

Cultural Tourism and the Conservation of Natural Heritage Sites in Ikot Abasi, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

¹Obot Mary Ifiok & ²Uboegbulam, Gideon Chukwunwem

^{1&2}Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management,
University of Port Harcourt.

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/djiapeh.v2.i2.09

Abstract

The rapid destruction of natural heritage sites, especially in environmentally vulnerable areas like Ikot Abasi, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, underlines an urgent need for sustainable protection. This study investigated cultural tourism's significance as a catalyst for natural heritage conservation, focusing on its influence on environmental awareness and community engagement. Adopting a descriptive survey approach, the research featured 200 respondents selected by stratified random selection. Data were examined using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation. Findings demonstrate a substantial positive link between cultural tourism and education & awareness ($r=.641, p<.01$), as well as with community engagement ($r=.703, p<.01$). These results imply that properly harnessing cultural tourism might effectively improve environmental awareness and foster participatory conservation practices at the grassroots level. The study addresses a major empirical vacuum by offering context-specific insights into how culturally embedded tourist projects can encourage long-term ecological stewardship in developing nations. It finds that when cultural tourism is intelligently developed and locally integrated, it increases both conservation outcomes and community empowerment. Recommendations include institutionalising cultural tourism in conservation policies, adopting community-led involvement models, and investing in interpretive infrastructure to encourage sustainable tourism and safeguard Nigeria's natural heritage.

Keywords: *Cultural tourism, Natural heritage conservation, Community engagement, environmental awareness, Sustainable tourism*

Corresponding Author: Obot Mary Ifiok

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6127-5866>

Background to the Study

The rising global concern over the destruction of natural heritage sites underlines an urgent need for effective conservation solutions. These sites, covering different ecosystems, distinctive geological formations, and rich biodiversity, are critical for ecological balance, scientific advancement, and human well-being through essential ecosystem services (Osipova et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Organisations such as UNESCO stress the global value of natural heritage. However, resource-rich continents like Africa face challenges such as fast population increase, socio-economic pressures, governance issues, and inadequate financial resources (UNEP, 2021; United Nations, 2023).

Nigeria, a nation recognised for its great biodiversity and natural wonders, suffers significant environmental difficulties, including excessive deforestation, illegal mining, and insufficient enforcement of environmental regulations (Akinlo & Akanni, 2017; Okonjo-Iweala & Oyejide, 2014). Within the environmentally vulnerable Niger Delta, Akwa Ibom State features unique coastal ecosystems, mangrove forests, and various terrestrial habitats (Akpan & Udofia, 2020). Specifically, Ikot Abasi Local Government Area, with its distinct natural assets, requires focused conservation measures to protect its ecological future and local communities from growing anthropogenic pressures and environmental degradation (Essien et al., 2021; Ite & Ibok, 2016).

Natural heritage, comprising Earth's biological and geological diversity, contains intrinsic scientific, artistic, and recreational significance for present and future generations (UNESCO, 2021). These sites provide crucial ecosystem services vital for human existence and economic activities, in addition to significant socio-cultural advantages such as recreation, historical preservation, and spiritual enrichment (Osipova et al., 2018; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). However, their conservation is challenging, hampered by poor public awareness, limited financial resources, weak institutional frameworks, and conflicting land-use goals that often prioritise short-term economic gains above long-term environmental sustainability (Alexander, 2017; UNESCO, 2021).

Given these severe conservation challenges, particularly in regions like Ikot Abasi, academic discourse has increasingly explored sustainable alternatives. Cultural tourism has become a viable concept by establishing a direct relationship between a region's cultural identity and its natural surroundings to support economic growth and environmental protection (Richards, 2018). It delivers considerable economic rewards, including new job opportunities and cash directly earmarked for conservation (Timothy & Conover, 2019; Wang & Ap, 2013). Crucially, it builds cultural pride, empowers communities, and raises understanding among visitors and locals about the intrinsic importance of both cultural and natural heritage (Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

Despite the acknowledged importance of Ikot Abasi's natural heritage, its protection faces significant challenges from unregulated human activities such as unsustainable agriculture, improper waste disposal, and illegal resource extraction, compounded by insufficient local

conservation efforts (Essien et al., 2021; Ite & Ibok, 2016). Moreover, inadequate community engagement in conservation planning and a general lack of public understanding regarding the ecological significance of these assets restrict collective action (Akpan & Udofia, 2020; Ite & Ibok, 2016). This paper posits that cultural tourism offers a comprehensive framework to address these specific issues by generating dedicated revenue for conservation, empowering local communities through economic participation, and enhancing public education and awareness, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards natural heritage preservation (Timothy & Conover, 2019; Wang & Ap, 2013).

