

The Impact of Community-Based Tourism on Sustainable Development: Example of Owu Waterfalls, Kwara State, Nigeria

*¹Olusola S. Folorunso, ²Olumuyiwa A. Akande and ³Chinyere Ukpokolo

^{1,2}Department of Sustainability Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

³Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

*Corresponding author's Email: olusola.folorunso@kwasu.edu.ng +2348062224274

Abstract

Community-based tourism (CBT) is increasingly recognized as a key strategy for achieving sustainable tourism development, particularly in culturally and ecologically significant destinations. Owu Waterfall in Owa-Kajola, Kwara State, Nigeria, holds vast potential for tourism development, yet the extent of local community participation in its management and conservation remains unclear. This study explores the role of CBT in the sustainable development of Owu Waterfall, focusing on community involvement, socio-economic benefits, and identifying existing challenges. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to community members, local business operators, and tourists. Key informant interviews were conducted with tourism stakeholders, including government officials, conservation experts, selected tourists, and community members. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions and percentages, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic and descriptive analyses to capture perspectives on CBT in the study area. Findings revealed that community participation in the management and conservation of the Owu Waterfalls is limited, as external stakeholders, including government agencies and private investors, dominate decision-making processes. While tourism has created economic opportunities in the area, these benefits are unevenly distributed, with residents receiving a minimal share of the economic benefits. Infrastructural deficits, poor management, and disputes over resource control hinder the full realization of tourism development in the community. The study concludes that a more inclusive tourism framework is necessary to harness the benefits of CBT at Owu Waterfalls. It recommends the establishment of participatory governance structures, improved revenue-sharing formula, and targeted investments in infrastructure and conservation initiatives. Collaboration between government bodies, private investors, and local communities, can help tourist sites transform into a model for sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism, Economic Opportunities, Owa-Kajola, Sustainable Tourism, Waterfalls

Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors globally, playing a pivotal role in the development of many countries through job creation, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange. It encompasses various forms, including leisure, adventure, eco, and cultural tourism, and significantly contributes to national income and community well-being (Alabede *et al.*, 2024). As documented by Bashiru *et al.* (2024), tourism development refers to the process of planning, expanding, and enhancing the tourism industry within a region. It involves the creation and improvement of infrastructure, services, and experiences to attract and satisfy visitors while also benefiting local stakeholders. When not properly managed, however, tourism development can lead to environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and social displacement.

Apparently, sustainable tourism development seeks to address these concerns by promoting responsible tourism practices that balance economic growth with environmental conservation and social equity. It emphasizes long-term planning, resource conservation, and inclusive stakeholder participation to ensure that tourism meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNWTO, 2022). These efforts can better be finessed for effective implementation by ensuring that the major stakeholders in the development and promotion of tourism products are properly engaged, empowered and encouraged to participate in the process. Ogunjente *et al.* (2021), opine that the primary stakeholders are the local communities, who are the custodians of the attractions. This submission can be clearly expressed using community-based tourism approach.

Community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as a viable model for sustainable tourism development, offering communities opportunities to manage and benefit from their cultural and natural resources (Manyara and Jones, 2007). In Nigeria, several ecotourism sites with significant socio-cultural and ecological value remain underutilized or poorly managed due to minimal community involvement. Owu Waterfalls in Owa-Kajola, Kwara State, is one of the highest and most magnificent waterfalls in West Africa. Plunging from a height of approximately 120 meters above sea level, the waterfall is nestled within a thick forest that provides habitat for a wide variety of flora and fauna. The captivating natural scenery, coupled with the sound of cascading water and a serene atmosphere, makes Owu Waterfalls a prime destination for nature lovers, adventure seekers, and researchers. The site also holds cultural significance for the local people, featuring in

traditional beliefs and communal festivities (Aremu and Abara, 2024). Despite its tourism potential, the extent to which the local community participates in its management, conservation, and benefit-sharing is limited. This implies that the management efforts of Owu Waterfalls have not fully integrated the local community. There is a lack of coordinated planning, and residents are often excluded from decision-making processes. This undermines the potential of CBT to empower the local population through employment, skill development, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship.

