

Tourism Policy of a Sub-Region of the Niger Delta of Nigeria: An Evaluation

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Abstract

This study evaluates the tourism policy of a sub-region of the Niger Delta of Nigeria on the basis of international standards for tourism development. Attempt was made to highlight the tourism potentials and activities in the region. The findings have revealed omissions of crucial issues in the available “tourism charter” of the region to include; role of the private sector, incentives to private participation, guidelines for investors and environmental conservation among others. The paper recommends specialized institutional participation such as universities in the process of developing complete tourism policy for the region in order to ensure effective and sustainable tourism development.

Key words: Tourism policy, Tourism development, Niger Delta Region, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Just over a century ago, most people spent their entire life within a few hundred miles of the spot where they were born. Travel to far-flung destinations for pleasure or education was the prerogative of a very small group of adventurous or wealthy individuals. But today hundreds of thousands of people are able to crisscross the country where they live or even the globe. What has been responsible for the change? The industrial revolution has been identified as a major factor (“Tourism”, (2002). As consequence of the revolution, millions of people became involved in manufacturing goods and providing services. The result was greater earnings and eventually more disposable income. The forward leap in technology also created machines that took over much of the labor-intensive work. This afforded many people more leisure time. With these factors in place, in the mid-1900, the advent of more affordable mass transportation opened the floodgates of tourism. Then, by beaming images of far-off places into homes around the world, the newly invented mass communication industry stimulated the desire to travel. The result was a rapidly expanding global tourism industry. Many countries have now recognized the economic benefits accruable from the development of tourism and they have therefore established programmes to promote travel and have assisted in provision of better physical facilities for the accommodation of tourists (Olajuyin, 1990).

Nigeria is blessed with numerous tourist attractions spread all over the entire country. Nevertheless, the country is yet to fully develop her tourism potentialities. This is really essential in order to bring about diversity in the national economy to supplement earnings from oil extraction which has remained the major foreign earner for a long time now.

In the light of the numerous advantages derivable from tourism, the Akwa Ibom State which is the focus of the paper has recently shown optimism and enthusiasm in the development of the tourism sector. It is the vision of Akwa Ibom State Government that tourism be developed to become

the second foreign exchange earner (AKS, 2007). In order to attain the expected level of tourism development, the ministry of Culture and tourism was created. The ministry is committed towards effective policy formulation and management of tourism sector with the view to diversifying the economy.

The development of the tourism economy in the state is plausible for it is what is needed to boost the over all state economy which presently depends solely on the Federal allocation of the oil money. The geographic location of the state makes it a destination point; therefore, developing the rich tourism base is essentially needed to attract visitors to the area. However, the attractiveness, viability and sustainability of the sector depend largely on the policy upon which it is based. This paper therefore attempts to highlight and evaluate the content of the State tourism policy at this early stage.

2. The Study Location

The paper focuses on Akwa Ibom State. Akwa Ibom State is one of the thirty-six States in the Federal Republic of Nigeria with the Population of over 3.5million people (Mbat, Ibok & Daniel, 2013). It was created on 23rd September, 1987. There are 31 Local Government Areas including Uyo the State Capital. The State is strategically located at the Southeastern corner of Nigeria between latitudes $4^{\circ}30^1$ and $5^{\circ} 33^1$ North and longitudes $7^{\circ} 30^1$ and $8^{\circ} 25^1$ East (see Fig.1). It is sandwiched between Abia and Rivers States to the West, Cross River State to the East, Abia State to the North and Atlantic Ocean to the South (Daniel, 2012).

3. Tourism Policy

A tourism policy is a statement of goals and objectives with reference to tourism, which the government hopes to attain within a specified time period, showing what course of action, strategies or mechanism will be adopted to achieve the goals.

Information received from the Research and Statistic Unit of the Ministry of Culture and tourism has it that the fully developed Tourism Policy of the State shall be accessible to the public in the

future. What is now accessible to the public, which is the basis of this paper, considered as draft policy statement is referred as “Service Delivery Charter”.

