Kwaghe International
Journal of Sciences and Technology

ISSN: 1595-7977

Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, ResearchGet Scilit, Semantic, Google Scholar, Base etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/KIJST.v2i3.7347

Assessing the Current State of Tourism Development in Gashaka Gumti National Park

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Aug 1, 2025	Aug 22, 2025	Sep 3, 2025	Sep 8, 2025

Abstract

This study assesses the current state of tourism development in Gashaka Gumti National Park, Nigeria. Questionnaires were administered across all communities officially recognized by the National Park authority to obtain first-hand perspectives from community members. Data collected covered respondents' socio-economic characteristics, available tourist attractions, and supporting facilities. Findings revealed that the park's rich biodiversity, including diverse forest ecosystems, wildlife, and bird species serves as a primary attraction for tourists. Within the surrounding communities, facilities such as schools, health centres, television viewing centres, electricity, and public tap water were identified; however, only about 10% of respondents reported access to tap water, while more than 50% relied on rivers and streams. Most of these amenities were provided by the Adamawa and Taraba State governments as well as the Local Government Areas of Toungo, Gashaka, and Sardauna. The study further noted that tourists were particularly drawn to the availability of standard restaurants and both indoor and outdoor sporting facilities in the park. To strengthen tourism development, the paper recommends enhancing partnership programmes between the National Park

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and local communities, alongside improvements in basic infrastructure and service delivery, to foster sustainable tourism growth.

Keywords: Tourism Development; Gashaka Gumti National Park; Community Participation; Tourist Attractions; Sustainable Tourism

Introduction

Gashaka Gumti covers an area greater than 6,500 square kilometres and is the largest national park in Nigeria. Protection of forests covering steep slopes within the park preserves an important catchment area for the River Benue, Nigeria's second largest river. The park contains forest, savannah and montane vegetation and is a region of exceptionally high biodiversity. Gashaka Gumti is situated within the subhumid zone, now subject to immigration from more densely cultivated areas north and south of it. Expansion of the livestock industry in this zone is also occurring as a means of reducing settlement and grazing impact on the semi-arid zone to the north. Pressure on Gashaka Gumti is increasing.

Significant areas of montane grassland are located within the national park boundary contiguous with Mambilla plateau, offering abundant pasture, high rainfall and also no tsetse fly. Fulani pastoralists settled permanently within this valuable grazing region during the 1960s. When a game reserve was established in 1972, they were not evicted, but actively participated during the planning process in the demarcation of areas for agricultural settlement and livestock grazing. State management of the enclaves effectively ceased during the 1980s when funding for the reserve dwindled in response to declining government oil revenues. The game reserve deteriorated, yet traditional management institutions survived intact. Grazing of livestock within each enclave and the allocation of land to newcomers is still controlled by a traditional leader

Established conservation practices continued such as the movement of livestock between the uplands and flood plains to prevent overgrazing. Annual burning of the vegetation-controlled bush encroachment and helped maintain sufficient forage throughout the year for both domestic and wild ungulates. Many Village heads also discouraged commercial hunting by outsiders. However, the authority of the traditional management system was seriously undermined by the state's untimely intervention in 1991, when

Gashaka Gumti was decreed a national park and responsibility passed from state to federal control. Confused conditions under which it was unclear who controlled access to resources came into existence.

As a result, many households began to abandon the enclaves because they feared that eviction was inevitable. Some of the oldest residents of the enclave of Chappal Hendu expressed fear of eviction from the national park. The national park authority is committed to restoring stewardship for the enclaves to existing traditional management institutions, supported by legislation that recognises their authority and empowers them to administer sanctions against transgressors of agreed rules and regulations.

Local people are now actively participating in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of a management plan for the national park and surrounding area. Secure land tenure and the ability of local people to limit access by outsiders is considered to be an essential requirement for sustainable management of the enclaves.

The long-term future of Gashaka Gumti National Park clearly depends upon strengthening the right of local people to become stewards of resources which they can manage and conserve for their own benefit.

