

POTENTIALS OF AZUMINI BLUE RIVER FOR ECO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The importance of tourism as a major tool for a country's socio-economic development cannot be overstated. Although many centers and attractions in a country like Nigeria have not been developed to realize the goal of tourism development, the means to avoid this is to devote maximum effort to the growth of the tourism sector. This paper investigates the Azumini Blue River and its potential for eco-tourism development. The paper also evaluates the potential effects of the activities at the river on the host community and determines measures to ensure the continued preservation of the river. Data were gathered using qualitative research method and secondary sources from libraries and the internet. The findings revealed that the Blue River has a lot of potentials but also, the collaboration of stakeholders is imperative for the potentials to be fully enjoyed. This paper argued that the Azumini Blue River deserves to be properly cared for, with working policies guiding its development.

Keywords: Azumini Blue River, domestic tourism, economic development, tourist attraction, tourism development.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is graced with a vibrant cultural and natural heritage. Amongst the many pleasant cynosures the country is blessed with, just a few are being developed. The rest have been left untouched and wasting. In fact, the growth of tourism in Nigeria is a fairly recent phenomenon. This is because, the required attention has not been given to the various potentials and attractions located in different parts of the country.

It is a truism that tourism is a widely recognized large industry focusing basically on leisure, business and travel activities (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2018). It has major economic, environmental and sociocultural impacts attached to it, and it offers a lot of benefits in terms of wealth creation, employment, increase in the standard of living, etc. (Mason, 2016). Olorunfemi and Raheem (2008) perceive tourism as a highly vital tool that is capable of alleviating poverty while also sustaining development. Eco-tourism, an aspect of tourism is the travel made to an undisturbed and untampered natural environment with the motives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the view together

with any existing cultural traits, be it past or present, found in the area (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987). Ecotourism is one of the booming and promising tourism segments. Ziffer (1989) stated that ecotourism requires managerial processes and careful planning to help balance the economic, social and environmental goals. Thus, eco-tourism development involves planning and strategizing on how to increase, develop and sustainably manage tourism eco-destinations. Ecotourism has a lot of impacts that can greatly affect the image of an area. Hence, the governments of most developing countries tend to invest in the tourism sector.

The tourism sector was one of the neglected sectors until recently when the Nigerian government decided to focus on it having realized the benefits that could accrue from it. Abia State has beautiful attractions such as the Azumini Blue River in Abia State which can attract domestic and foreign tourists if well-harnessed, developed and maintained. It is against this background that this research seeks to examine the potentials of the Azumini Blue River for eco-tourism development and the factors affecting tourist visitation in the destination.

METHODOLOGY

The Study Area

The study was carried out in the Blue River located in Azumini which is south of the commercial city of Aba. Azumini community is famous for the Azumini Blue River. It was one of the earliest communities in eastern Nigeria to be blessed with tourism facilities. Azumini community is on a hilly ground. It was an ancient slave trade route through the Blue River, commonly known in the local dialect as '*Mini-okigo*'. Azumini lies on latitude $4^{\circ} 49' 00''$ N and longitude $7^{\circ} 29' 00''$ E (Figure 1). It is bounded to the north by a village known as Akanu, on the west by Umuogo and the south and east by the Annags. It is linked to Aba, Akirika, and Obuzu and has a boundary with the Imo River. The Azumini people are known for farming and craftwork (*Akwete* weaving) as occupations. They are more Christian worshippers than traditionalists.

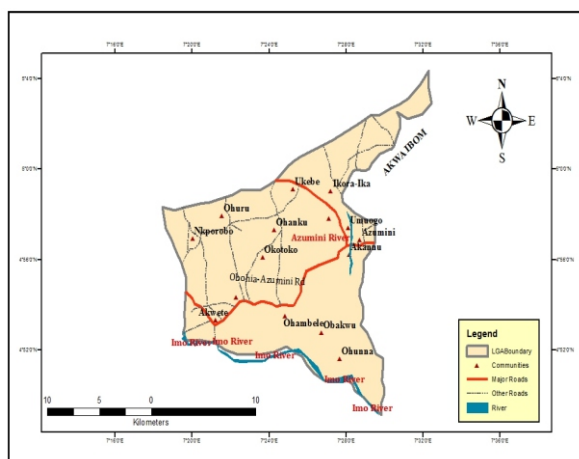


Figure 1: Map of Ukwu East Showing the Study Area
Source: Cartographic Unit, Department of Geography, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Data Collection and Analysis

