

Sustainable Development Plans for Caves in Southeast Nigeria for Tourism

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Abstract

Tourists are most of the times motivated to visit natural attractions to appreciate wonders of nature. Developing these natural attractions for tourism and other socio-economic purposes has become an issue in some parts of Nigeria. The nation has abundant natural attractions of which many are either unharnessed or not harnessed sustainably. There are so many caves in Nigeria and most of them are abandoned with their tourism potentials neglected. Some of these caves in most cases are seen as a mere trip of sand with less relevance to the socio-economic aspect of a people. With emphasis on Ajalli cave, this paper looked briefly at the origin of caves with emphasis on myths and science; give a clear picture of the Ajalli cave by studying its features, problems and prospects. The paper equally unveils various sustainable developmental strategies for Ajalli cave which are applicable to similar caves in Southeast Nigeria.

Keywords: Sustainable development, Tourism, Natural attractions, Cave, Socio-economic development, Strategies.

Introduction

Caves are large underground open space (Barbara, Brian & Stephen, 1996) which may have resulted from an underground solution of limestone. They may have been used by the earliest humans (Ibeanu, 2006) and can provide useful information on paleoecology and paleoclimatic changes (Umeji & Ibeanu, 2001). Various kinds of caves include; solution caves, talus caves, crevice or tectonic caves, sea or littoral caves, ice caves, glacier caves, etc. Caves are wonders of nature which are naturally enriched and possessed touristic potentials (Taylor & Michael, 2001). Nigeria has many caves which stand out to be developed (Umeji & Ibeanu, 2001; Ibeanu, 2006), hence "...natural attractions remains the captivating scenery and landscape, eternal sunshine and the wild fauna and flora with which the country (Nigeria) is endowed" (Okpoko & Okpoko, 2002:39). A cave can form a reliable tourism structure of a locality owing to the fact that nature astonished human conceptions through the formation of caves. Even after some scientific explanations, some persons are still doubtful over the existence of these caves. Southeast Nigeria has a good number of caves spread across the region such as Ogbunike cave, Opi cave, Owerri-Ezukala cave, Obimo cave (*See Figure 2*), Uturu caves, Ugwuelle cave, Ajalli cave, etc, but unfortunately most of these caves have been relegated to the background without tourism considerations. This is particularly the case with Anambra State where its most exciting cave (Ogbunike cave) has been given limited attention hence poorly managed. These have raised some questions on the development of natural attractions and sustainability of development and management strategies?. Ajalli community where the cave of focus is situated is located in Orumba North Local Government of Anambra State, Nigeria. The community is approximately on longitude 10⁰N and latitude 7⁰E, and located in the rain forest belt of West Africa (Nwajagu, 2005). The community is about 10 kilometers from Awka, the Anambra State Capital. Tourism potentials of the cave can boost the overall socio-economic development of the area if sustainably harnessed.

This paper however, studied caves in Southeast Nigeria but with much reference on the Ajalli cave and its tourism potentials, role definitions for relevant stakeholders, marketing strategies as well as the problems and prospects of the cave. Methodologically, the research adopted qualitative research approach such as in-depth interviews, field notes, tape recorders, cameras, field observations, as well as documentary sources of data collection. The study will promote caves and their economic impacts on developing economies; hence tourism development is an avenue for promoting rich cultural heritage of Africans before their neighbours (Oluwole, 2001). The research was faced with the problem of finance, time, distance, and language. Also the physical environment of the Ajalli cave was terrible with bush and swampy ground, thereby hindering smooth entrance to the cave. Finally the community attached much spiritual significance to the cave which forbids the use of any form of light in the cave, thereby making the cave visually impaired.



Figure 1: The entrance of the Ajalli Cave in Ajalli, Anambra State.