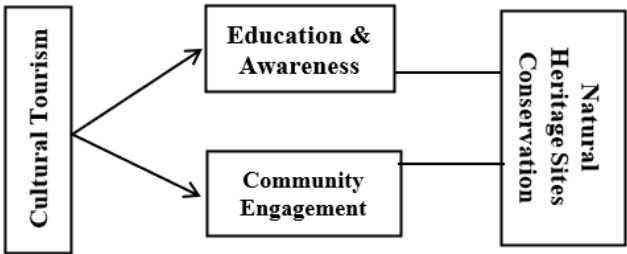
Although there is extensive research on the relationship between tourism and environmental conservation, there is still a lack of specific studies on how cultural tourism uniquely influences the conservation outcomes of natural heritage sites. The existing literature typically oversimplifies the advantages of tourism for conservation or concentrates substantially on ecotourism, which might not completely confront the intricacies of a culturally centred technique for larger natural heritage conservation (Dodds & Joppe, 2005; Wearing & Neil, 2009). This gap highlights the critical need to understand how cultural tourism specifically supports practical conservation efforts, including promoting education, awareness, and genuine community involvement, within the unique socio-cultural and environmental context of under-researched developing nations. The scarcity of particular research investigations, especially in regions like Ikot Abasi, where cultural traditions are tightly tied to natural surroundings, hinders the utility of broad conclusions and obstructs the establishment of customised conservation plans (Akpan & Udofia, 2020). Consequently, this project intends to give evidence-based insights on harnessing cultural tourism for natural heritage protection in Ikot Abasi.

Hence, this study attempts to analyse how cultural tourism affects the preservation of natural heritage sites in Ikot Abasi, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. To reach this aim, the particular aims are to i. Assess how cultural tourism helps education and awareness regarding natural heritage protection among inhabitants and visitors in Ikot Abasi. ii. Investigate the impact of cultural tourism in generating community engagement in the conservation of natural heritage assets in Ikot Abasi.

Based on these aims, the following hypotheses were tested:

- H0:1. Cultural tourism has no substantial link with education and awareness about natural heritage site conservation among locals and visitors in Ikot Abasi.
- H0:2. Cultural tourism has no substantial link with community engagement in natural heritage site conservation among locals and visitors in Ikot Abasi.

Figure 1: Researcher's Conceptualization of the Relationship Between Cultural Tourism and Conservation Natural Heritage Sites



Source: Measure of Agro-Tourism are adapted from Nastou & Zerefos (2024) and Hernández (2011)

Theoretical/Literature Review

The research is backed by the Social-Ecological Model (SEM), a comprehensive framework developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and widely employed in environmental and social sciences. SEM posits that behaviours and complex phenomena arise from dynamic interactions across multiple interconnected levels: individual (e.g., knowledge, attitudes), interpersonal (e.g., social networks), organisational/community (e.g., local institutions, businesses), and policy/societal (e.g., national laws, cultural norms) (Golden & Earp, 2012; Stokols, 1992). This multi-layered approach highlights that obtaining lasting outcomes for complex issues like heritage conservation involves coordinated effort across all these systemic levels.

SEM offers a robust lens for assessing cultural tourism and natural heritage conservation in Ikot Abasi, Akwa Ibom State. At the individual level, it evaluates how tourists' attitudes and locals' underlying values (affected by education and awareness programmes) determine their conservation behaviours. The interpersonal level examines how interactions among guides, guests, and community members develop shared responsibility. At the organisational/community level, SEM analyses the roles of local tourism bodies, heritage management, and traditional governance in implementing sustainable practices. Finally, the policy/societal level scrutinises how national laws, tourism regulations, and larger cultural norms affect heritage site management. Integrating these interacting layers, SEM provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors and obstacles to effective conservation through cultural tourism, emphasising the necessity of integrated approaches for long-term sustainability.