Both primary and secondary data were used for study. In-depth interview was used for data collection. Semi-structured interviews with some selected persons were conducted. Ten key informants from knowledgeable persons in the host community, Azumini were selected and interviewed. These people were selected based on their status and positions within and outside the Azumini community. This implies that knowledgeable people who were conversant with the subject matter were selected while the remaining participants were recruited through snowballing technique (Creswell, 2007). The data were analyzed thematically.

Findings

Azumini Blue River: A huge potential tourist site

Azumini Blue River became a tourist site from the period of East Central to Imo and Abia States. Over the years, many dignitaries and politicians have visited the river with promises of development. During the administration of former president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the then Minister for Culture and Tourism, Abubakar Sadiq A. Mohammed, visited the Azumini Blue River for first-hand observation of its tourism potential.

Currently, an ongoing project is the construction of a new bridge which both pedestrians and motorists have started using even though it is yet to be completed. Before this time, an Azumini tourist hotel located near the river was functioning but was demolished due to the new bridge construction. Despite this, about four hotels are available for overnight visitors' accommodation, though they are not very close to the Blue River. Further into the river is a sand-made beach, which could be seen as the only fun spot and the last/limit one can go. The cost of transportation around the river ranges between five to ten thousand naira. Plate 1 shows a canoe used for transportation in the Blue River



Plate 2: Canoe Used for Transportation in the Blue River
Source: Field survey (2022)

Azumini Blue River and its Implications for Host Community

After crossing the river, the community's founder named it Azumini (back of the river) Blue River. It was called Blue River because of its colour, which is more pronounced and beautiful during the dry season (See Plate 2). But when scooped out, the water is colorless. The Blue River is so clean that even when viewed from the top, sand, stones, and grasses can be seen beneath the waters.

The Blue River is a spring water that has existed for centuries. It flows through Aba Waterside, Akirika, Abaka, Obuzu, and Abala Nkemini, but it is deeper and wider in the Azumini community. It also flows to meet the Imo River and forms a confluence.

Some years back, white men who visited Enugu (in Enugu State) and even Port Harcourt (in Rivers State) usually travel to take their baths in the river and also relax at the environment. Unfortunately, this no longer happens due to incessant kidnapping operations. Azumini Blue River is linked to commercial activities. The river was a trade route when King Jaja of Opobo was sold. He was traded to Borno, from where he fled and settled in Opobo.



Plate 2: Picture of the Blue River.
Source: Field Survey (2022)

The Azumini Blue River is of economic and religious importance to the host community. Fishing activities are carried out in the river, most especially by indigenes. There was a time during the 1970s after the Nigerian civil war when the then-army troops from Aba would visit the river and throw in dynamites in the water body, killing a lot of fish. This hindered fishing activity then, but recently, it has been revived. It is not just fish that is found in the water but also the presence of tortoises and crocodiles.

Harnessing of sharp sand from the river for building and glass works is increasing as the sand is perceived to be very good for industrial purposes. Aba Glass industry usually visits the river to harness sand for manufacturing most of the glassware sold in Aba markets. Furthermore, swimming activities are also performed in the Blue River. In this regard, visitors who come around enjoy watching the host community members swim. Beach parties are also conducted in the river. Apart from the foregoing, the Blue River is used for washing, cooking, and bathing. In the olden days, the Azumini was associated with a

river goddess (*Okpuru* deity) worshipped by traditional adherents and admirers. Celebrations that warrant the recognition of this god are the crowning of a new king and the new yam festival. The date for welcoming a new king varies as a committee of elders is set up for this event. The new yam festival is usually in September but with no fixed date. One thing that must be done during the two events is that sacrifices must be performed in the river. A goat or hen may be used but a female hen must be thrown into the river before these events start. This practice has diminished but is still practiced by a few individuals.

