Stakeholders' Participation and Sustainable Management of Ecotourism Destinations' Environment in Plateau State Nigeria

[1]**Emmanuel Musa Samdi** & [2]**Abel Ochigbo**
[1]*Department of Marketing*
[2]*Department of Business Administration*
University of Jos, Nigeria

A b s t r a c t

Sustainable tourism is expected to encourage the social, economic and environmental well-being of the host communities. This is central to ecotourism development. This study focused on one of the three sustainability construct, which is environmental sustainability. The study examined the significance of stakeholders' participation in the conservation and protection of the natural environment for ecotourism. A quantitative research design was used to describe and explain the relationships between identified variables based on stated research questions and hypotheses. Primary data were scientifically collected using a survey approach and analysed using structural equation model after meeting all preconditions for analysis. The result showed that the purpose of nominal participation was significantly achieved, but the purposes of instrumental and representative participation were insignificant. Transformative participation showed a significant outcome. However, the results from the descriptive analysis showed that this is because the stakeholders were dependent on the natural environment for livelihood but in an unsustainable manner.

Keywords: *Stakeholder, Ecotourism, Sustainability, Participation, Systems Thinking*

Corresponding Author: Emmanuel Musa Samdi

Background to the Study

Ecotourism is a novel concept; most often it is misused by many who define it to suit their purpose. However, the International Ecotourism Society defines it as "Responsible travel to natural areas thatconserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" where Ecotourism destination is managed in a specific way that follows a set of principles promoting social, environmental and economic sustainability, it exemplifies the benefits of responsible tourism development and management (TIES, 2017). It helps educate the traveller; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and fosters respect for different cultures and human rights. Over the last century, Ecotourism around the world has done more to conserve natural areas than any other sector. The 'eco' in ecotourism took on a deeper meaning when conservationists saw the sense in these discerning tourists' visiting threatened areas outside parks and in promoting their environmental sensibilities as an exemplar of responsible tourism. Today, dozens of communities around the world are actively encouraging visitors because they see tangible benefits from nature conservation. Ecotourism is at the core of these new initiatives (Watkin, 2002).

The future of ecotourism is also dependent on the protection of the natural environment. The concept of protecting natural areas started in the 19th century. Governments funded these areas and maintained as assets for their nations and populations. At the early stage, communities were smaller than today's, with inadequate means of transportation as road infrastructure were insufficient. However, general population pressures on protected areas were far lower than at present. As populations have grown and demands on the environment and wildlife have increased, so too the importance of protected areas, and of conserving biodiversity, has been increasingly recognised. At the international level, this has led to the development and implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and to an increase in the number of nationally-designated protected areas to around 100,000 (Font, Cochrane, & Tapper, 2004). Protected areas are an essential resource for conserving biodiversity, and at present approximately one-tenth of the world's land surface is a secured area in some form. The term 'protected area' is "A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values" (Borrini-Feyerabend, et al., 2013 p.1). Whose interest should ecotourism destinations managers give more considerable attention to, in ensuring sustainability? Is it to the stakeholder or the shareholder? The debate placed the study within the corporate governance debate in management sciences as reflected in the review below:

The Stakeholder Versus Shareholder Debate

In the 1990s, there was a re-examination of capitalism as an agent capable of meeting the world's needs which were a significant shift from the discourse of the 1970s? Some different industries, even oil and gas, which had been resisting environmental regulations in the 1970s, declared that they now had reached the point when the ongoing

degradation of the environment had to be dealt with urgently, including climate change. Sustainability suddenly emerged as something compatible with profits and something that could enhance value also in large multinational corporations (Bergquist, 2017). The corporation belongs to shareholder and in their interest must be run. The shareholder value doctrine, suggests that the corporation must be run in the interest of shareholders, creating value on their behalf. Therefore, the objective of management should be to maximise the market value of the company. On the other hand, the corporation must be run in the interest of stakeholders. However, the stakeholder has various and contradictory, expectations (Chilosi & Damiani, 2007).