Literature Review

Concept of Natural Heritage Conservation

Natural heritage sites are precious assets globally recognised for their outstanding universal value, spanning biodiversity, biological processes, geological features, and aesthetic

significance (Osipova et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Their maintenance is crucial for maintaining global ecological equilibrium, stimulating scientific study, and safeguarding human well-being, as these places provide essential ecosystem services such as climate regulation, water purification, and nutrient cycling (UNESCO, 2021).

In Nigeria, a nation wealthy in natural landmarks, conserving these places poses enormous hurdles. Akwa Ibom State, in the South-South geopolitical zone, is notably rich in coastal areas, riverine habitats, and wetlands (Ebong et al., 2025). The Niger Delta Mangroves, which comprise areas of Akwa Ibom, are on UNESCO's Tentative List, recognising their global importance (UNESCO, 1995). However, these essential ecosystems, especially around Ikot Abasi, are vulnerable to serious degradation from oil exploration, pollution, and unsustainable activities (Ebong et al., 2025; Udoh et al., 2025). For instance, Ibeno Beach reveals worrying amounts of heavy metals, suggesting concerns for both human health and the ecosystem (Udoh et al., 2025).

Beyond their ecological relevance, natural heritage sites carry great socio-cultural importance. They serve as vital leisure places, offer opportunities for interaction with nature, and act as living historical records, giving valuable educational resources (United Nations, 2015; UNWTO, 2017). Many are strongly connected with local cultural identities, generating a sense of belonging and pride and contributing to community self-esteem (Redalyc, 2021). The protection of these sites directly promotes global sustainable development goals, underlining the inextricable relationship between environmental preservation, social equality, and economic viability (Alexander, 2017).

Measures for Natural Heritage Conservation

Education and Awareness

Education and awareness programmes are important to sustainable conservation. They develop understanding of the intrinsic and instrumental importance of natural heritage among stakeholders, including local communities, policymakers, and visitors (Ite & Ibok, 2016). These projects attempt to convey knowledge about ecological functions, dangers including climate change and unsustainable behaviours, and collective involvement in mitigation (Akpan & Udofia, 2020). By boosting understanding, educational activities can develop pro-environmental behaviours and increase support for conservation policies (Ite & Ibok, 2016). Within cultural tourism, improving environmental knowledge among tourists can favourably influence their conduct at places, contributing to sustainable results (Aman, 2025; Cheng & Chen, 2022).

In Akwa Ibom State, especially within sensitive wetland and coastal zones containing Ikot Abasi, concentrated education and awareness are crucial (Akpan, 2024; Udoh & Akpan, 2018). Pervasive concerns such as oil spills, deforestation, and unsustainable resource extraction demand informing affected local populations about the long-term effects and encouraging them to adopt sustainable practices (Ebong et al., 2025). For example, despite their economic and ecological benefits, wetlands in Ibeno confront difficulties from

underutilisation and unsustainable exploitation, underlining the need for improved understanding regarding proper management (Udoh & Akpan, 2018).

Community Engagement

Meaningful community engagement is vital for the long-term survival of conservation projects. Local communities, particularly those with historical linkages to natural heritage places, possess essential traditional ecological knowledge and a vested interest in the health of these habitats (Essien et al., 2021). Their active and equitable involvement in planning, implementation, and management ensures that conservation actions are culturally sensitive, socially just, and economically beneficial to those living closest to the resources (Essien et al., 2021). This collaborative paradigm, where inhabitants are vital partners, creates shared ownership of conservation goals, leading to more resilient and enduring practices (Tsintskiladze, 2024). Community engagement is also known for its ability to increase local quality of life and foster community empowerment (Lu & Wei, 2022).

In Akwa Ibom State, community participation is crucial for effective biodiversity conservation, particularly given persisting socio-economic, institutional, and political constraints (William, 2025). Areas like Stubbs Creek Forest Reserve have suffered serious degradation due to uncontrolled human activities, underlining the urgent need for strengthened regulatory restrictions and community-led initiatives (Udoma-Michaels et al., 2019). While traditional management approaches, such as periodic limits in community-preserved areas, exist for wetlands in southern Akwa Ibom, they are typically insufficient against modern environmental challenges (Etim et al., 2018; Udoh & Akpan, 2018). This underscores the demand for more community participation and sensitisation to governmental legislation, emphasising collective responsibility for safeguarding the state's unique natural assets, notably around Ikot Abasi.