Mythology

Cave is a natural feature that demands scientific explanations for one to comprehend its existence and formation processes. In the process of searching for the origin of Ogbunike cave in Ogbunike town in Oyi local government area of Anambra state, oral tradition affirms that it was discovered by a man called 'Ukwa' while on his hunting expedition on 'Eke' market day in a local jungle. The discovery was dated back by experts to 800 AD (Okani, 1996). The people of the community then began to see the cave as one of the greatest gift from God, hence they believed that the cave has been in existence since the creation. A similar mythology was given on that Opi and Obimo caves in the Nsukka area of Enugu State. This supernatural and non-scientific origin of cave was equally supported by the oral tradition from Ajalli through various respondents who claimed that the cave was divinely sent to them for socio-religious functions to the people of Ajalli. They held tenaciously that their ancestors discovered the cave during some earliest traditional expedition when they came in contact with spirits who were occupying the cave to help man solve his spiritual and healing difficulties. This is the traditional and religious view of cave formation. From oral traditions of some sampled caves in the study area, caves formations are beyond human comprehension hence it was attributed to the supernatural. And people living at these areas strongly believed in the safety of the cave. While oral traditions attributed cave formation and existence to the supernatural, science had attributed cave formation to natural process. Both approaches see nature as the major cause of cave formation with any human effort or manipulation. Traditional Africans attached some myths of great religious importance to it, while scientists attributed their findings purely on scientific orientation.



Figure 2: The entrance of Obimo Cave in Nsukka, Southeast Nigeria

Overview of Ajalli Cave

Ajalli cave, otherwise known as "Ogba" by the people of the community, is dust-powdered red in colour (*see Figure 3*) and believed to have been discovered many years ago (about eighteen 18 Century) by some local hunters who might have come in contact with the cave during ritual, farming or hunting activities. The cave is lying on the surface to the extent that tourists' vehicles can park in front of it unlike at some other caves in the study area where vehicles can be packed some meters from the cave. The cave has only one entrance with its top thickly covered by forest. There are also presence of some cave lives like bats, snakes, pythons, fishes, etc, although they are not harmful to visitors as affirmed by one of the respondents and also observed. And some of

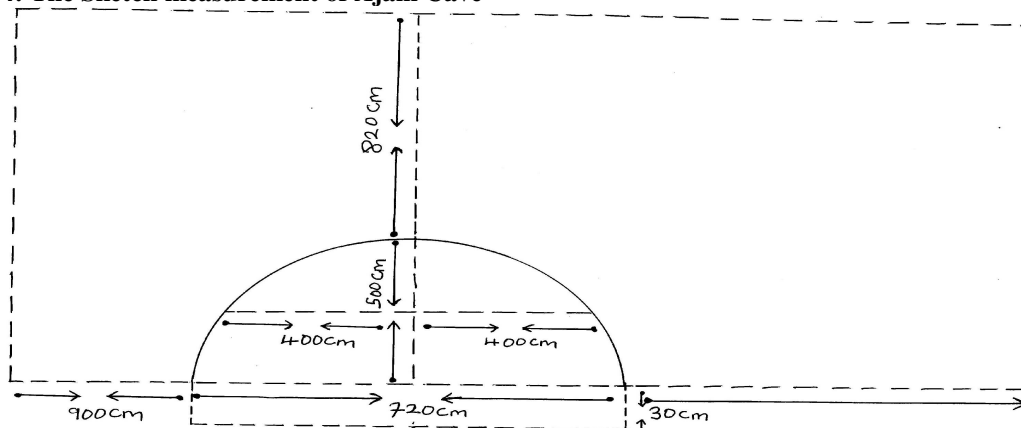
these cave lives are seen at the entrance of the cave. The cave also has a stream that flows out of it which used to serve as the source of water to the community prior to the provision of an alternative source of water supply (bore hole) by the government to the community. The people of the community have some supernatural beliefs attached to the cave like belief in the existence of spirits inside the cave who do not admit the use of any form of light in the cave, belief in the supernatural healing from the cave, etc. This was aimed at supernatural relevance of the cave. Although some of these restrictions are currently weakened owing to modernity.



Figure 3: The Swampy frontage of Ajalli Cave where some of the Cave lives are living.