Owu Waterfall holds vast potential for tourism development, yet the extent of local community participation in its management and conservation remains unclear. Previous studies including Bashiru *et al.* (2024) investigated community-based tourism and development of waterfall attractions in Southwest, Nigeria using Erin Ijesha and Arinta Waterfalls as case studies, with emphasis on the economic impact of the tourist sites. Also, Eja, *et al.*, (2012) examined community participation in tourism development and its socio-economic impact in Obudu Mountain Resort, Nigeria. In the same vein, Manyara and Jones (2007) studied community-based tourism enterprises development in Kenya through the exploration of their potential as avenues of poverty reduction. Among other studies, it can be deduced that there are no sufficient researches and documentation on the contribution of CBT to sustainable tourism development, especially in North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. This study therefore investigates the role of CBT in promoting the sustainable development of Owu Waterfalls, emphasizing community involvement, socio-economic benefits, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. This will help to align the development of Owu Waterfalls with the principles of CBT, the site could serve not only as a sustainable tourist attraction but also as a driver of socio-economic advancement for the host community. This study is guided by three main objectives, which are to: examine the level of community participation in the management and conservation of Owu Waterfalls; to assess the socio-economic benefits of tourism development to the local community around Owu Waterfalls; and to identify the key challenges affecting community-based tourism implementation at the site.

Literature Review

Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Development

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) focuses on empowering local people by allowing them to participate in decision-making, management, and financial benefits derived from tourism

(Manyara and Jones, 2007). It enhances community pride, preserves cultural heritage, and promotes environmental conservation when properly implemented. Bashiru *et al.* (2024), affirms that Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is a form of tourism that emphasizes the active involvement and empowerment of local communities in planning, developing, and managing tourism initiatives. It is grounded in the principles of equity, sustainability, and cultural sensitivity, aiming to ensure that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly among community members while preserving their natural and cultural heritage. CBT prioritizes local ownership and control over tourism assets, encourages grassroots participation, and fosters a sense of pride and identity among local populations.

Similarly, Balogun and Folorunso (2025), asserts that CBT contributes to sustainable development by aligning tourism activities with environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and social inclusion. It encourages the use of locally sourced materials and services, promotes environmental education, and supports initiatives that reduce tourism's ecological footprint. This is achieved through the enablement of the residents to share their customs, crafts, cuisine, and traditions with visitors, as CBT not only generates income but also helps safeguard intangible cultural assets that might otherwise be lost. Furthermore, CBT initiatives often reinvest a portion of tourism-generated revenue into community development projects, such as schools, clinics, and infrastructure improvements. This approach helps build local capacity, reduces poverty, and strengthens social cohesion. According to Manyara and Jones (2007), effective CBT requires supportive institutional frameworks, access to training and resources, and partnerships with NGOs, government bodies, and responsible private investors.

In the context of natural attractions such as Owu Waterfalls, Community-Based Tourism (CBT) serves as a strategic approach to achieving long-term sustainability. Through the involvement of the local residents in the planning, management, and provision of eco-friendly services such as tour guiding, hospitality, handicraft production, and conservation, CBT fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility while encouraging environmentally sustainable practices. It also ensures that tourism benefits are retained within the community, enhancing local livelihoods and reducing reliance on external investors. The integration of indigenous knowledge further enriches tourism experiences and promotes respect for cultural and natural resources. Through capacity

building, CBT empowers communities to manage tourism sustainably, thereby balancing environmental protection, community well-being, and inclusive economic growth.

Community Engagement and Tourism Development in Nigeria

Bashiru *et al.* (2024), narrated that in Nigeria, community-based tourism (CBT) is still in its developmental phase, with varying degrees of implementation and success across different regions. The concept has gained recognition as a viable approach for harnessing the country's abundant cultural, ecological, and historical resources to promote sustainable development, especially in rural and underserved communities. However, despite its potential, CBT in Nigeria faces numerous systemic and operational challenges, such as poor institutional frameworks, lack of capacity building, inadequate funding, and dominance by government agencies or private investors (Eja *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, successful examples from other African countries suggest that with appropriate policy frameworks and community empowerment, tourism can be a catalyst for rural development.