Concept of Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is defined as travel motivated by a desire to experience and engage with the distinctive arts, heritage, customs, and unique character of a particular location (McIntosh et al., 2015). This form of tourism goes beyond mere observation, promoting immersion in diverse cultural expressions such as historical monuments, museums, art installations, festivals, and natural landscapes that hold significant cultural value (Richards, 2018). It promotes authenticity, experiential learning, and meaningful engagement with local populations, developing a greater knowledge and appreciation of other ways of life (Timothy & Conover, 2019).

The state is rich in cultural heritage, offering a broad assortment of sights and activities. For instance, Ikot Abasi Local Government Area is home to historically significant structures like the "Bridge of No Return" and the Amalgamation House, both crucial anchors for heritage tourism (Etim, 2024). Beyond historical treasures, Akwa Ibom enjoys a rich festival calendar, like the Annang Festival of Arts and Culture, which celebrates Annang history and culture through masquerade presentations, traditional music, and art (Esu, 2018). Other indigenous

festivals like Ekpe and Ekpo masquerade outings are held across various local government areas, including Ikot Abasi, exhibiting the region's rich cultural tapestry (Esu, 2018; Edem, 2024). Sites like the Oron Museum and Raffia City in Ikot Ekpene further showcase the state's diversified cultural offerings (Udoakpan et al., 2015).

Economically, cultural tourism is a vital driver, producing cash, offering employment opportunities, and supporting alternative livelihoods for local populations (Adedoyin & Adeyemi, 2023; Emeakpo & George, 2025). The financial profits can be reinvested into the restoration and administration of heritage monuments, establishing a virtuous cycle of preservation and economic development (IEREK, 2025). In addition to economic benefits, cultural tourism significantly enhances cultural pride and identity in communities such as Ikot Abasi and Ibeno. (Augustine et al., 2023). It empowers local populations by acknowledging their customs and narratives, potentially revitalising local cultural practices (Lu & Wei, 2022). Furthermore, cultural tourism promotes visitors' awareness of a site's cultural and environmental relevance, generating appreciation and shared responsibility for heritage preservation (Aman, 2025; Cheng & Chen, 2022). It can also extend a community's horizons by improving access to knowledge and boosting external relationships (Lu & Wei, 2022). However, the potential of cultural tourism in Akwa Ibom is hampered by challenges such as insufficient funding, inadequate community involvement in planning, and a lack of supportive infrastructure (Imikan & Ekong, 2021; Udoakpan et al., 2015). Addressing these concerns is vital for effectively exploiting the region's cultural diversity.

Empirical Review

Cultural Tourism and Education & Awareness

Several studies highlight the critical role of education and awareness in fostering support for sustainable tourism and conservation.

In Nigeria, Okunola and Popoola (2018), in their quantitative descriptive survey "Awareness of residents towards the development of sustainable tourism in Olumo Rock Tourist Complex, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria", investigated the local community's awareness of tourism's role. They gathered data via questionnaires from 300 residents (convenience sampling) and subjected it to statistical analysis. Their findings demonstrated a substantial positive link between citizens' knowledge and the development of sustainable tourism, showing that fostering educational programmes and raising awareness favourably affects pro-environmental and supportive behaviours.

Similarly, Galić and Škare (2022) conducted a quantitative assessment in Croatian national parks titled "Fostering Sustainable Tourism through Local Awareness". Their research involved 485 local inhabitants, and data from the survey were evaluated using structural equation modelling (SEM). The study's major finding suggested that higher levels of local awareness were strongly associated with improved support for sustainable tourism practices within protected areas, underlining the vital significance of focused education and awareness efforts in gaining community buy-in.

Beyond local communities, Tran et al. (2023) evaluated the influence of "cultural heritage awareness and tourists' willingness to pay for conservation at heritage sites in Vietnam". This quantitative study surveyed 500 tourists, and data acquired from the surveys were evaluated using various statistical techniques to establish the relationships. The findings demonstrated a positive relationship between tourists' awareness of cultural heritage and their willingness to financially contribute to its conservation, suggesting that enhancing cultural heritage education and awareness among visitors can directly translate into increased resources for preservation.

These studies collectively underline the great potential of cultural tourism to serve as a platform for environmental education and awareness in Ikot Abasi. By integrating educational components into cultural tourism experiences, there's an opportunity to dramatically boost both local inhabitants' and visitors' understanding of the area's distinctive natural history, its ecological importance, and the risks it faces. This enhanced understanding is vital for establishing a sense of shared responsibility and generating support, both behavioural and financial, for conservation initiatives, directly answering the first premise regarding education and awareness.