According to Sonmez and Sirakaya (2002) if a destination is interested in developing a sustainable tourism industry in a period of increasing competition, then it needs a clear understanding of tourists' images (of the destination) to develop a successful positioning strategy in the competitive marketplace. Central to destination marketing is the way in which the image is perceived and acted upon by potential tourists as it is often perceived, rather than reality that motivates tourists to visit a destination (Andersen, 1984). The tourist marketer's goal is to match the promoted image and the perceived image in the consumer's mind to avoid a distorted destination image. Indeed, lack of knowledge of a destination's appeal from the perspective of potential tourist markets hinders the development of a destination's image. The creation of a distinctive and unique destination image in the tourism industry plays a vital role in positioning the destination in the consumer's mind and holds the key to destination differentiation. An important step in the destination management process is an understanding of the attitudes of actual and potential visitors of a destination (Deslandes, 2006). Consequently, tourism destination images are important because they influence both the decision-making behaviour of potential tourists and the levels of satisfaction regarding the tourist experience (Jenkins, 1999). An accurate

assessment of perceived destination image is a prerequisite to designing an effective marketing strategy and helps the destination marketer to offer what its visitors are expecting and create more realistic expectations, if necessary.



Figure: Gashaka Gumti National Park , showing Boundaries with Cameroun and Chad

Statement of Problem

Tourism has been widely recognized as a potent driver of economic growth and regional development.

Despite the recognized benefits of tourism ranging from increased Grevenue generation, job creation, and cultural exchange to enhanced conservation funding (Jones & Miller, 2021). The park faces significant obstacles that hinder the full realization of these opportunities. The challenges primarily revolve around infrastructural inadequacies, environmental degradation, and governance issues, which together present a complex problem for stakeholders committed to both conservation and development.

One of the primary issues confronting Gashaka Gumti National Park is the inadequacy of tourism-related infrastructure. Although the park has attracted a growing number of visitors in recent years, the supporting infrastructure such as roads,

accommodation facilities, and basic utilities has not kept pace with this increased demand (Chukwu, 2022). The lack of proper infrastructure not only limits the quality of the tourist experience but also restricts the economic benefits that can be derived from tourism activities. For instance, inadequate road networks and poor transportation services compromise the accessibility of key attractions within the park, thereby reducing the potential for generating tourist revenue (Adeyemi & Musa, 2023).

Aims and Objectives of the Study

Specific objectives are to: Assess the current state of tourism development in Gashaka Gumti National Park. Thus, what is the current state of tourism development in Gashaka-Gumti National Park?

Significance of Study

The significance of this study lies in its comprehensive approach to understanding how tourism can be leveraged to foster sustainable development within Gashaka Gumti National Park. By examining the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions of tourism, the study provides critical insights that can inform both policy formulation and practical management strategies.

Scope of the Study

This study covers tourism development and its contribution to revenue generation in Gashaka Gumti National Park.

This study focuses exclusively on the current state of tourism development in Gashaka Gumti national park and its surrounding communities in northeastern Nigeria, a region celebrated for its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage. By concentrating on developments over the past decade, the research examines the evolving impact of tourism from multiple perspectives.

Limitation of the Study

This study only focuses the tourism contribution to the development of Gashaka Gumti National Park, which may not be representative of other tourist destinations in Nigeria or globally.

The findings of this study may not be generalized to other tourist destinations or contexts.

Study Area

Gashaka Gumti National Park, Nigeria's largest national park is located in the northeastern part of the country, spanning parts of Adamawa and Taraba States. The park is renowned for its rich biodiversity, encompassing a variety of ecosystems that include savannahs, montane forests, and wetlands. It serves as a critical ecological corridor and a significant center for wildlife conservation. In addition to its ecological importance, the park has the potential to drive regional development through tourism by attracting both domestic and international visitors interested in its natural beauty and cultural heritage.

The park's geographical coordinates roughly range from 9°30'N to 10°00'N latitude and 12°30'E to 13°00'E longitude, covering an expansive area that provides a habitat for numerous endemic and endangered species. The local communities living in and around the park largely depend on agriculture, animal husbandry, and increasingly, tourism-related activities for their livelihood. The study focuses on assessing how tourism contributes to the park's development by examining its economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Tourism

Pearce (1982) defines tourism as "relationships and phenomena arising out of the journeys and temporary stays of people traveling mainly for recreation." The spatial interaction arising out of the tourist's journey (movement) from his/her place of origin to destination is important in understanding the phenomenon of tourism and differentiates it from other forms of leisure such as in homes and places of work.

Tourism is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the movement of people from their usual place of residence to destinations outside their normal environment for leisure, business, or other purposes. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as "the activities of people traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, and other purposes" (UNWTO, 2021). This definition highlights key aspects of tourism, including travel, temporary stay, and the purpose of the visit.