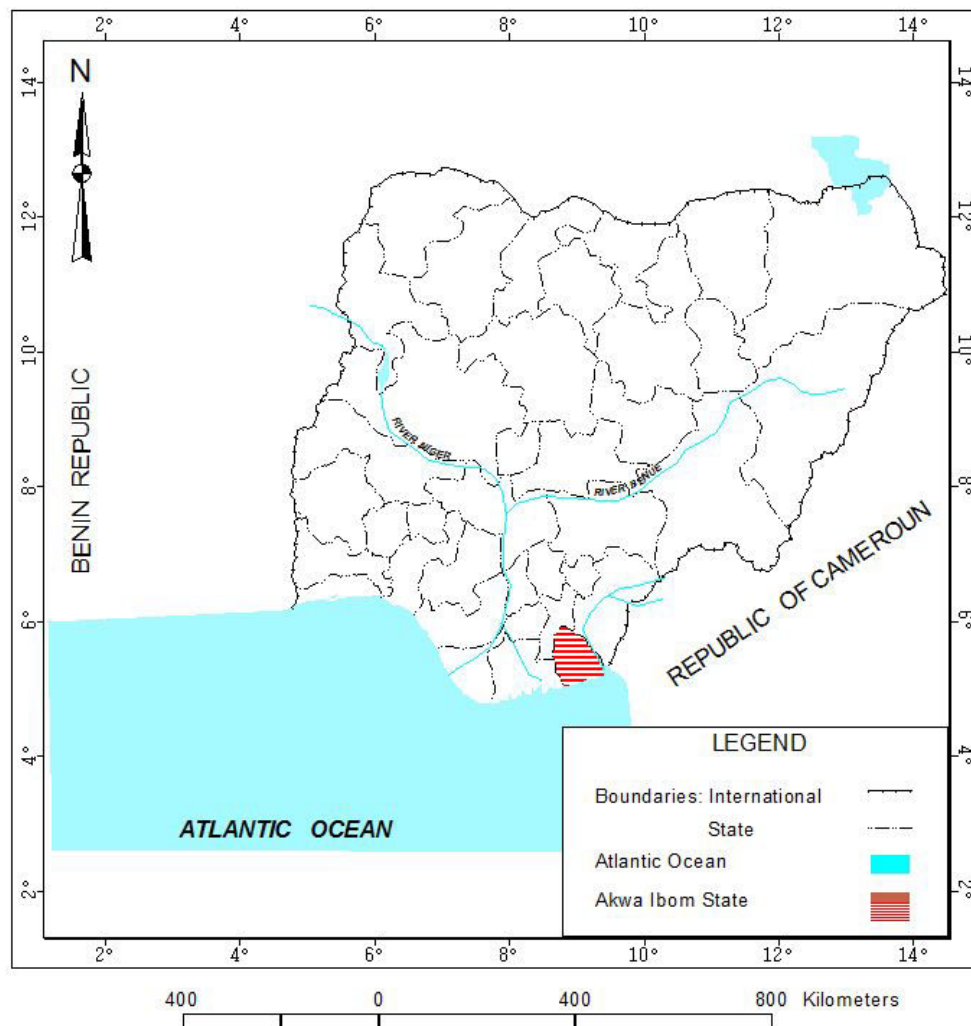


Fig. 1: The Study Location on the Map of Nigeria

4. Aim of the Tourism Charter

It is the aim of the state Government to (a) use arts, culture and tourism for job creation as alternative source of revenue for Akwa Ibom State and (b) Harness the enormous potentials that exist in arts, culture and tourism.

5. Strategies for Developing Tourism in Akwa Ibom State

Specific strategies are outlined in the “charter”, designed towards the development of tourism to the desirable height namely: second foreign exchange earner in the State after oil. These strategies are:

1. Baseline economic survey of the tourism sector: This is to obtain a deeper insight into what it will take to support tourism as a viable business venture in the State. This strategy should be given priority because according to Robinson (1996) without a full study of the attractions the “State” possesses, and their evaluation in terms of potential future types of tourists, the ‘State’ cannot begin to plan for the future expansion of the tourist trade. It is then of fundamental importance that a very careful assessment be made of all the attractions - physical, historical, cultural- that the State possesses.
2. Improving tourism infrastructure and facilities: The term “infrastructure” according to Chiras (1985) refers literally to all those built-in services which are essential for modern social life and economic development. They include; transport facilities such as roads, railways and airport, water supplies and sewage systems, supplies of energy such as electricity, communications facilities such as telephone services.
3. Promoting private sector investments in tourism and in tourist infrastructure: There are at least two ways in which the government can do this; first, it can create a favorable climate for investment by ensuring that conditions reassure the private investors and second, it can help the private investors to consider tourism development as an attractive investment proposition by offering special financial inducements such as subsidies, credit, tax concessions, preferential rates of interest on land purchase, etc.

4. Promoting development of small and medium enterprises by fostering linkages between tourism and craft. An example is providing craft shops at tourism projects.
5. Promoting national tourism events in the State.
6. Encouraging non-governmental organizations involvement in tourism.
7. Promoting uniquely Akwa Ibom State exportable products with a view to “branding” them for national and international patronage. This should include cultural artifact of Ikot Ekpene, Itu canoe craft etc.
8. Developing indigenous theatres for drama, local poetry, dancing and sculpture.
9. Setting up of mechanisms for rating hotels; this is necessary in order to initiate and maintain an internationally accepted standard.

The State Ministry of Culture and Tourism is vested with the statutory responsibilities of developing tourism, arts and culture policy and programmes. It plays the oversight functions over all tourism matters, projects, activities and facilities in all sections of the State.

6. Tourism Activities in Akwa Ibom State

Tourism activities according to the “Charter” include hospitality business such as hotels and restaurants as well as leisure and entertainment services. Government owned hospitality business concerns inherited by Akwa Ibom State during its creation are listed in the Charter as follows:

1. Qua River Hotel, Eket
2. Metro Hotel, Uyo
3. Metro Hotel, Ikot Ekpene
4. Catering/ Rest Houses at Oron, Itu, Ikot Abasi and Etinan.

Unfortunately, because of poor management and other factors, these hotels and rest houses have deteriorated significantly to almost a state of non-existence.