Cultural Tourism and Community Engagement

The literature consistently emphasises the importance of meaningful community engagement for successful heritage management and sustainable tourism.

Ifatimehin (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study titled "Community Participation in Cultural Heritage Management for Sustainable Tourism Development in Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria." Data from surveys and interviews with 320 inhabitants were evaluated using both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (thematic) methods to determine engagement. Findings demonstrated that despite the critical importance of community participation in effective heritage management, actual involvement was often limited due to poor awareness and inadequate frameworks, indicating the urgent need for formal engagement initiatives.

Further afield, Flores-Rodríguez and Ramos-Elósegui (2022) studied "Community Participation in Cultural Tourism Development in the Ecuadorian Amazon" using a qualitative study design. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were evaluated using thematic analysis to detect patterns in involvement. Their findings demonstrated that while communities requested increased involvement, their participation typically remained at an operational level rather than impacting strategic planning, emphasising that more empowered engagement models are required to ensure equal benefits and sustainable development.

Complementing this, Yang et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study on "Indigenous tourism development and community engagement in Australia". Their research comprised semi-structured interviews with Indigenous tourism operators. Data from these interviews were evaluated using thematic analysis to discover major themes related to self-determination and

collaboration. The key conclusion underlined that genuine community engagement, anchored in principles of self-determination, is crucial for ensuring that Indigenous cultural tourism respects traditional rights and brings tangible benefits to local communities.

These empirical findings strongly suggest that cultural tourism might be a potent driver for improving community engagement in natural heritage protection in Ikot Abasi. However, for this participation to be genuinely successful and durable, it must extend beyond tokenistic involvement. It entails developing robust structures for involvement, ensuring that local people are not merely benefactors but active collaborators in planning and decision-making. This deeper level of empowerment is vital for creating a sense of ownership and responsibility among Ikot Abasi's population, closely agreeing with the second hypothesis on community engagement. By learning from the problems and accomplishments of other locations, Ikot Abasi can build cultural tourism initiatives that really involve and benefit its local populations in maintaining their natural heritage.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research approach to assess the relationship between cultural tourism and the conservation of natural heritage assets in Ikot Abasi. This approach is excellent for gathering, evaluating, and interpreting data from a specific population to understand present conditions and uncover links among diverse aspects. The study's target group comprised inhabitants, local stakeholders, and visitors who engage with natural heritage assets within the Ikot Abasi Local Government Area. A sample size of 200 respondents was acquired using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across relevant categories (e.g., local inhabitants, community leaders, tourism operators, and visitors).

Data were obtained using a structured questionnaire, derived from existing measures linked to cultural tourist effect and conservation awareness. The questionnaire was arranged into sections, including cultural tourism, education and awareness, and community engagement. All items employed a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly Disagree (1)' to 'Strongly Agree (5)'. Prior to full data collection, a pilot test was done with a small subset of respondents to polish questionnaire clarity and assess initial dependability, assuring the instrument's validity and consistency.

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, and mean) were employed to summarise respondent characteristics and item responses. The reliability of the instrument was examined using Cronbach's Alpha to establish the internal consistency of items for each construct. To test the hypotheses, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was applied. This statistical method was chosen to examine the degree and direction of the linear association between cultural tourism (independent variable) and the two dependent variables: (1) education and awareness and (2) community engagement. All analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0, with a significance level set at 0.05 to evaluate statistical relevance.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Values for Constructs

Variable Measured	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Cultural Tourism	6	.861
Education & Awareness	6	.814
Community Engagement	6	.838

Source: SPSS Result of Field Survey, 2025

Interpretation: All variables show Cronbach's Alpha values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating good internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Hypothesis 1: Cultural Tourism and Education & Awareness

Hypothesis Statement

H₀₁: Cultural tourism has no significant relationship with education and awareness about natural heritage sites conservation among residents and visitors in Ikot Abasi.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Test for Hypothesis 1

Correlations			
		Cultural Tourism	Education & Awareness
Cultural Tourism	Pearson Correlation	1	.641**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
Education & Awareness	Pearson Correlation	.641**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output, version 25

Decision Rule and Interpretation Based on Decision Rule

The analysis demonstrated a statistically significant and favourable association between cultural tourism and education & awareness about natural heritage conservation in Ikot Abasi ($p=0.000<0.05$). This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0 : Cultural tourism has no substantial link with education and knowledge about natural heritage site conservation among locals and visitors in Ikot Abasi). The positive association suggests that as cultural tourism activities improve, so does the degree of education and awareness concern natural heritage protection among both locals and visitors.