Odetoye and Folorunso (2024), affirmed the issues of the weak institutional and policy framework that governs tourism development is a major obstacle. Fagbolu *et al.* (2022), added that there is often a lack of clear policies or legal instruments to support community ownership, participation, and benefit-sharing. This sometime leads to conflicting interest within the community or with neighbouring community, especially when resources ownership is not clearly defined (Raji and Abdulkadir-Imam, 2018). In many cases, government tourism agencies and private investors dominate the development process, sidelining community voices in decision-making and management. This top-down approach undermines local empowerment and limits the effectiveness of CBT initiatives. Furthermore, Bashiru *et al.* (2024), argued that communities often lack the capacity, infrastructure, and technical know-how required to manage tourism enterprises effectively. However, Zhang (2021), indicate that inadequate access to funding, limited training opportunities, and poor awareness of sustainable tourism practices hinder the growth of CBT. Additionally, issues such as land ownership disputes, political interference, and inconsistent government support create an unstable environment for grassroots tourism projects.

Despite these constraints, there have been promising efforts to promote CBT in Nigeria. Some communities have begun to leverage their natural and cultural assets such as waterfalls, festivals,

and heritage sites to attract visitors and generate income. NGOs, academic institutions, and international development agencies have played a supportive role by facilitating training, advocacy, and capacity-building programs aimed at strengthening community participation in tourism (Bashiru *et al.*, 2024). To fully harness the benefits of CBT, there is a need for a more inclusive and coordinated national strategy. As documented by Balogun and Folorunso (2025), this strategy includes enacting enabling policies, investing in tourism infrastructure, fostering public-private-community partnerships, and integrating CBT principles into local development plans. When effectively implemented, CBT in Nigeria can contribute significantly to poverty reduction, cultural revitalization, environmental conservation, and national economic growth.

Tourism Potential of Owu Waterfalls

Owu Waterfalls, with its scenic beauty, biodiversity, and cultural significance, offers immense potential for sustainable tourism development. However, previous reports have indicated issues of infrastructural decay, poor marketing, and lack of community participation (Adetola, 2018). Owu Waterfalls, situated between Owa Onire and Owa Kajola in the Ifelodun Local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria, is recognized as the tallest waterfall in West Africa, standing at approximately 120 meters above sea level and cascading 330 feet down an escarpment into a pool of ice-cold water. This natural marvel is enveloped by lush greenery and rugged cliffs, creating a mesmerizing sight that attracts nature enthusiasts, hikers, and photographers. The waterfall's pristine environment and serene atmosphere offer a unique experience for visitors, making it an ideal spot for relaxation, sightseeing, and connecting with nature. Aremu and Abara (2024), noted that despite its potential, Owu Waterfalls remains underdeveloped, with infrastructural deficits such as poor road access and lack of visitor amenities hindering its full utilization as a tourist destination.

Aremu and Abara (2024), added that Efforts to harness the tourism potential of Owu Waterfalls have been initiated, including visits by government officials to assess and promote the site. However, challenges such as ecological threats from logging, farming, and grazing activities pose risks to the sustainability of the site. Alabede *et al.* (2024), suggested that the involvement of the local community in the conservation and promotion of the site is a key lifeline for its sustainability. Hence, to fully realize the tourism potential of Owu Waterfalls, a multidisciplinary approach involving infrastructure development, environmental conservation, and community engagement is

essential. Balogun and Folorunso (2025), opined that implementing sustainable tourism practices and integrating community-based tourism principles can transform tourist destinations into a globally accepted place to visit. This is applicable to Owu Waterfalls as it has the capacity to be transformed into a world-class destination, contributing to the socio-economic development of the host community, state, and country at large.

Model of Community-Based Tourism

There are quite a number of models applicable to the study of Community-Based Tourism, prominent among them is the Community Cooperative Ecotourism Model. This model was adopted for this study because of its relevance with the scope and the case study of this study which is Owu Waterfall.