According to Cooper *et al.,* (2008), tourism consists of various components such as transportation, accommodation, attractions, and services that facilitate the travel experience. These components form the tourism system, which is influenced by economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Tourism is broadly classified into different types, including domestic tourism (travel within one's country), international tourism (travel across national borders), and various niche forms such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, and cultural tourism (Page, 2019).

The economic significance of tourism is widely acknowledged, as it contributes to employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and infrastructure development (Mason, 2020). However, tourism also has environmental and socio-cultural implications. While it can promote cultural exchange and heritage conservation, it may also lead to environmental degradation and social disruptions if not properly managed (Hall & Lew, 2009). Sustainable tourism development, therefore, emphasizes responsible tourism practices that minimize negative impacts while maximizing benefits for host communities (Sharpley, 2021).

Concept of National Park

A national park is a designated area protected by the government to conserve its natural environment, wildlife, and cultural heritage while allowing public recreation. The concept was first established in the United States with the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, setting a precedent for conservation efforts worldwide (Runte, 2010). National parks play a crucial role in preserving biodiversity, preventing deforestation, and mitigating climate change by maintaining ecological balance. They are often situated in areas with rich natural landscapes, such as mountains, forests, and wetlands, ensuring the protection of endangered species and unique ecosystems (Eagles et al., 2002).

In many countries, national parks serve as significant tourism attractions, contributing to local and national economies. Visitors engage in activities such as hiking, wildlife viewing, and camping, which generate revenue through park fees, accommodation, and local businesses (Buckley, 2011). Additionally, these parks create employment opportunities in conservation, hospitality, and guiding services. However, tourism in national parks must be managed sustainably to avoid negative environmental impacts, such as habitat destruction and pollution (Balmford et al., 2015). Policies such as visitor limits and eco-friendly infrastructure are often implemented to mitigate these effects.

Beyond ecological conservation and tourism, national parks contribute to scientific research and education. They provide a natural laboratory for studying ecosystems, climate change, and wildlife behavior (Dudley, 2008). Many parks collaborate with universities and research institutions to monitor species populations and assess environmental health. Moreover, national parks serve as centers for environmental education, raising public awareness about conservation issues and fostering a sense of stewardship among local communities and visitors (Sanderson & Redford, 2003). This role is crucial in promoting long-term sustainability and ensuring that natural resources are preserved for future generations.

Despite their benefits, national parks face numerous challenges, including illegal poaching, deforestation, and land encroachment. In many developing countries, local communities depend on natural resources within park boundaries for survival, leading to conflicts between conservation efforts and livelihoods (Wilkie et al., 2006). Effective management strategies, such as community participation and alternative livelihood programs, are essential in addressing these issues. Additionally, government policies and international collaborations play a crucial role in strengthening conservation efforts and securing funding for park maintenance and enforcement.

In conclusion, national parks are vital for conserving biodiversity, supporting tourism, advancing scientific research, and promoting environmental education. However, they require effective management to balance conservation with economic and social interests. Governments, conservation organizations, and local communities must collaborate to ensure the long-term sustainability of national parks. By addressing existing challenges and implementing sustainable policies, national parks can continue to serve as invaluable ecological and cultural assets (Phillips, 2003).

Motivation theory

Motivation in the tourism literature is defined as "a meaningful state of mind which adequately disposes an actor or a group of actors to travel, and which is subsequently interpretable by others as a valid explanation for such a decision" (Dann, 1981). Both tourism practitioners and scholars have always been interested in motivational forces that guide travel consumption. Although the 1950s is known as the motivation research era in consumer behavior literature, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that it (i.e., motivation concept) appeared in the travel and tourism literature (Fletcher et al., 2018).

Since then, motivation has been among the most researched concepts (Gnoth, 1997; Kozak, 2002; Wong, 2013) and motivation studies have been considered fundamental in tourism literature (Pearce & Packer, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Descriptive research methods using a survey study design was used for this work. This was considered appropriate because according to Osuala (2003), descriptive research is the basic for all types of research in assessing a situation as a pre-requisite for inference and generalization.

This study employed a mixed method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach will facilitate the collection of quantitative and qualitative data on tourist behavior, community perceptions, and the overall socio-economic impact of tourism. The design enables the identification of key trends and challenges in tourism development within the park's context.

Population of the Study

The Population consisted of the local communities of Gashaka and Gumti National Park. These include tourists, residents, business owners, and park officials in the park.