This finding agrees with recent research by Okunola and Popoola (2018), who discovered that heightened tourism knowledge directly connects with greater sustainable attitudes and educational outcomes among communities. Similarly, Galić and Škare (2022) highlighted that local awareness, frequently encouraged by exposure to tourism, is vital for generating support for conservation efforts. The implication for Ikot Abasi is that cultural tourism efforts operate as excellent instructional platforms, boosting public understanding of environmental conservation. From a social-ecological perspective, this shows that cultural tourism might favourably influence the cognitive and attitudinal components within the human subsystem, leading to more informed and conservation-orientated behaviours that eventually benefit the natural environment.

Hypothesis 2: Cultural Tourism and Community Engagement

Hypothesis Statement

H₀₂: Cultural tourism has no significant relationship with community engagement of natural heritage sites conservation among residents and visitors in Ikot Abasi.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Test for Hypothesis 2

Correlations		Cultural Tourism	Community Engagement
Cultural Tourism	Pearson Correlation	1	.703**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
	Pearson Correlation	.703**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200
Community Engagement	Pearson Correlation	.703**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200
	Pearson Correlation	1	.703**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 -tailed).

Source: SPSS Output, version 25

Decision Rule and Interpretation Based on Decision Rule

The results demonstrate a statistically significant and strong positive link between cultural tourism and community engagement in natural heritage site conservation in Ikot Abasi ($p=0.000<0.05$). Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0 : Cultural tourism has no substantial link with community engagement of natural heritage site conservation among locals and visitors in Ikot Abasi) is rejected. This link shows that cultural tourism effectively mobilises and involves local populations in conservation initiatives.

This outcome is similar to Ifatimehin (2018), who highlighted that tourism-led programmes typically inspire community involvement in heritage management. Furthermore, the findings coincide with Flores-Rodríguez and Ramos-Elósegui (2022), who showed that cultural

tourism may empower communities by involving them in operational and decision-making processes. For Ikot Abasi, this implies that cultural tourism considerably benefits conservation efforts by inspiring local engagement, generating a sense of ownership, and supporting sustainable environmental practices. In keeping with the ideas of the social-ecological model, this shows that cultural tourism increases the adaptive ability of local communities, enabling them to become active stewards of their natural heritage and promoting a more robust human-environment relationship.

Research Implications, Conclusion and Recommendation

Research Implications

The findings of this study considerably improve academic research and policy development in heritage conservation and sustainable tourism, stressing the vital necessity to combine cultural tourism with conservation efforts for long-term sustainability. The observed favourable correlations between cultural tourism and the pillars of education, awareness, and community participation strongly support the premise that culturally rooted tourism acts as a potent weapon for grassroots environmental education. This underscores the significance of linking tourism development plans with heritage conservation programmes, particularly in ecologically fragile locations like Ikot Abasi.

Furthermore, the powerful beneficial association between cultural tourism and community participation highlights the crucial significance of local ownership in sustainable conservation. The data imply that cultural tourism not only attracts outward interest but also creates internal mobilisation among local citizens. This contradicts traditional top-down conservation approaches, arguing instead for community-centred solutions, supported by tourism earnings and participatory planning, which are likely to be more effective in maintaining the sustainability and authenticity of conservation initiatives. These findings extend existing theoretical frameworks, such as the social-ecological model, by highlighting how micro-level tourism interactions might increase ecological stewardship.

Conclusion

This study assessed how cultural tourism impacts the conservation of natural heritage sites in Ikot Abasi, focusing on promoting education, awareness, and community involvement. The data collected from both residents and tourists strongly support a positive connection between cultural tourism and increased environmental awareness, as well as enhanced community engagement in conservation efforts. These findings challenge the traditional concept of tourism and conservation as incompatible, demonstrating their possible synergy under optimal conditions.