The stakeholder theory recognises the importance of wealth creation as well as the firm's relationships with its multiple constituent groups such as shareholders, creditors, employees, customers, suppliers, regulators, and local communities and impact on society at large.While the shareholder based theory and its schools of thought (the "transaction cost economics" (TCE) and "agency theory") focus on behaviours that can maximise firm efficiency. The TCE focus on the importance of corporate hierarchies and monitoring employee behaviour to minimise self-interested behaviour; agency theory focus primarily on the principal vs agent (shareowner vs manager) relationship in publicly traded firms, and how to best align the competing interests of the two parties to maximise firm value. Both TCE and agency theory have "gloomy vision" of human self-interest. Both assume that human beings are opportunistic, and, thus, will put their interests before the firms. Although tenets of shareholder and stakeholder theories differ, both are concerned with the purpose of the firm and strategies to improve its competitive position. However, the stakeholder mindset is broader than that of the shareholder and in agreement with sustainability principles (Pfarrer, 2010). This paper aligns with the stakeholder theory, supported by sustainable development theory and systems theory for robust theoretical support.

Systems Thinking and Sustainable Environment
The systems thinking with regards to the environment suggests a self-regulatory system with a complex network of positive and negative feedback systems that function within the context of carrying, regeneration and assimilation capacity of the respective system (Adetunji, Price, Fleming, & Kemp, 2003). Therefore a strategic approach to managing an ecotourism destination successfully and sustainably relies heavily on the natural environment which requires careful examination and understanding. Today, the world understands that the most enormous and most immediate sustainability problemsare how humans relate to the natural environment. This concern is a result of the declining environmental, economic, and social conditions worldwide. It is therefore of immediate importance for the academic community to place more emphasis on sustainability based researches and to encourage human activities in ways that provide immediate needs without compromising the needs of the future generation. That is to continue to occupy the planet in such a manner as to not deplete our natural resources; harm our air, water, and soil; and undermine the social, cultural, and economic sustainability of our local and global communities. Sustainable design tends to produce products and services in which

nature is not subject to continual increased use of natural resources, increases in substances produced by society, and increases in waste products and the effects of their degradation (Pappas, 2012).

Therefore a systems approach to sustainability is capable of breaking down the complexities around environmental, societal, and economic phenomena involved. Voinov & Farley, (2006 p. 104) observed that most definitions of sustainability suggest "that a system is to be maintained at a certain level, held within certain limits, into the indefinite future. Sustainability denies run-away growth, but it also avoids any decline or destruction". In examining systems and subsystems, they further observed that systems are parts of hierarchies where systems of higher levels are made up of subsystems from lower levels. This is how communities are structured, smaller communities are nested within bigger communities and so on, with each having characteristics that define its boundaries.

In applying systems thinking to the concept of sustainability, Adetunji, Price, Fleming, & Kemp, (2003 p.161) observed that "sustainability is the integration of the environmental, social and economic systems to improve the quality of life within earth's carrying, regenerating and assimilating capacity". Therefore since each of these systems has other systems embedded within them, a nested hierarchy of subsystems then emerges. The individual subsystem is a whole on its own and forms an integral part of a complex system. The properties of each of these subsystems considerably change when interacting with other subsystems. As a result, the properties of a single subsystem cannot be used to explain the properties of the whole system. Hence the concept of sustainability falls beyond the narrow scope of reductionism and compartmentalised specialisation. The issues addressed by sustainability are complex with multidimensional variables and sub-variables. This explains the challenges of ensuring inclusiveness, representation and empowering of stakeholders in ecotourism. However, the systems theory provides an analytical framework for the planning of stakeholders participation in ecotourism.

In summarising the fundamental factors necessary for the survival of any protected area, according to Font, Cochrane, & Tapper, (2004) depends on the quality of its natural features and support from local communities and critical stakeholders. Until recently previous researches on tourism destination management have focused on the role of government as the most critical stakeholder in destination management, leading to a "top-down" approach which puts the government at the centre of attention. However, scholars have started to recognise that stakeholders such as residents, tourists and tourism business are essential parts of a destination and have significant influences on local social, economic development. The recognition has significantly impacted on the need for corporate governance in the Tourism industry and ecotourism, in particular, to design their business plans and strategies with stakeholders in mind (Hanyu & Mingfang, 2014).Therefore according to Jenkins, (2003) "Theories of sustainability attempt to prioritise and integrate social responses to environmental and cultural problems. An economic model looks to sustain natural and financial capital; an ecological

model looks at biological diversity and environmental integrity; a political model looks to social systems that realise human dignity, implying that the three central constructs that define sustainability are the local economy, society and the environment. It also suggests that the active participation of stakeholders in managing ecotourism destinations is an essential ingredient for sustainability. In examining the outcome of Stakeholders' Participation in ecotourism destination management in Plateau State, the analytical framework used was that of White (1996) which provides a four-level depoliticised approach (Nominal, Instrumental, Representative and Transformative levels of Participation) and the outcome of these levels of participation was measured on the environment out of the three primary constructs (economy, society and environment).