More so, there is a great river goddess known as '*Nenebu*'. In the 1980s, the water would give signs through turbulence; the chief priest would then issue an order that all parents should prevent their children from going to the river to swim otherwise, they will be drowned by the river. However, as time passes, it is believed by the people that the river no longer drowns indigenous people but may drown any visitor with bad intentions. When such happens, the body will be discovered after three days or more and may be buried beside the river. It was further gathered that if an indigene drowns, it is usually discovered by a pregnant woman.

Another set of worshippers is the '*Owumini*' people (people who believe in '*mamiwota*' -mermaid). When they welcome anything new (visitors), something must be sacrificed to the river goddess inside the river. This practice is still in existence but they are not as loud as other sets of worshippers. Finally, the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS) and other prayer houses visit the river for religious activities such as praying. Most times, when they host a program, on the last day, they would fetch from the Blue River and bathe with it as a sign of cleansing.

Discussion

Potentials and Implications of Azumini Blue River for eco-tourism development in Abia State

Azumini Blue River has many ecotourism potentials. Development of the Blue River as a tourist site will be a source of revenue through various expenses and payments made by local/foreign visitors/tourists especially if other necessary structures are established to aid its growth. The development of the river will promote the state in national and international tourism markets and pave way for additional infrastructure development such as roads, electricity, and pipe borne water.

It will also significantly increase employment opportunities for the community's residents, thereby raising their standard of living, and this will likely help to decrease crime rate.

The Azumini Blue River could become a thriving site for water-based activities. Swimming and fishing, for example, would begin to operate on a different and higher level because these activities will be perceived as tourism – related, thus should generate revenue. If well developed, tourists visiting Azumini can take advantage of the opportunity to explore other attractions within the state, thereby maximizing their visit experience and value for money spent.

The Azumini Blue River has enormous potential for producing micro-hydroelectricity to benefit both the host community and the state. UNDP Report (2010) revealed that through the micro-hydro electricity generated from the water bodies in Rwanda's Nyungwe and Virunga national parks, there exist a power plant that serves the parks and the nearest communities. This scenario is repeatable in Azumini Blue River which is deeper and larger than that of Rwanda's Nyungwe and Virunga national parks.

As regards the foregoing, the data from the field revealed that to some extent, eco-tourism though not fully developed in the site has yielded some economic benefits, including reducing poverty through income generation, employment opportunities and foreign exchange. One participant highlighted, *"tourism in our place has reduced poverty and unemployment especially at the local and state levels by providing minor job opportunities, but a lot still needs to be done to develop the river"* (Participant 4). Mill and Morrison (1992) support the economic impact by stating that tourism development aids in poverty reduction. Another participant agrees with the foreign exchange impact when he said, *"Tourism development here would aid in the establishment of strong ties with the countries involved in the exchange, which would result in business partnership"* (Participant 5). Furthermore, it was found that all participants agreed that income creation has a major economic impact on tourism development. The money tourists spend in a destination multiplies as it passes through other segments of the economy. Income is also generated /created when tourism products and services are sold, e.g., accommodation, food and beverages, entertainment, etc. This agrees with Okpoko and Okpoko, 2002 that tourism entails that a tourist does not come to make money but spends it at that destination.

The money spent on the destination becomes an income to hotels, local tour guides, taxi drivers, shopkeepers and all persons involved to give the tourist the best satisfaction.

Another Participant postulated that *"eco-tourism development calls for infrastructural development triggered by tourist arrivals to the state"* (Participant 10). Mathieson and Wall (1982)'s research agrees with this participant's view about the economic contribution of tourism in infrastructure development. This is not only important to the tourists but becomes valuable, too, to the state and host community. To all the participants, another economic impact associated with tourism development is the increase in the standard of living, which is linked to job provision. This helps to improve the quality of life.

If developed, eco-tourism has different impacts on the social and cultural aspects of a region/ state. From the findings, two out of the ten participants pondered on the negative impacts of development of the site rather than the positive (Participants 1 & 2). Participant 1 mentioned that *"tourism activities are one of the major causes of pollution in their area"*. He gave an example of a visit to the Blue River by a group of school pupils who littered their squares with waste products. Okonkwo and Agnes (2017) mentioned pollution as a major threat to the main city of Calabar, especially during peak hours when many tourists visit several tourist spots.