Tourists: Visitors to Gashaka Gumti National Park who use its facilities and participate in tourism activities.

Residents: Residents living in the communities adjacent to the park who are affected by tourism.

Park Officials: Managers and staff involved in the administration and conservation of the park.

Local Business Owners: Entrepreneurs and service providers whose livelihoods are linked to tourism activities in and around the park.

Table 1: Population and Sample Size of the Study

S/N	Target Population	Sample Size
1.	Tourists	80
2.	Local residents	20
3.	Park officials	10
4.	Local business owners	10
Total		**120**

Sample and Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents who are knowledgeable and directly involved in tourism activity in the study area. The study sampled respondents from the identified groups as in table 3.1 above.

Instrument for Data Collection

The main instrument for the collection of primary data will be Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Self-administered questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. Structured Questionnaires will be administered to the respondents. This method was adopted because it is a faster and easier method of getting information from respondents. This was anchored on the fact that the respondent's response can give the researcher the opportunity to make further observation to get additional response in order to cross validate the responses elicited from the questionnaire method. The questionnaire contains section A and B. Section A contains personal information about the respondents. Section B is the main body of the questionnaire. This section contained close end questions using a four (4) point likert scale through which the opinions of the respondents were expressed. This ranges from 1= strongly disagree to 4= strongly agree.

Field observation

Procedure for Data Collection

The procedure for data collection began with the acquisition of a letter of permission from the head of the department to conduct fieldwork. This initial step ensures institutional approval and compliance with ethical guidelines. permission granted, the

research instrument and the was administered to the respondents. The researcher surveyed the park under study to ascertain the number of respondents as shown in table 1 above.

Questionnaires were administered to respondents based on the information obtained by the researcher on the number of respondents under study. One week was used for the collection of data at the park. Emphasis was placed on the tourists, local community members, park officials and local business owners at the time of data collection. Questionnaires were designed and administered to gather relevant data relating to the objectives and research questions. Thus, a total of 120 copies of well-designed and properly structured questionnaires were prepared to be administered to the respondents as shown in the sample size table above.

Method of Data Analysis

Responses from the questionnaires were computed in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Data collected were analyzed and presented using appropriate descriptive statistical tools such as frequency counts, simple percentages, mean and standard deviations which formed the basis for decision making.

This chapter deals with the analysis of data obtained in this research. The survey method was used to generate data for quantitative analysis. Tables, simple percentages, mean and standard deviation were used to ensure accurate statistical results. The results of the study are presented in accordance with the research questions.

RESULTS

Questionnaire Return Analysis

Table 2 shows the distribution and retrieval of questionnaires used in the study. A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed to the target respondents across the park, representing 100% of the intended sample size. All the 120 questionnaires were successfully retrieved, yielding a 100% response rate. This high response rate indicates a high level of participation and cooperation from the respondents. All the data collected was reliably good and were used for this analysis.

Table 2: Questionnaire Return Analysis

Distribution	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Returned not returned	120 0	100% 0%
Total	**120**	**100%**

Source: Field survey, 2025

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 3 presents the summary of the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. The findings indicate that 80 respondents, representing 66.7% were male, while 40 respondents representing 33.3% were female, indicating a higher representation of males among the respondents.

In terms of age distribution, 60 respondents representing 50.0% were within the 36–45 age groups, followed by 40 respondents, representing 33.3% in the 26–35 age category. Respondents aged 46 years and above accounted for 15 respondents, representing 12.5% while the least represented were those aged 18–25, with 5 respondents representing 4.2% of the total sample.

Regarding marital status, 75 respondents representing 62.5% were married, while 45 respondents, representing 37.5%, were single. No respondents identified under the "Others" category.

The educational qualifications of respondents indicate that 60 respondents, representing 50.0%, attained secondary education, 55 respondents, representing 45.8% attained tertiary education, while only 5 respondents, representing 4.2%, attained primary education.

In terms of residency status, the findings reveal that 80 respondents, representing 66.7%, were tourists, followed by 20 respondents, representing 16.7% who were local residents. Additionally, 10 respondents, representing 8.3%, were business owners, while 10 respondents, representing 8.3%, were park officials.