By focusing on the specific local context of Ikot Abasi, this research addresses a key vacuum in the empirical literature, which often misses the subtle dynamics prevalent in subnational regions of developing countries. Ultimately, the study highlights that when tourism projects are carefully developed and culturally integrated, they can generate lasting benefits for both people and the environment, contributing considerably to sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following proposals are made to increase natural heritage protection in Ikot Abasi through cultural tourism:

Short-Term Actions:

Integrate Environmental Education with Cultural Tours: Develop and implement guided tours and cultural experiences that explicitly highlight the ecological value of Ikot Abasi's natural heritage. This should involve conducting training for local guides to develop their environmental interpretation skills and setting up mobile interpretive exhibitions at significant cultural and ecological places.

Establish Community-Led Conservation Committees: Empower existing community groups or develop new ones, involving citizens, traditional rulers, and youth, to actively participate in the planning and implementation of cultural tourism and conservation programmes. Provide rapid instruction on basic site management, platform management and visitor interaction.

Long-Term Strategies:

Develop Context-Specific Cultural Tourism Policies: The Akwa Ibom State Tourism Board, in partnership with the Ministry of Environment and local government, should formulate policies that clearly include natural heritage conservation into cultural tourism frameworks. This should include rules for sustainable behaviours for tourists and operators and procedures for reinvesting tourism earnings directly into conservation funds.

Invest in Targeted Interpretive Infrastructure: Develop and install permanent, engaging interpretive signs and digital materials at major cultural and natural heritage sites such as Amalgamation House and mangrove regions like Ikot Abasi. These tools should convey both the historical/cultural narratives and the ecological value, using local languages and attractive visuals. Consider creating a small heritage interpretation centre in Ikot Abasi.

Foster Public-Private-Community Partnerships (PPCPs): Encourage cooperation between private tourism operators, local craftspeople, conservation agencies, and community groups to co-develop sustainable tourism packages. These collaborations can pool resources for marketing, infrastructure development, and conservation funding, ensuring reciprocal advantages and shared responsibilities.

Implement a Robust Monitoring and Evaluation Framework: Establish a framework for frequent assessment of the direct and indirect benefits of cultural tourism on conservation outcomes, including biodiversity health, waste management effectiveness, changes in local livelihoods, and levels of community engagement and environmental awareness. This should include measurements such as local biodiversity health indicators, waste management efficacy, changes in local livelihoods, and sustained levels of community engagement and environmental awareness throughout time. This data can be utilised to inform adaptive management techniques and aid decision-making processes for conservation programmes.

References

- Adedoyin, A. R., & Adeyemi, K. M. (2023). Cultural heritage tourism as a catalyst for sustainable development: The case of old Oyo town in Nigeria. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 13(2), 241–255.
- Akinlo, A. E., & Akanni, S. O. (2017). Oil exploration and environmental degradation in Nigeria. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 24(13), 12518–12529.
- Akpan, I. I., & Udofia, U. E. (2020). Environmental challenges and sustainable development in the Niger Delta: A study of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. *Journal of Geography and Environmental Management*, 2(1), 1–13.
- Alexander, C. (2017). *Understanding global environmental politics: From concept to practice*. Routledge.
- Aman, S. (2025). Impact of tourist's environmental awareness on pro-environmental behavior with the mediating effect of tourist's environmental concern and moderating effect of tourist's environmental attachment. *Sustainability*, 13(23), 12998.
- Buckley, R. (2020). *Ecotourism: Concepts, trends and issues* (3rd ed.). CABI.
- Cheng, Z., & Chen, X. (2022). The effect of tourism experience on tourists' environmentally responsible behavior at cultural heritage sites: The mediating role of cultural attachment. *Sustainability*, 14(1), 565.
- Dodds, R., & Joppe, M. (2005). Global tourism and sustainable development: An international snapshot. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 13(3), 227–243.
- Ebong, M. S., Udofia, U. E., & George, A. A. (2025). Assessment of ecological degradation and associated implications in southern Akwa Ibom State: Why actions need to be taken. *Journal of Ecology and Natural Resources*, 5(2), 000244.
- Essien, N. E., Udo, E. J., & Nkanta, N. A. (2021). Environmental issues and challenges in Akwa Ibom State: The way forward. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 5(4), 58–65.
- Essien, S. E., Udofia, U. E., & George, A. A. (2021). Community participation in sustainable tourism development in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 9(1), 1–12.
- Etim, N. A., Etim, N. N., & Ukpong, A. J. (2018). Spatio-temporal assessment of degraded marine wetlands and its remediation measures in southern Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2).

