

ASSESSING THE NICHE TOURISM PRODUCTS OF LOKOJA TOWNSHIP

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Abstract.

This paper critically scrutinises the positioning of niche tourism products in Lokoja township of Kogi State. Lokoja has bright prospects of tourism in the future. It possesses tourism potentials all around the township. But, tourism is facing so many problems including marketing and promotion strategies. By applying niche tourism product, it can earn more dollars, because Lokoja is blessed with key tourism products. Natural attraction, colonial Relics, and dark tourism sites, these products are only unique to Lokoja alone. The paper focuses on the present strengths and weaknesses of tourism industry in Lokoja and the ways to implement niche tourism to enhance its strategic contributions to the total earning of this sector. The paper concludes by suggesting how Niche tourism product will help the policy makers to differentiate the tourist market and customize their service to solve present downward earning.

Keywords: Niche Tourism Product, Natural Attraction, Colonial Relics, Dark Tourism.

Introduction

Tourism is an attractive and important tool for socio-economic development in both developed and developing countries. Tourism has assisted many developing countries to move away from the dependency on mineral resources, agriculture and manufacturing (Tooman, 1997). Chosen for its ability to bring in needed foreign exchange earnings, income and employment, tourism has become a popular addition to economic development policies in many African countries, although tourism seems to be adding substantially to the economic growth of many of such countries (Nicole Vaugeois, n.d).

Lokoja, by virtue of its location offers a unique and fascinating attraction to the tourists. Located right in the heart of the country, boarded by the Federal Capital Territory to the north, it is also the converging point between the two major rivers in Nigeria (Benue and Niger River). Lokoja, the state capital of Kogi State was once the colonial administrative capital of Nigeria, hence, holds a stake in Nigerian's colonial history.

The economic impact of tourism in Lokoja can be described as unclear. There is a lack of information or data to support whether or not, tourism has positive economic impact, but with the numbers of hotels existing, it is possible to affirm that tourism plays a significant role in the economy of the colonial city.

Although the emphasis of this paper is to identify the major tourism resource in Lokoja township and to determine their extend of being a niche tourism product, the present state of tourism development will be examine, the problems of tourism development will also be identified and strategies of developing niche tourism products for the tourism sector will be established.



A PROSPECTIVE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NICHE TOURISM CONCEPT.

Hutchinson (1957) is largely attributed with introducing the idea of 'Niche' referring to an optimum location that an organism can exploit against its competitors. A later definition is given by Keegan et al (1992), describing a niche as a 'smaller market not served by competing products. Prabakaran and Panchanathan (2011) describe the term 'niche' as a method to meet customer needs through the tailoring of goods and services to small markets, small profitable, homogeneous market segment which have been ignored or neglected by others. In Dalgic and Leeuw (1994) as stated by Prabakaran and Panchanathan (2011) Niche is a process of concentrating marketing resources and efforts on particular market segment 'Dalgic and Leeuw also reviews by stating that niche firms generally focus their marketing activities to a limited part of the market, with relatively few customers and competitors, through the application of company specialization, product differentiation, relationship marketing and customer focus (http://researchrepository.napier.ac.uk/5376/1/Full_thesis.pdf_br).