Table 3: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	80	66.7
Female	40	33.3
Total	120	100
Age		
18-25	5	4.2
26-35	40	33.3
36-45	60	50.0
46-above	15	12.5
Total	120	100
Marital Status		
Single	45	37.5
Married	75	62.5
Others	0	0.0
Total	120	100
Educational Level		
Primary	5	4.2
Secondary	60	50.0
Tertiary	55	45.8
Total	120	100
Residency Status		
Local Resident	20	16.7
Tourists	80	66.7
Business	10	8.3
Park officials	10	8.3
Total	120	100

The results in Table 4 reveal varying perceptions of the current state of tourism development in Gashaka Gumti National Park. Respondents generally agreed that local communities actively participate in tourism-related activities, as shown by a mean of 3.08 and a standard deviation of 0.49. However, there was strong disagreement regarding the increase in tourist visits over the years, with a mean of 1.83 and a standard deviation of 0.55. Similarly, the adequacy of tourism infrastructure was rated low with a mean of 2.04

and a standard deviation of 0.61 indicating concerns about roads, accommodation, and other facilities.

Security concerns were identified as a major factor affecting tourism growth, with a high mean of 3.25 and a low standard deviation of 0.43 reflecting widespread agreement among respondents. The park's management was perceived to have made efforts in addressing poaching, with a mean of 3.08 and a standard deviation of 0.64. Meanwhile, conservation measures for wildlife and natural attractions received moderate agreement, with a mean score of 2.88 and a standard deviation of 0.83, indicating mixed perceptions.

Government policies supporting tourism development in Gashaka Gumti were rated poorly, with a mean score of 1.96 and a standard deviation of 0.68 suggesting dissatisfaction with policy implementation. However, respondents agreed that the park's scenic beauty and wildlife are well-preserved, as reflected in a mean of 3.04 and a standard deviation of 0.61.

Tourism's contribution to the local economy was strongly affirmed, with a mean of 3.25 and a standard deviation of 0.43. However, opinions were divided regarding the number of tourists visiting annually, with a mean score of 2.58 and a standard deviation of 0.64, indicating inconsistent visitation trends.

Table 4 Current State of Tourism Development in Gashaka Gumti National Park

	Statement	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard
1	Local communities actively participate in tourism-related activities.	2	4	3.08	0.49
2	The number of tourists visiting Gashaka Gumti has increased over the years	1	3	1.83	0.05
3	The available tourism infrastructure (e.g., roads, accommodation) is adequate.	1	3	2.04	0.61
4	Security concerns affect the growth of tourism in Gashaka Gumti	3	4	3.25	0.43
5	The park's management has effectively addressed the issue of poaching	2	4	3.08	0.64
6	There are proper conservation measures for wildlife and natural attractions	1	4	2.88	0.83
7	Government policies support tourism development in Gashaka Gumti.	1	3	1.96	0.68
8	The park's scenic beauty and wildlife are well-preserved and conserved	2	4	3.04	0.61

	Statement	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard
9	The park's tourism development has contributed significantly to the local economy.				
10	The park receives a significant number of tourists annually.	2	4	2.58	0.64

Likert scale: 1.00-1.49= Strongly Disagreed; 1.5-2.49 = Disagreed; 2.5-3.49 = Agreed; 3.5-4.00 = Strongly Agreed.

DISCUSSION

The Current State of Tourism Development regarding local community participation in tourism activities, this study found that residents are involved, with a mean score of 3.08. However, concerns about inadequate infrastructure (with a mean score of 2.04), security (with a mean score of 3.25), and government support (a mean score of 1.96) were identified. These findings align with Ukabuilu, Nwokorie, and Ezeibe (2018), who identified poor infrastructure, lack of security, and inadequate funding as major hindrances to inbound tourism in South-Eastern Nigeria. Similarly, Alam *et al.,* (2022) found that infrastructural deficiencies and safety concerns were key barriers to sustainable tourism in South Asian countries.

Dissatisfaction with government policies on tourism development in Gashaka Gumti, reflected by a mean score of 1.96, is also supported by Kebete and Wondirad (2022), who found that restrictive government policies and lack of local participation were significant challenges to Botswana's tourism sector. These studies collectively emphasize the need for policy improvements and strategic infrastructure investment to enhance tourism development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are made to enhance tourism development in Gashaka Gumti National Park; Environmental Conservation Strategies: Sustainable waste management practices, reforestation programs, and stricter regulations on human activities that degrade the park's ecosystem should be enforced. As well as the sustainable Revenue Allocation: Revenue generated from tourism should be transparently reinvested into community development projects, conservation programs, and park management to ensure long-term sustainability.

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