism in the Cameroonian context contributes to the growth and development of the country through the use of abundant natural resources (Lambi et al., 2012), while at the same time enhancing communities by giving them the opportunity to engage in alternative livelihood strategies, since ecotourism is based on community involvement (Venkatesh & Gouda, 2017).

3.3.2. Strategies for Enhancing Ecotourism in the Benue National Park

The Park does not have an applicable legal framework for ecotourism development. For optimal and sustainable development of ecotourism, a participatory management approach and regulations need to be put in place, including all stakeholders at all levels of management and decision-making within the park. This participatory approach will ensure biodiversity conservation and drive development in the host region. This finding corroborates those of (Mbaiwa & Stronza, 2010), (Fiorello & Bo, 2012), (Bosak, 2016), (Xue et al., 2017) that host communities need to be involved in decisions that impact their lives and should be able to maintain some control over resources to meet their needs and that clear and equitable benefit-sharing systems ensure a greater likelihood of sustainable success of ecotourism ventures as well as the achievement of conservation objectives. Benefit sharing is then part of the give and take of a complex socio-ecological system, in which implementation strategies and objectives need to be adapted to respond to cultural and social changes.

The strategies for enhancing ecotourism in the park are based on six major pillars, namely: the establishment of clearly defined and enforceable policies, an economy focused on the equitable redistribution of the benefits of ecotourism activity to enable communities to better conserve resources, socio-cultural harmonisation and coordination between tourism stakeholders, technological support in terms of equipment and development of the protected area, an environment that respects the principles of sustainable consumption and legality in terms of synergy between stakeholders. This result corroborates that of Forje et al. (2020) who show that the strategy for sustainable development of ecotourism requires the participation of local communities, equitable redistribution of income from ecotourism activities and the establishment of good governance of ecotourism.

The strategic model for ecotourism in Benue National Park should be based on: effective governance (good management, transparency and participation of all stakeholders); involvement of agencies in the promotion and marketing of ecotourism activities in the region; and a fairly rigorous policy in the enforce-

ment of tourism laws and regulations. This result is in line with Akbar et al. (2022) who state that poor service quality, obsolete facilities and a shortage of qualified employees in tourism management are the main weaknesses. Another group of constraints to tourism development is the lack of tourism marketing and promotion agencies, lack of transparency, poor institutional arrangement and corruption, and the lack of preferential policies for the development of the tourism sector

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to contribute to the understanding of stakeholders' opinions on the development of eco-tourism in order to propose alternative sustainable strategies. The analysis shows that the issue of sustainability of ecotourism is perceived by local communities as an income-generating activity that could contribute to the development of the locality through the establishment of reception structures, the creation of stable jobs, a strengthening of the conservation of the park's resources and a socio-cultural opening. However, if the ecotourism activity is well managed, the socio-economic benefits could help finance the conservation of the park's resources. This will require a participatory management approach and regulations that include all stakeholders at all levels of management and decision-making. This participatory approach will ensure the conservation of biodiversity and stimulate the development of the host region. The latter will facilitate socio-cultural harmonisation and coordination between tourism stakeholders, technological support in terms of equipment and development of the protected area.

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Author Contributions

Jean Baurel ATCHOMBOU: Conceptualization.
 Abubakar Ali SHIDIKI: Review & Editing.
 Martin Ngankam TCHAMBA: Supervision.
 Kamgang Serge Alexis: Investigation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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