Statement of the Problem

The ecotourism destinations in Plateau State have shown significant signs of environmental neglect which has resulted in low patronage by tourists and massive encroachment by communities close to the destinations. IIlegal hunting, bush burning, fishing are on the increase in most of the destinations. The infrastructure has become obsolete and none functional. These symptoms of low-level sustainability showed that there must be an underlying reason that needs investigation. The environment as earlier stated is a major attraction for tourist, whose visits are expected toimpact positively on the local communities economically and socially. The observed destruction of the natural environment and the decay (symptoms) of the ecotourism destinations and infrastructure in Plateau State were the motivating force for this study. What could be the underlying phenomena responsible for the destruction of the natural environment from a stakeholders' Participation perspective?The literature showed that this situation is not peculiar to Plateau State because evidence of non-sustainable management of ecotourism destinations are numerous in Nigeria. This unsustainable state of ecotourism natural environment could be due to the lack of active engagement of the stakeholders in ecotourism management and by extension in the protection and preservation of the natural environment. Therefore this study examined the suspected underlying problem which is the outcome of the relationship between stakeholders' participation and sustainability of the natural environment in Plateau State in order to provide the basis for robust recommendations to achieve sustainability.

Research Questions

The problem of sustainable management of ecotourism destinations in Plateau State has given rise to some questions from a stakeholders 'perspective, which were answered by this study. These research questions are particularly important as they further expand and make clearer the investigative approach to follow to address the stated problem and how specific the hypotheses formulated needs to be. The research questions were designed to fit with the analytical framework adopted in this study. Which is the framework for analysing Participation provided by White (1996)?Therefore, the four questions are presented below to reflect the above position:

I. Does the Nominal level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism have a significant positive effect on the preservation/ protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State?

ii. What is the level of significance of the Instrumental level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism on the preservation/Protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State?

iii. To what extent has the Representative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism impacted on the preservation/ protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State?

iv. Does the transformative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism have a significant positive effect on the preservation/Protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State?

Objectives of the Study
This study examines the level and implications of participation by stakeholders in the sustainable management of ecotourism destinations in Plateau State, with a clear emphasis on the factors that determines sustainability, (social, economic and environment) from a management perspective

i. To examine the impact of Nominal level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism on the preservation/protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State.

ii. To investigate the level of significance of the Instrumental level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism on the preservation/Protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State.

iii. To identify the Representative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism on the preservation/protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State.

iv. To establish the impact of transformative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism on the preservation/Protection of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State.

Statement of Hypothese s
The research questions and the objectives of the study determined the formulation of hypotheses for consistency.

Therefore, the four hypotheses for this study are stated as follows:

i. H_{01}: Nominal level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant effect on the preservation of the natural environment of the ecotourism destinations in Plateau State.

ii. **H$_{02}$**: Instrumental level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant effect on the preservation of ecotourism natural environment of the destinations in Plateau State.

iii. **H$_{03}$**: Representative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant effect on the preservation of ecotourism natural environment of the destinations in Plateau State.

iv. **H$_{04}$**: Transformative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant effect on the preservation of ecotourism natural environment of the destinations in Plateau State.

Methodology

This study is descriptive and explanatory in design. It measured units from a sample of the population at only one point in time. Therefore, it is cross-sectional. The survey option was used to collect primary data because of its cost-effectiveness as the sample is large. This was achieved with the use of a 5-point Likert-scale format of questionnaires to reflect the strength of agreement by the respondents. The design of the questionnaire was done based on the hypothesised relationship between the dependent variables (economic, social and environmental sustainability) and the independent variables (Nominal, Instrumental, Representative and Transformative Participation). The total population of study is 1,080,695 and a sample size of 765 was drawn to represent the entire local communities and public sector where ecotourism destinations are located. The sample size for the non-probability sampling (tourism operators/tourist and NGOs) which is taken purposively as 100 was made up of 90 tourism operator/tourist and 10 NGOs making the total Stakeholders for this study to be 865 respondents. The critical stakeholders for the sustainability of ecotourism destination are the Local communities, the tourism Administrators at the local government level, living in among the local communities and private enterprises within the local communities. A test of non-response bias showed a response rate of 88.1% which suggests that they are adequate for the analyses based on the recommendation of 80% (Kerlinger, 1964). The data for this study were subjected to data cleaning tests such as out of range, missing values, outliers and normality tests before the final analysis.