Moreover, the cave is faced with some challenges like dearth of good roads which restricts adequate accessibility to the community and the cave proper. Also less attention was given to the cave by the government and the community hence the entrance was left to be grown by grasses. Much of the supernatural beliefs attached to the cave by the community can scare away potential visitors, unless adequate orientation programme is put in place. The cave has socio-religious relevance in the life of the people owing to the presence of unharmed cave lives like pythons, bats, snake fishes, etc, around the cave. The cave is scarcely known and there is poor availability of social amenities in the Ajalli community. Also tourism facilities such as hotels, recreational centers, restaurants, tourist buses or coaches, sporting facilities, etc, are lacking in the area unless at some neighbouring communities like Okoh, Umunze, Ekwulobia, etc, which are about thirty minutes drive to Ajalli community. That notwithstanding, the cave still has some prospects as a tourist attraction in Anambra state considering current developments in the area. For instance, the government is gradually appreciating the relevance of tourism development to the national economy as envisaged in current policies and programmes on tourism. Also a new good road was constructed to link Ajalli community to some other communities in Anambra state. On the other hand, the people of the community have started to appreciate the tourism potentialities of the cave in their area and were ready to embrace and support any development programme for the cave, etc. These were some of the indicators to the prospect of developing Ajalli cave as a tourist attraction in Anambra state. During the fieldwork, the Ajalli cave was adequately measured as thus; the width of the entrance was measured at 800cm as against 500cm being the height of the entrance, the floor of the entrance was measured at 720cm while the depth of the swampy area is 30cm, etc (see Figure 4 for other measurements of the cave). The length of the extension of the cave towards the east could not be ascertained. Further research was necessary to ascertain if the cave extended eastwards to the Owerrezukalla Cave as was claimed by some informants during ethnographic studies.

Figure 4: The Sketch measurement of Ajalli Cave



(Source: Field survey, 2014)

Developing Ajalli Cave as a Tourist Attraction

For a sustainable development of the Ajalli cave and some other caves in Southeast Nigeria, adequate personnel management should be put in place and the local community should be well informed and involved in the management of the cave. Proper environmental upkeep should be encouraged to keep both the exteriors and interiors of the cave neat and attractive. The carrying capacity of the cave should not be depleted as the developers should measure and plan the carrying capacity of the destination and at the same time ensuring effective publicity and awareness of the cave since even some members of the community are not even aware of the existence of the cave in the locality. There is also need to scout for funding since the site may not be profit motivated at the developmental stage. The use of cave guides is very important since they would be present always to guide tourists to the sites.

Furthermore, the government of Nigeria has less emphasis on developing virgin tourist destinations and there is also lack of continuity in government policies on tourism in Nigeria since Mohamed/Obasanjo regime (Alabi, 2001). The government has unquantifiable role in the development of Ajalli cave as tourist attraction. Take for instance, the provision of infrastructure is necessary for the enhancement of accessibility to the area, adequate funding, etc. There is also need for the enlistment of Ajalli cave among tourist attractions in Nigeria as such measures would enhance the relevance of the cave as a tourist attraction. Through various embassies and commissions, the public and private can bring the knowledge of the site to the potential domestic and international tourists to Nigeria. There should be periodic organization of symposia and other seminar workshops to enlighten the masses on the relevance of tourism to national development through the appreciation and promotion of Ajalli cave and other caves in the study area as tourist attractions. It is also necessary to ensure adequate security in the tourist destination to ensure the safety of lives and properties of potential visitors. For effectiveness the security network need to be dominated by members of host communities but with professional monitoring and control. Adequate concern should be given to the Local Government Tourism Committee which was given constitutional mandate to ensure development and preservation of local tourist attractions as found in Decree No. 81 of 1999 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Alabi, 2001).