Community Cooperative Ecotourism Model

This model was first adopted by Stronza (2007), its approach involves a collectively owned and managed tourism enterprise where the entire community benefits from ecotourism activities, such as guided nature tours, handicraft sales, and conservation programs. The features of community cooperative ecotourism model include:

1. *Democratic Governance*: in this case a cooperative or community association makes decisions collectively; profits are reinvested in local development (healthcare, education, infrastructure).
2. *Focus on Conservation and Education*: here, tours highlight biodiversity, wildlife protection, and sustainable practices. Examples include forest treks with indigenous guides explaining medicinal plants.
3. *Multi-Stakeholder Involvement*: the locals serve as guides, cooks, artisans, and lodge staff; this can also enhance partnerships with NGOs or governments for training and funding.
4. *Fair Distribution of Income*: this ensures that revenue is shared based on participation (e.g., guides earn wages, artisans sell crafts, farmers supply food). It helps prevent monopolization by a few families.
5. *Low-Impact Infrastructure*: this is when lodges or campsites are built with local materials. Strict waste and energy policies are also ensured (e.g., solar power, composting toilets).

For example, UNWTO (2022), documented The Chalalán Ecolodge (Bolivia) – The Chalalán Ecolodge owned by the indigenous Quechua-Tacana community, is an Amazonian lodge that offers jungle tours, traditional canoe rides, and cultural exchanges. Proceeds from tourists are used to fund schools and environmental projects. This model works because it balances economic benefits with cultural preservation and ecological protection; and it ensures long-term sustainability through shared ownership.

Considering the model above, the Community Cooperative Ecotourism Model is a prominent framework used in the study of Community-Based Tourism and was adopted for this study due to its relevance to Owu Waterfall; the model emphasizes collectively owned and managed tourism enterprises that ensure community-wide benefits through activities such as guided tours, handicraft production, and conservation initiatives. Its key features include democratic governance with profits reinvested in community development, a strong focus on environmental conservation and education, broad stakeholder involvement, fair income distribution, and the use of low-impact infrastructure. An example is the Chalalán Ecolodge in Bolivia, documented by UNWTO (2022), where tourism revenue supports education and environmental projects. Overall, the model promotes sustainable tourism by balancing economic benefits, cultural preservation, and ecological protection through shared community ownership.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design; a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was employed. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to fifty (50) community members, local business operators, and tourists. Key informant interviews conducted with 10 stakeholders, including government officials from the Kwara State Tourism Board, conservation experts, selected tourists, and community leaders. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions and percentages). Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to capture in-depth perspectives on community involvement and challenges.