Results

The study is considered to have a good spread across gender with male respondents representing 61.4% while the female respondents represented 38.6%. Also of importance is the length of stay by respondents in the communities because it is assumed to be one of the primary determinants of the depth of knowledge of the environment. Therefore, the results showed that while 30.7% lived in the communities for 11-15 years, 25.4% lived for above 20 years, in summary, 93.6% of respondents for this study lived in the communities for more than 5 years. Furthermore, 42.6% of the respondents work for the local government council while only 2.1% are employed in the Private sector, reflecting the low level of private investments in the local communities generally, 31.1% are self-employed mainly farming/hunting and petty trading. Meanwhile, 21.5% represents the retired, homemakers, students and other unemployed/idle people. 21.5% could be depending

on others. Also, 85.8% of the respondents earn $2 and below on the average per day, 67.7% of the respondents live on $1.4 and less per day — a clear indication of the poverty level and low economic impact of ecotourism destinations in their localities, this could put significant pressure on the natural environment.

Results of Structural Equation Modelling
This study applied the structural equation modelling (SEM) to determine the extent to which sample data support the theoretical model and comprise both a measurement model and a structural model. The measurement model relates observed responses or 'indicators' to latent variables and sometimes to observed covariates (i.e., the CFA model). Figure 1 shows the measurement model for this study.
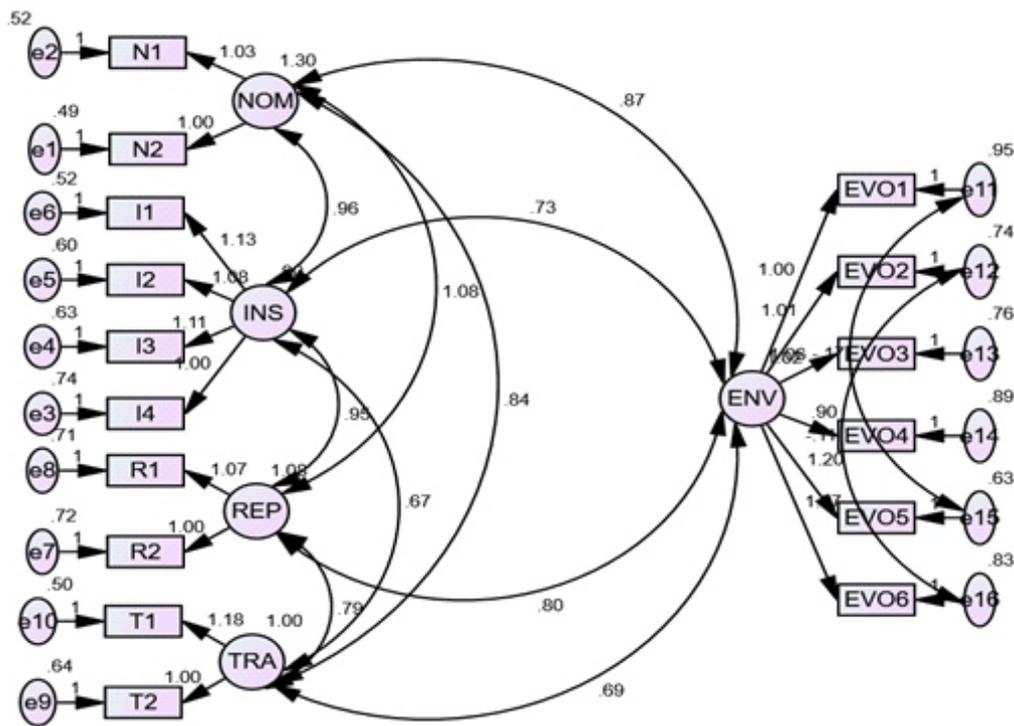

Figure 1: Standardised Path Coefficent Model, indicating factor loading

Source: AMOS Output 23.0

Table 1: Convergent Validity

s/n	Constructs	Factor Loading
1	**Nominal Stakeholder -** AVE= 0.726, CR= 0.841	
	N1	0.852
	N2	0.853
2	**Instrumental Stakeholder -** AVE= 0.629, CR= 0.871	
	I1	0.830
	I2	0.798
	I3	0.799
	I4	0.742
3	**Representative Stakeholder -** AVE= 0.618, CR= 0.7637	
	R1	0.798
	R2	0.774
4	**Transformative Stakeholder** AVE= 0.672, CR=0.803	
	T1	0.858
	T2	0.780
5	**Environmental** AVE= 0.578, CR= 0.891	
	EO1	0.719
	EO2	0.764
	EO3	0.775
	EO4	0.694
	EO5	0.836
	EO6	0.765