Another socio-cultural impact of tourism development is the mutual respect and relationship between the tourists and the host community, strengthening the interactions between people with different cultural backgrounds, behaviours, norms, values, etc. Another participant highlighted, *"I have been able to build more friendships even without travelling just because of my engagement in tourism activities"* (Participant 3). This view resonates with the study of Ukaegbu, Carr, and Okpoko (2020). Also, Researchers believe that it is healthy and productive for tolerance and respect to be maintained by both parties (host community and visitors) to ensure maximum support and cooperation

Furthermore, Participant 6 gave a few positive impacts of this category and then mentioned one striking negative impact as *"the increase in prices of things in shops as tourists are often viewed as being wealthier than the local population"*. The indigenes suffer from these increments as most persons cannot purchase goods when prices are hiked.

From another point of view, eco-tourism development aids in promoting local handiworks and crafts and causes greater demand for local food. This, in turn, paves the way for more job opportunities, income generation and popularity of an area for their heritage resource, which now attracts more visitors. This is also applicable in the study area.

There is a close relationship between tourism and the environment. A pleasant environment appeals to tourists, be it natural or man-made. From the findings, six participants talked about the improper and poor conservation of the Blue River and all apportioned blames to the government. A participant from the host community stated, *"The government only comes once in a while and makes watery promises which are never fulfilled while the vicinity of the river continues to be uncared for"* (Participant 1). This agrees with Okonkwo and Agnes (2017), who argued that the government is failing to meet its promises to grow the tourism sector. Against this backdrop, this paper advocates that the preservation and harnessing of the potential of the Blue River should be done by both the government and the host community.

Some of the infrastructural facilities (like good access roads, restaurants, electricity, good transport systems, hotels, etc.) built in local communities can result from tourist visits to that area. One participant from the Azumini community highlighted that *"the construction of the new bridge over the Blue River has added to a smoother means of transport for us"* (Participant 4). Another participant added, *"our community also has good hotels which were prompted by the need to accommodate visitors/tourists though they are quite far from where the Blue River is located"* (Participant 3).

Factors impeding the development of the Blue River's potential

The Blue River is faced with challenges hindering its potential from being well harnessed. Below are the constraints responsible for this:

i. Inexperienced staff

This is one of the major reasons the Blue River has not been developed as revealed in the data. Most persons charged with the responsibility of harnessing the river's potential are not qualified, do not know how to discharge their duties and are inexperienced. Selemon and Alemken (2019) postulate that the tourism industry requires trained personnel because its terminologies, principles and

approaches should be carefully followed. An informant stated that *"most of the persons in the Tourism Board are just there for the money; they have no idea what duty they should perform, let alone those charged with the duty of taking care of the river"* (Participant 7). Those recruited into the tourism sector should have the required orientation, and those with relevant qualifications should be employed to handle tourism-related activities. This would help in the placement of the right people in the sector as well as the conservation and development of tourism potential.

ii. Lack of adequate tourism policies

Every industry has rules and regulations that guide it; the tourism sector is no exception. Unfortunately, existing tourism policies in Nigeria are inadequate, moribund or poorly implemented. This situation is believed by some participants to have also affected the maintenance of Azumini Blue River. In addition, no government agency has been assigned the responsibility of implementing any policy for management of the river for tourism. It is imperative that a committee or administrative group conferred with the authority to maintain, preserve, and harness, the potentials of the Blue River be set up with a mandate to formulate relevant policies that will help develop the Blue River into a vibrant ecotourism destination, promote the destination for domestic and international patronage, as that will guarantee the continued preservation of the Azumini Blue River for sustainable ecotourism purposes. Oloidi (2019) mentioned that one importance of formulating a tourism policy is to define the game's rules; this means the terms and conditions under which the industry should operate and function to produce a good result. One major purpose of tourism policy is to protect the interest of the industry and people affected by its actions, and help guide visitors' activities (Lilly, 2008). The absence of good tourism policies or their poor implementation makes actualization of tourism development difficult.

iii. Poor funding

The study's findings also revealed that poor funding is a major issue that the sector faces as all participants mentioned and stressed on it. Because the State is so focused on other things that generate income, the tourism sector is not considered as it should in the area by the Abia State government. One participant from the community reported that the natural attraction is not maintained because there

are no funds for that. He further said, *"We, the elders of this community, have spoken to the government and asked for financial assistance towards maintaining the Blue River, but our request fell on deaf ears"* (Participant 2).