Results

Quantitative Data Analysis

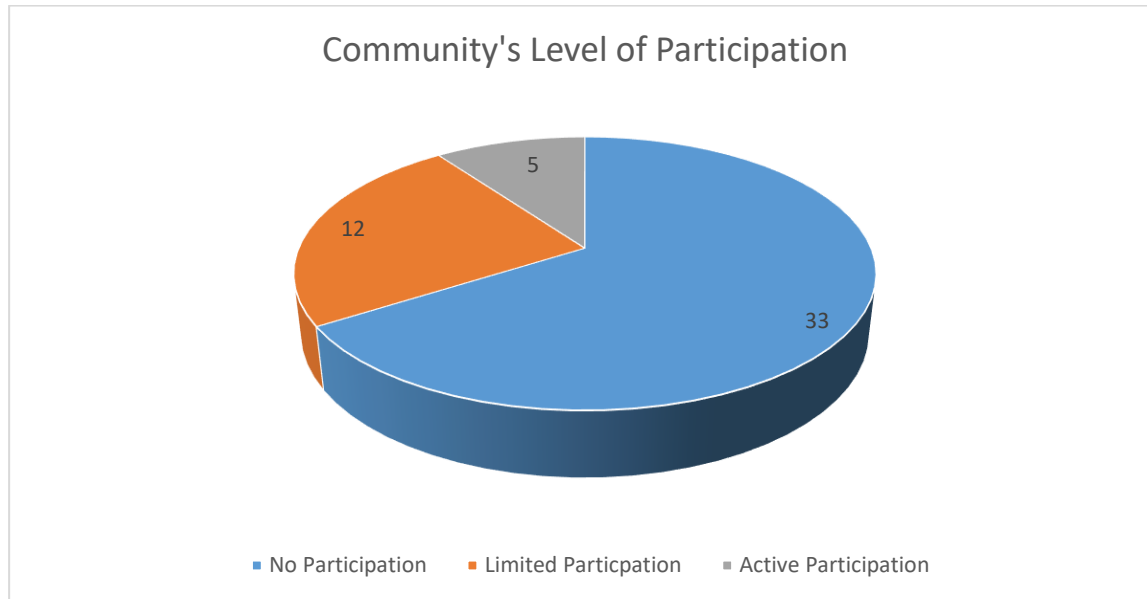


Figure 1: Showing the level of community participation in the management of Owu Waterfall

The **Figure 1** above indicates that 66% representing 33 respondents do not have any form of participation in the decision making that affect the waterfall. 24% representing 12 respondents only have limited participation; while just 10% representing 5 respondents are involved in active participation. This implies that there is a need for more active participation of the local community in the development and promotion of the waterfall.

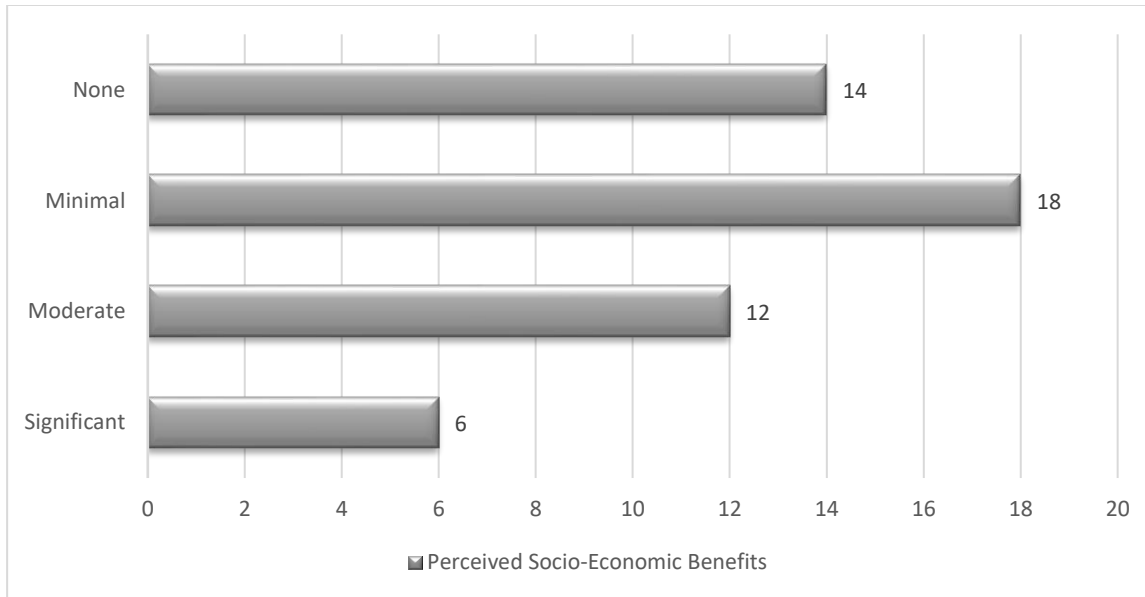


Figure 2: Showing the perceived socio-economic benefits of Owu Waterfall to its host community

It can be deduced from the **Figure 2** above that there is a very minimal to no benefits for the host community as regards the socio-economic impact of the waterfall. This can be substantiated in relation to **Figure 1** which shows massive non-involvement of the local community in the management of the waterfall. Furthermore, 36% of the respondents said that they have only a minimal benefit from the waterfall; while 28% do not have any benefit at all from the waterfalls. Although, some 12% indicated that they enjoy a significant socio-economic benefit from the waterfall; while another 24% submitted that they enjoy moderate socio-economic benefit due to the presence of the waterfall in the community. This implies that the waterfall is capable of providing socio-economic benefits to the host community of CBT is embraced.