Table 1 presents the result of convergent validity. Convergent validity is the extent to which observed variables of a particular construct share a high portion of the variance in common (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Factor loadings of the construct, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) estimation are used to assess the convergent validity of each of the constructs. Also, ideal standardised loading estimates should be 0.7 or higher, AVE estimation should be higher than 0.5, and reliability estimates should be above 0.7 to show adequate convergent validity (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Therefore, in this study, the minimum cut off criteria for loadings >0.7, AVE >0.5, and reliability >0.7 used for assessing the convergent validity. Table 1 also shows the result of the composite reliability for each construct used for this study. The result shows that the value of the composite reliability implies that the instrument is reliable.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

	NOM	INS	REP	TRA	ECO
NOM	**0.8525**				
INS	0.6842	**0.7929**			
REP	0.6806	0.7419	**0.7861**		
TRA	0.6083	0.5421	0.5602	**0.8199**	
ECO	0.6124	0.5823	0.5628	0.5024	**0.7602**

Table 2 shows the result of the Discriminant validity for this study. Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which a latent construct is genuinely distinct from other latent constructs. The result shows that the diagonal values which are bolded are all higher than the correlational values of the latent construct. This confirms the discriminant validity of this study.

Structural Model
The structural model then specifies relations among latent variables and regressions of latent variables on observed variables. The relationship between the measurement and structural models is further defined by the two-step approach to SEM proposed by James, Mulaik and Brett (1982). The two-step approach emphasises the analysis of the measurement and structural models as two conceptually distinct models. This approach expanded the idea of assessing the fit of the structural equation model among latent variables (structural model) independently of assessing the fit of the observed variables to the latent variables (measurement model). The rationale for the two-step approach is given by Sorbom & Joreskog, (2003) who argued that testing the initially specified theory (structural model) may not be meaningful unless the measurement model holds. This is because if the chosen indicators for a construct do not measure that construct, the specified theory should be modified before the structural relationships are tested. See figure 2 for the resultant structural model for the study
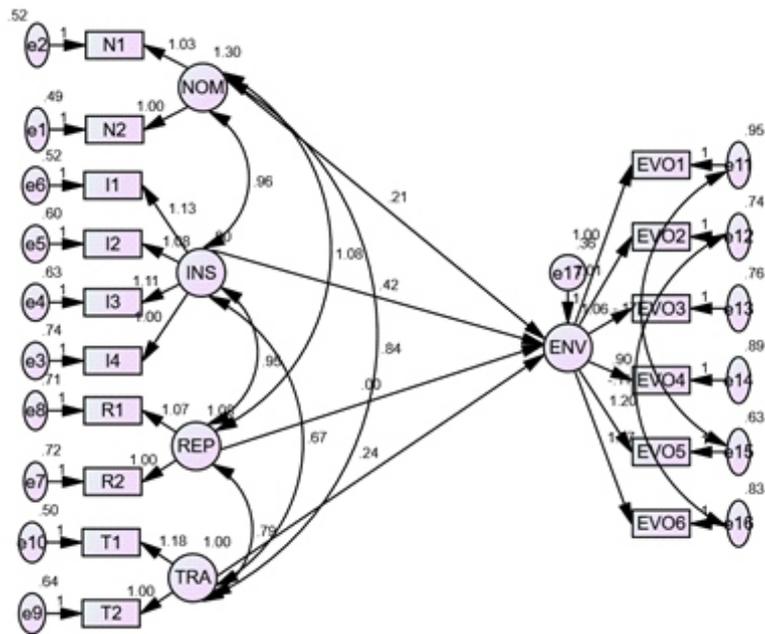
Figure 2: Standardised Path Coeffient Model.
Source: AOMS Output 23.0

Table 3: Goodness of fit for the structural equation Model

Measurement Index	Bench Mark	Values Obtained	Remark
χ2		352.924	
Df		92	
χ2/df	Between 2 and 5	3.836	Good fit
GFI	...	0.945	Good fit
AGFI	≥0.90	0.918	Good fit
CFI	≥0.90	0.967	Good fit
NFI	≥0.90	0.956	Good fit
RMSEA	<0.05	0.061	Fair fit
TLI	≥0.90	0.956	Good fit
Note: χ2 = Chi -square; **df** = degree of freedom; **GFI** = Goodness of fit index;**RMSEA** = Root mean square error of approximation;**NFI** = Normated fit index; **TLI** = Tucker Lewis index; **CFI** = Comparative fit index; **AGFI** – Adjusted goodness of fit index			