Other hospitality business concerns set up by Government after the creation of Akwa Ibom State are listed to include:

1. Akwa Ibom Guest Suites, Lagos
2. Akwa Ibom Guest Suites, Abuja
3. Ibom Resort Hotel Limited, Nwaniba

The Guest suites are said to be within the premises of the State Liaison offices in Lagos and Abuja. They are said to be under private lease management contracts. Ibom hotel has been developed into a five star hotel of international standard. It is being managed by a Chinese Hotels and Catering Company, “**Le-Meridians**”. This hotel is equipped with requisite facilities to promote tourism, entertainment, games and leisure. It is located at Nwaniba, near a beach and has a golf course.

It is noted in the “**Charter**” that Qua River Hotel, Eket and Metro Hotel, Ikot Ekpene have been sold to private sector investors. However, they are yet to be refurbished and reactivated. It is observed that apart from Government –owned hotels and guest suites, there is active private sector involvement in the restaurants operating as small and medium enterprises in the State. Nevertheless, no existing privately owned Hotel/Restaurant is rated as meeting international standard. Such saying is however baseless since, as noted earlier the Ministry is yet to set-up hotel rating system in the State in alignment with international best practice. This is expected to be included in the proposed “Tourism Policy”.

The beaches occurring along the State’s 129 Kilometer coastline with the Atlantic Ocean, have been identified to possess a lot of potentials for tourism and leisure activities. These beaches occur along the Cross River at Ayadeghe, Itu and Nwaniba, Uruan.

7. Proposed Tourism Projects

In the light of the foregoing, Akwa Ibom State Government according to the “Charter” has planned to developed more tourism potentials of the State as follows:

1. Amusement/Leisure Park and Tourism Gallery at Uyo
2. Development of beach resort facilities into international standard at Ikot Abasi and Itu
3. Development of Mary Slessor Memorial Park at Ibiono Ibom
4. Development of a Recreational Park and Sea Foods Depot at Oron.
5. Creation of Inaha Fishing and Cultural Festival/Boat Regatta
6. Creation of Akwa Ibom Tourism Week/World Tourism Day
7. Creation of Carnival with Beauty Pageant
8. Renovation and reactivation of Metro Hotel, Uyo
9. Rehabilitation and reactivation of catering Rest House at Oron, Itu and Ikot Abasi
10. Establishment of Tourism Information Management Centers to be located at the hotel and rest houses at Uyo, Oron, Itu and Ikot Abasi

It is hoped that if these projects planned by the Akwa Ibom State Governemnt are consistently developed and maintained, it will help reduce unemployment rate and will also create wealth and consequently reduce poverty.

8. Other Themes in the “Charter”

Other themes highlighted in the “charter” are:

- i. Ministerial Responsibility
- ii. Services to Clients
- iii. Commitment
- iv. Grievances Redress Mechanism and

v. Reward Mechanism

The Charter concludes with comment soliciting for the support of all as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism endeavors to serve the interest of all.

9. Observations

Although the “Charter” is yet to be developed into full *Tourism Policy*, it is necessary and wise to draw attention to serious and important omissions in the charter that must be given due consideration when preparing the final policy, document:

- 1. Policy Objectives:** The objective of government tourism policy should be clearly defined and outlined. What are considered objectives in the ‘Charter’ are usually strategies or policy measures towards achieving the objectives.
- 2. Role of the Private Sector:** A section of the policy should spell-out clearly and in detail the role of the private sector in the development and management of tourism in the state. This is essential in order to avoid unnecessary duplication and conflicts of interest.
- 3. Incentives to Private Participation:** In order to induce greater support of the tourism development objective, package of incentives approved by the government should be stated. This should include tax relief for research and development, etc
- 4. Export Promotion:** A variety of measures ranging from export insurance to outright grant should be articulated in this section.
- 5. Guidelines for Investors:** A section of the policy should be designed to provide investors with information on government requirements for establishing tourism businesses or related businesses and relevant government institutions involved in the process.

6. Environmental Conservation: This is a very critical issue in tourism development. The section will provide guidelines on conserving the natural endowment, cultural legacy and social amenities while developing and managing tourists' attractions.

10. Recommendation

Consequent upon the foregoing, the paper strongly recommends as follows: Though it is the Ministry of Culture and Tourism that has the primary responsibility of developing tourism policy for the State, but in order to produce creditable document, one that can guarantee effective and sustainable tourism development, there should be an institutional arrangement that the final draft of the policy statement be sent to specialized institutions, such as the Department of Geography and Regional Planning of the University of Uyo and the Akwa Ibom State University, all located in Akwa Ibom State. Experts in these institutions will then research into the various aspects of the draft policy and thereafter make their contributions that would be built into the draft for the final production of the tourism policy of the State.

11. Conclusion

The success of tourism development depends very largely upon appropriate facilities being available in the right place at the right time and these can only be provided by adequate research into the state tourist assets and markets. Research is also required to ensure that the natural and created tourism assets are conserved and protected to maintain tourist appeal, for lack of care and coordinated development may impair and even ruin those assets upon which the tourist industry is founded.

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