Figure 3: Showing the major challenges of community-based tourism in Owu Waterfall

The **Figure 3** above highlight the major challenges associated with community-based tourism in Owu Fall. Poor Management is seen as that most prominent among the challenges as indicated by 32% of the respondents representing 16 participants. 22% of the respondents opined that infrastructural deficiency is the major challenge of CBT in Owu Waterfalls. 9 respondents which amounts to 18% of the respondents indicated that issues of land ownership and cultural identity resulting into resource disputes is the major challenge of the site; while 16% are coy on security issues around the site with incessant kidnapping and presence of wild animals being the major concern; and 12% of the respondents feels that hostility on the part of the local people towards the tourist is the major stumbling block against the development of Owu Waterfall.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

The findings of this study is discussed under the following themes:

Community Participation

Findings show that community participation in the management and conservation of Owu Waterfalls is minimal. Findings from this study reveal that local residents have limited influence over decision-making processes, Government agencies and private investors often control the planning and operational aspects of tourism at the site, leaving community members in passive

roles. In the account of Dr. Alabede, one of the key informants for this study and the formal Director of Kwara State Tourism Board, he quipped that:

“many local residents have lost interest in anything that has to do with the waterfall. Some even assumed the waterfall is under a curse due to lack of development despite its unique characteristics”.

In the account of Mr. Akeem Olamilekan Deen, a tourism promoter, he expressed that:

“the lack of participation by the host community is a result of lack of proper intervention by the government”.

He added that:

“until recently when the road construction began, the community didn’t have anything to do with the waterfalls.”

This submission emphasized the lack of community participation and the reasons for it. While some informal consultation occurs, there are no formal platforms for inclusive governance. This exclusion restricts opportunities for the community to contribute to and benefit from the sustainable development of the waterfall.

Socio-Economic Benefits

While tourism activities have created economic opportunities such as petty trading, guiding services and transportation, benefits are not equitably distributed. A majority (over 60%) of community members reported receiving little or no direct financial gains from tourism, as shown in the quantitative analysis of this study. This result is substantiated by Mrs Sarah Odewale, one of the community women leaders and a trader in Owa Onire community who narrated that:

“when a few corpers (Nigerian Youth Service Corps –NYSC) come around, they get tired before getting to the site (waterfall) and they are always in a hurry to go back because of the bad road.”

This means that they don’t have time to spend money that can create a multiplier effects within the community. In addition to this, Dr. A. A. Bashiru, who is community-based tourism expert submitted that:

“lack of influx of tourist to Owu waterfall as result of many challenges facing the site, will result into negative impact on the livelihood of the host community, especially the people who directly benefit from tourism in Kajola Town.”

To buttress, one the community member who directly benefit from tourism activities at the site, Mr. Tajudeen Aliu, a taxi driver, noted that:

“the financial gain from tourist that come to visit the Waterfall is minimal due to high seasonality. During the rainy season, people do not like to visit as the site becomes bushy and difficult to access.”

These responses emphasize that the current tourism structure fails to provide sustainable livelihoods or significantly improve living standards. There is limited reinvestment into the local economy or infrastructure that would facilitate long-term community development.

Challenges Identified

Several challenges identified in connection with community-based tourism in Owu Waterfalls include:

1. Infrastructural deficits such as poor road networks, lack of visitor facilities, and inadequate signage.
2. Resource control disputes between community leaders and external stakeholders over ownership and management rights.
3. Poor management resulting from the absence of maintenance plans and lack of skilled personnel in tourism management.
4. Security issues related to kidnapping, encroachment and presence of wild animals
5. Hostility towards tourist/visitors by some members of the host community.