Moreover, the Nigerian Tourism Development Commission which was assigned a similar function to that of the defunct Nigerian Tourism Board (Omeje, 2006) has a vital role to play in the development of Ajalli cave and other caves in the study area as tourist attraction. The cooperation which has the mandated to operate tour services both within and outside Nigeria (Okpoko & Okpoko, 2002) has some other roles like tourism marketing and promotion, tourist reception and information service, tourism facilitation and coordination, tourism planning and development, preservation and development of Nigeria's tourism assets, provision of financial aids and incentives, etc (Alabi, 2001). These roles of the NTDC would aid the development of Ajalli cave and make the site to be among leading tourist destinations in Nigeria.

Also developing this site should not be left alone in the hands of the government; the private sector equally has a role to play in that regard. The private sector investment is not owned by the government but controlled by the government (James, n.d; Okoli, 2001), has significant role to play in providing accommodation facilities, neat restaurants and fast-food joints that will accommodate the need of tourists, establishments of amusement parks, tourist village, exhibition halls, ice cream joints, Suya spots, canteens, etc, in and around Ajalli community to encourage quality comfort of tourist to the destination. Also private tour operating companies can equally promote the site by giving it proper packaging in their tour brochures. In line with this, Okoli (2001) asserted that for the development of tourism potentials, the private sector can offer consultancy services to the potential investors, aid project development and management and equally fund developmental projects that are both capital and labour intensive.

The Ajalli community equally has a role to play in the development of the Ajalli cave as a tourist attraction. Jamieson and Noble (2000) observed that tourism development will be more motivated and sustainable with community input. Also Eze-uzomaka (2006) and Falade (2001) assert that to ensure sustenance of tourism projects in any locality, the community should be actively involved. To this regard the community can participate actively in the development and management of Ajalli cave. They should provide adequate information on the traditional values of the people and also provide necessary information concerning the cave, to the developers. Such information would aid the sustainability of the project in the area. The community has to ensure adequate neatness of both the interiors and exteriors of the cave. The leadership of the community can equally set up a local management committee (Aremu, 2001) to oversee the cave and work loosely with the external developers and managers. This is because "It is imperative to find components partners for joint planning, implementation and evaluation, partners who after agreeing among themselves, can manage the individual measures independently and autonomously" (Sterck, 1999: 45, in Eze-Uzomaka, 2006).

However, it would be pertinent at this juncture to look at various marketing strategies that would enhance the tourism viabilities of Ajalli cave; hence quality marketing strategies help in the development and promotion off tourist destinations (Ekechukwu, 2006). This calls for the need to adopt efficient marketing concept (Okoli, 2001) for Ajalli cave. Also result-oriented research and development should be adopted towards

improving the marketing viabilities of a tourist destination (Okoli, 2001; Chisnal, 1975). Such programme would improve the quality branding of Ajalli as a tourist destination. Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert and Wanhil (2005) gave some other marketing strategies which include advertisement (using both print and electronic media), sales promotion which would add value to the destination, personal selling, public relations which is important not only in editorial coverage but also minimizing potential wrong notion, printed communications which include brochures and sales reflects, television documentaries on Ajalli cave and its tourism potentials and finally using the internet to launch the site to the global village.

Conclusion

Ajalli Cave was extensively studied in this research work; looking at its problems and prospects, and also suggesting many vital developmental strategies and role definitions that would aid a sustainable development of the Cave. Ifionu (2014) noted that for the development of tourism in Ujari and Nigeria in general to be effective, there is need for the government and host communities to work closely and provide suitable climate. Both the state and the local government are expected to work harmoniously in promoting tourism in Ajalli community and other parts of the state. This will aid the promotion and preservation of arts and culture of the people and at the same time strengthen and foster national consciousness and unity among the people. This paper has functioned as a catalyst towards ameliorating the barrier of poor and non sustainable development and management of natural attractions in Southeast Nigeria. The paper outlined possible challenges to developing natural attractions and discussed sustainable measures for developing natural attractions for tourism, pointing at peculiar roles of relevant stakeholders to that regard. Some limitations restrained the paper from working in detail on some other caves in the Southeast Nigeria so as to have a broader picture of the fact. Subsequent researches would venture into some other caves in the study area so as to have a unique and sustainable blueprint for the development and management of natural attractions in the Southeast Nigeria and other parts of the country.

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