Table 3 shows the result of the fitness indices for CFA. To improve the fitness of the model, it was refined and re-specified. The items which shared a high degree of residual variance were therefore constraint. Thus, after constraining these problematic items, the measurement model was re-run, (Byrne, 1998; Kline, 2005; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The model was then certified fit as shown in table3

While the χ2 is the only inferential statistics in the fit indices it has its own problem because it increase with the sample size, other indices are descriptive statistics and there exist only rule-of-thumb. Therefore do not be overly critical if the obtained values are not exactly the bench mark(Lacobucci, 2010).

Test of Hypotheses
Table 4 presents the values used to test the stated hypotheses followed by decisions.

Table 4: Regression estimates of latent constructs

Hypotheses	Construct	Direction	Construct	Standardised Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P-value	Remark
H_1	ENV	<--	NOM	0.210	0.095	2.203	0.028	Significant
H_2	ENV	<--	INS	0.418	0.261	1.604	0.109	Not significant
H_3	ENV	<--	REP	-0.005	0.300	-0.016	0.798	Not significant
H_4	ENV	<--	TRA	0.239	0.061	3.939	0.000	Significant

Source: AMOS output 23.0

Hypothesis One
The null hypothesis states that the nominal level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant positive effect on the preservation of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State. However, the test result shows that there is a significant effect of the nominal level of stakeholders' participation on the natural environment of communities. This result implies that the reason for participation by stakeholders which is to 'display' the inclusion of local communities and to legitimise government participation in the activities of the ecotourism destination towards the preservation of the natural environment is significantly being achieved.

Hypothesis Two
The null hypothesis is that the Instrumental level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant positive effect on the preservation of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State. The test result confirms that there is no significant effect of the instrumental level of stakeholders' participation on the preservation of the natural environment of communities. This result implies that the reason for participation by stakeholders which is as a 'means' of reducing the cost of living for local communities and as a means for efficiency to the government in the activities of the ecotourism destination towards the preservation of the natural environment, is not significantly being achieved.

Hypothesis Three

The null hypothesis statement is that the Representative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant positive effect on the preservation of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State. The test result confirmed that there is no significant effect of the Representative level of stakeholders' participation on the preservation of the natural environment of the communities. This result implies that the reason for participation by stakeholders which in this case is to 'have a voice' in the management of ecotourism destinations in their communities to leverage upon for improved livelihood is not significantly achieved. Also, the aim and interest of the government at this level in managing ecotourism destination for sustainability is also not significantly achieved. Thisis reflected in the insignificant preservation of the natural environment of the communities around the destinations.

Hypothesis Four

The null hypothesis statement is that the Transformative level of stakeholders' participation in eco-tourism has no significant positive effect on the preservation of the natural environment of the communities around ecotourism destinations in Plateau State. However, the test result showed that there is a significant effect of the Transformative level of stakeholders' participation on the preservation of the natural environment of the communities. This result implies that the reason for participation by stakeholders which in this case is 'a means to an end' as a source of empowerment to the communities and the government is significantly being achieved. This result could be because the local communities depend on the natural environment for livelihood as described earlier through illegal hunting and farming in an unsustainable manner. This may be an empowerment to them but not sustainable in the management of the ecotourism destinations in their communities.

Conclusion

The sustainability of an ecotourism destination is dependent on how a precise balance of importance and attention is given to the three critical constructs which include Environment, society, and economy to the host communities. The participation of the host communities and other external stakeholders is critical to the sustainable management of the destinations and its natural environment. Also, the tourist is first attracted to the environment and the society implying that the attractions must be preserved and economic incentive is a significant motivation. This study focused mainly on the environment in order to examine how participation of the stakeholders in sustainability practices has impacted on the preservation of the natural environment. The conclusion drawn from this study is that the Plateau State ecotourism destinations environment is not being sustainably managed because of a lack of active Participation of stakeholders, especially the immediate communities hosting the destinations. The reduced level of participation is attributable to the fact that the state government is the sole owner of the destinations. The involvement of both the immediate communities through community-based ecotourism and the private sector has the potentials of encouraging sustainable

practices that would further attract international and local non-governmental organisation towards conservation and environmental protection. These players would attract investments into the industry and it would be a win-win situation for all.

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