Steps towards Harnessing the potentials of the Azumini Blue River for ecotourism development in Abia State

Certain things can be done to harness the potentials of Azumini Blue River. The first step to take is to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). This is in line with the report of John, Riki, and Andrew (2012) that EIA is a technical tool used in identifying and analyzing impacts on the physical environment to predict and mitigate measures to reduce the environmental impact of a proposed project. This is very important because EIA aims to foresee the factors affecting the project or the needed development. The outcome can then help in deciding whether to proceed or abort the project. This impact then gives an insight to other measures of proper development, which include:

i. Role of host communities

The idea of hospitality in the tourism sector is partially shaped by the host community's total involvement in tourism-related activities (Soaras, Casado, Lezcano, Sanchez, Gabriel & Abril, 2021). Therefore, to ensure that ecotourism is ably maintained, it is paramount to ensure the sustainability of the tourism destination's natural and cultural environment. This will involve carrying the host communities along. Eze-Uzomaka (2006) argued that any tourism-based program that does not actively involve the host community is prone to fail. Thus, the government and host community partnership is a strong tool for ecotourism development in Abia state.

ii. Role of Government

Tourism stands with the support of basic infrastructural facilities such as electricity, good roads, clean water, safety and security. It is the responsibility of the government to prove these infrastructures, which help create conducive environment both for the tourists and the host community. The government also needs to make policies and regulations that will guide the tourists and ensure that there is no detrimental issue that may arise towards the sector's goals, as well as in safeguarding the tourists and ensuring the safety of the host community (Okonkwo, 2011).

Hall and Jenkins (2004) aptly argued that the government has seven specific roles in tourism development: coordination, planning, legislation and regulation, entrepreneurship, stimulation, social tourism, and protection of public interest.

iii. Accessibility of the destination

Accessibility is a fundamental element that connects tourists to the destination. This agrees with Geza and Lorant, 2010 that transportation is one of the fundamental preconditions for tourism development. All roads (major or minor) leading to where the tourist attraction is located should be made accessible for tourists. Easily accessed areas attract more visitors than areas that are badly eroded. Not only will this measure attract visitors, it will also curtail any further damage.

iv. Communication

This is another major factor that fosters or aids in developing ecotourism in a destination. No tourist or visitor would be comfortable in an area without communicating with families or friends while away from home. As aptly noted by Okonkwo (2011), every tourist wants to visit an area where they can easily communicate with their families or workplaces. This can be achieved through the provision of phone booths, GSMs and even good and working network providers.

v. Publicity

Another step to take in conserving the Blue River is publicity. If people are unaware that such a beautiful natural attraction exists, it is useless and cannot be fully harnessed. Enemu and Amaechi (2015) identified mass media's benefits to tourism development in Abia state. They support the role of publicity through the advertisement of various attractions in Abia state. They further explained that this would help improve visitation and patronage. It can be done by placing billboards all over the city in Nigeria or through radio jingles and television advertisements. This implies that the government, private sectors, community members, and media teams should all get involved.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research problem stated and analyzed, it was discovered that the Azumini Blue River needs proper attention from the major stakeholders (host community, government, tour guides, etc). The workload of preserving and conserving this Blue

River is left for just one party- the host community. It was observed that many ecotourism benefits attached to the Blue River are fading slowly because of no form of seriousness in harnessing its potential. Tourism can facilitate the promotion and development of Abia State. Hence, there is a need to harness, conserve, preserve, and maintain a healthy and vibrant, natural, cultural and social environment in the area.

Laws and sanctions need to be put in place to ensure protection of the Blue River. Awareness of these laws and the sanctions would bring about compliance among the host community and tourists. Currently, the Blue River experiences low patronage but, if the attraction is properly harnessed and managed well there will be increase in patronage and the needed infrastructural development, foreign exchange and a boost in the economic standard of Abia State and Nigeria at large. Thus, to attain sustainable ecotourism development in the study area, there is need for collaboration among the major stakeholders, and establishment of State and Local Tourism Boards with working policies to develop the ecotourism potentials.

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