- Fennell, D. A., & Malloy, D. C. (2007). *Tourism codes of ethics: Practice, theory, synthesis*. Channel View Publications.
- Flores-Rodríguez, P., & Ramos-Elósegui, N. (2022). Community participation in cultural tourism development in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Sustainability*, 14(18), 11488.
- Galić, A., & Škare, M. (2022). Fostering sustainable tourism through local awareness: The case of Croatian national parks. *Sustainability*, 14(2), 652.
- Ifatimehin, O. O. (2018). Community participation in cultural heritage management for sustainable tourism development in Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 1(1), 1–10.
- Ite, A. E., & Ibok, U. J. (2016). Environmental education and awareness for sustainable development in Nigeria: The challenges and prospects. *International Journal of Educational Research and Reviews*, 4(4), 58–66.
- Jamal, T., & Stronza, A. L. (2009). Collaboration theory and tourism practice. *Journal of Tourism Planning and Development*, 6(1), 11–25.
- Lu, Y., & Wei, L. (2022). Community empowerment under powerful government: A sustainable tourism development path for cultural heritage sites. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 752051.
- McIntosh, R. W., Goeldner, C. R., & Ritchie, J. R. B. (2015). *Tourism: Principles, practices, philosophies* (13th ed.). Wiley.
- Okonjo-Iweala, N., & Oyejide, A. (2014). *The future of Africa: A new path to prosperity*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Okunola, M. M., & Popoola, R. I. (2018). Awareness of residents towards the development of sustainable tourism in Olumo Rock Tourist Complex, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 6(1), 1–9.
- Osipova, E., Mariani, A., & Kettunen, M. (2018). The benefits of natural World Heritage: Identifying and assessing ecosystem services and benefits provided by the world's most iconic natural places. IUCN.
- Redalyc. (2021). Cultural psychology, social identity, and community engagement in World Heritage conservation sites. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 53, 1–14.
- Richards, G. (2018). Cultural tourism: A review of recent research and trends. *Journal of Tourism Planning and Development*, 15(1), S140–S154.

- Stronza, A. L., & Gordillo, J. (2008). Community-based ecotourism. In R. W. Butler & S. Boyd (Eds.), *Tourism and national parks: International perspectives on development, use and sustainability* (pp. 235–252). CAB International.
- Timothy, D. J., & Conover, L. (2019). *Cultural heritage and tourism: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Channel View Publications.
- Tran, V. D., Le, M. N., Nguyen, H. M. P., & Nguyen, M. D. (2023). Cultural heritage awareness and tourists' willingness to pay for conservation at heritage sites in Vietnam. *Heliyon*, 9(5), e15777.
- Tsintskiladze, M. (2024). Role of community empowerment in the sustainable cultural heritage management: A review. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business, Management and Economics*, 1(1), 22–31.
- Udoh, I. U., Udoh, E. U., & Akpan, M. A. (2025). Environmental challenges in Ibeno Beach, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria: Implications for human health and the environment. *Nigerian Journal of Chemical Research*, 29(2), 73–98.
- Udoh, J. P., & Akpan, E. B. (2018). Evaluating wetland assets in consumptive and non-consumptive dimensions and utilization potentials in Ibeno, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. *Global Journal of Environmental Science and Management*, 4(2), 146–153.
- Udoma-Michaels, D., Ndukwu, B., & Obafemi, A. (2019). Perception assessment of the impact of human activities on Stubbs Creek Forest Reserve, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. *Natural Resources*, 10(5), 185–197.
- UNESCO. (2021). *Climate change and World Heritage: An updated report on the impacts of climate change on World Heritage properties*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre.
- UNEP. (2021). *Africa's environment: A view from space*. United Nations Environment Programme.
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations.
- United Nations. (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals report 2023*. United Nations Publications.
- UNWTO. (2017). *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: A guide to action*. UNWTO.
- Wang, Y., & Ap, J. (2013). Tourists' perceptions of service quality in tourist destinations: A case study of Hong Kong. *Journal of Travel Research*, 52(2), 221–237.

- Wearing, S., & Neil, J. (2009). *Ecotourism: Impacts, potentials and possibilities* (2nd ed.). Butterworth-Heinemann.
- William, E. (2025). Assessing Nigeria's efforts in biodiversity conservation. *Scientific Reports in Life Sciences*, 6(1), 87–99.
- Yang, S., Kim, H., & Su, L. (2020). Indigenous tourism development and community engagement: A case study of Australia. *Tourism Management*, 76, 103986.