A local farmer Mr. Hassan Kehinde gave an account of security issue encountered near the waterfall as some herders engaged some local youth in a violent clash; while other vices have also been reported lately according to him. However, Mr. Adio, a member of the PCRC (Police Community Relations Committee), express that:

“as of now, there is no publicly available Police Community Relations Committee (PCRC) report specifically addressing security issues at Owu Waterfall. Owu Waterfall, located in Kwara State, Nigeria, is a popular tourist destination, and while general safety concerns have been noted by visitors, no formal PCRC documentation has been found detailing specific incidents or security assessments for this site.”

He stressed that:

However, the PCRC plays a vital role in enhancing security across Nigeria by fostering collaboration between the police and local communities. Their efforts include intelligence

gathering, community engagement, and supporting the police in crime prevention initiatives. For instance, the PCRC has been instrumental in providing timely and credible information to the police, aiding in crime reduction efforts nationwide.

Mr. Hassan Kehinde expressed that:

if there are concerns about safety at Owu Waterfall or any other location in the community, it's advisable to contact the local police division or the nearest PCRC unit. They can provide up-to-date information and guidance on security measures in the area.

The lack of training opportunities and awareness programs also prevents community members from actively participating in tourism planning and management.

Discussion

The limited involvement of the Owa-Kajola community in tourism development at Owu Waterfalls mirrors broader national challenges in implementing CBT. Without active participation and benefit-sharing, local communities are less motivated to support conservation efforts, leading to resource degradation and social tensions. The current situation at Owu Waterfall is characterized by lack of community involvement in the management of the site, due to reasons highlighted in the findings of this study. Some of these reasons are captured in the study of Aniah and Eja (2018) in their study on community-based tourism: an option for the development of tourism destinations in Nigeria. The study buttressed that community engagement is very pivotal to sustainable development of community-based tourism. Drawing lessons from successful CBT models in countries like Kenya and South Africa, participatory governance structures, community capacity building, and transparent revenue-sharing frameworks are essential for achieving sustainable tourism at Owu Waterfalls.

Equally, socio-economic accruable from the site is lacking due to many factors, which include lack of infrastructural development, contributing to the low patronage of the Waterfall. Ojo (2021), affirmed that tourist activities around the site is really limited, due to lack of basic amenities. Hence, the lack of economic viability. Okonkwo and Adora (2020) added that the uniqueness of site is enough to create an appeal but social amenities that contribute to tourism product of the destination must be available. It was deduced from the findings that the Federal government of Nigeria have started the construction of the road leading up to the site, however, there are no certainties as to when the road will be completed. This raised a some hopes about the potential

economic and social benefit of the Waterfall. However, to ensure that the local community enjoy socio-economic benefit from any eco-tourism site like Owu Waterfall, Yusuff and Odunlami (2019), suggested that there may be a need for a revised revenue-sharing mechanism, transparent partnership models, and the creation of local tourism cooperatives to ensure equitable benefit distribution.

Lastly, the issue of security is the most prominent among the major challenges faced by the Waterfall. A recent documentary by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) narrated the current security situation of Owu Waterfall. This issues include kidnapping, and other crimes, leading to a strong warning by the community to tourist and visitors, to always visit the site with armed local vigilantes. This shows that the local community are ready to protect the lives of visitors, to ensure safety and security around the site. This is in tandem with the submission of Afolabi (2012), who posited that Community-based tourism requires the effort and direct involvement of the local community members to thrive.

Conclusion

This study concludes that although Owu Waterfalls holds significant potential for sustainable tourism, achieving this requires a paradigm shift towards inclusive community-based management. The study identified the strategies that can transform Owu Waterfalls into a model of sustainable tourism development in Nigeria and beyond. It is expedient to understand that effective implementation of these strategies can promote the sustainable development of Owu Waterfall. It is therefore recommended that:

1. Participatory governance structures involving community representatives be established.
2. A fair revenue-sharing model be developed to ensure equitable distribution of tourism earnings.
3. Targeted investments in infrastructure, training, and conservation initiatives be prioritized.
4. Collaboration between government bodies, private investors, and local communities be strengthened.

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