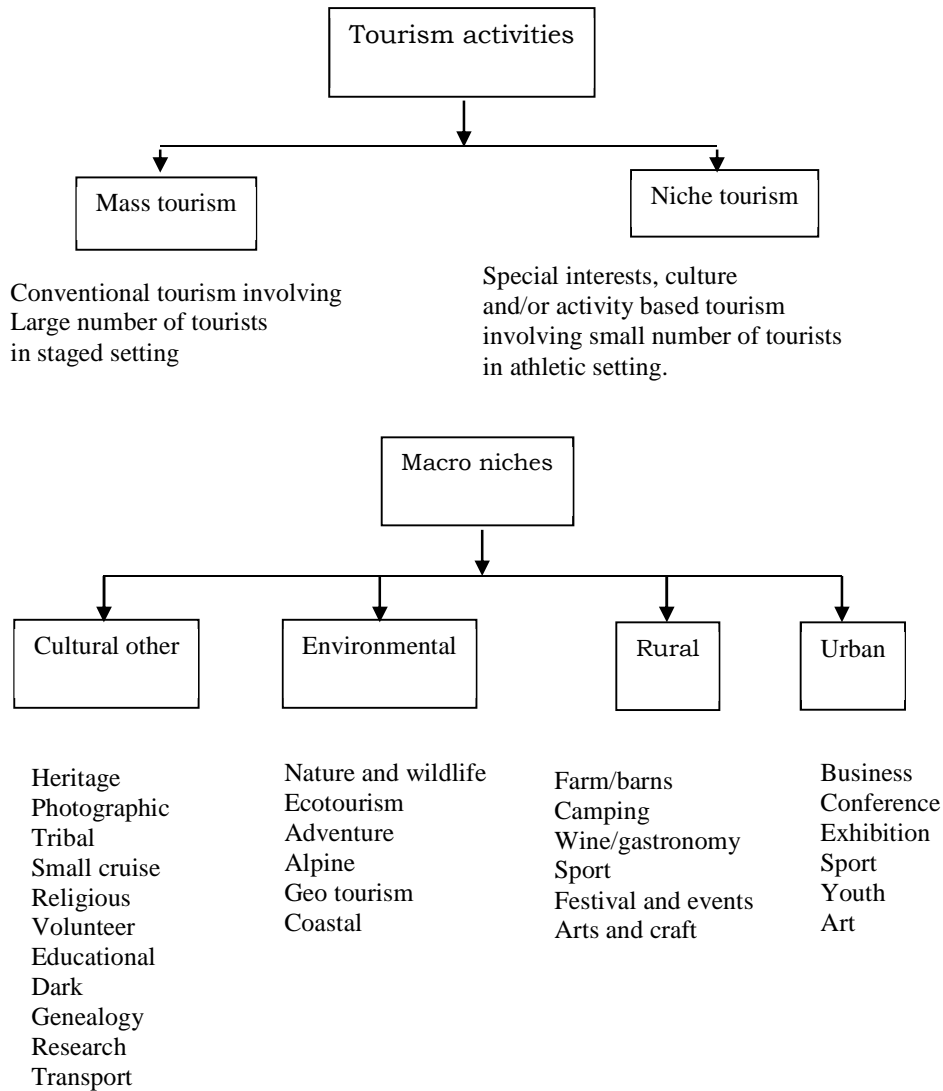
Lew (2008) observed that over the years tourism debate has been focused on globalization as technological change, without really giving attention to "New tourism", or a consumer led desire to seeking out new tourism attraction that suit their purpose or niches. Although a lot of research have been conducted on special interest in tourism, niche tourism as a concept and theory was not fully examined until this millennium (Ali-Knight 2011) Not until 2002 the Crichton Tourism research Centre at the university of Glasgow held a conference which was tagged 'niche tourism in question', hence with collective thinking of expert in tourism the word Niche tourism was coined.

Novelli's (2005) attempts to provide the rationale for niche tourism product and consumption and through a series of theoretically underpinned case studies introduces the two extremes of niche tourism. In an attempt to define niche tourism Novellis (2005) brought out the following characteristics:

- The term 'niche tourism' has its roots in the concept of niche marketing.
- Is a counterpart to the undifferentiated mass tourism products.
- Refers to specific tourism products focused to meet the needs of particular market segment or niches.
- The existence of a niche tourism continuum with macro niches on one end occupying relatively Large market share (e.g. ecotourism) and further segmented micro niches at the end of the continuum (e.g. wildlife tourism).

NICHE TOURISM FRAMEWORK

Following on the work of Macleod (2003) and Novelli (2005) we begin to see the emergence of a Niche Tourism framework as presented below:



Source: Novelli (2005)

The diagram on figure 1 gives a clear meaning to niche Tourism. Hence Ali-Knight (2011) define ‘niche tourism’ as a specific tourism product can be tailored to meet the needs of a particular audience/market segment locations with specific niche products are able to establish and position niche products themselves as niche tourism destinations. Niche tourism through image creation, helps destinations to differentiate their tourism products and compete in an increasingly competitive and cluttered tourism environment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To demonstrate the understanding of the role of Niche tourism product in destination development.



2. To evaluate the critical role of Niche product such as the colonial relics, dark tourism, the confluence of Benue and Niger River.
3. To identify the hindrance of niche tourism product development in Lokoja township.

THE STUDY AREA

The study was carried out in Lokoja Township of central Nigeria, which is situated in Kogi State, close to the Federal Capital territory. The town is at 7°8⁰ North latitude, 6° 74⁰ East longitude and 55 meters elevation above sea level, with a land area of 3180km² and a population of over 195,261 at the 2006 census.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The approach of the research has been that which is underpinned by pragmatism, which uses both qualitative and quantitative methodologies for a more in depth investigation of some of the key issues that are reflected in the highly interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary nature of tourism (Botteril, 2001). The research majorly focus on existing data accessed through tourism service providers in Lokoja Township, the government agencies that are linked to tourism policy and development, internet books documents and academic journals.

AN OVERVIEW OF NICHE TOURISM PRODUCTS IN LOKOJA.

The development of niche tourism products has been a response by the tourism industry to diversify their product base to capture new, emergent tourist markets and build a more diverse customer base. Therefore, establishing very defined and individualized niches has allowed smaller independent tourism operators to compete in the highly price sensitive and competitive tourism market phase (http://researchrepository.napier.ac.uk/5376/1/Full_thesis.pdf_br).

Lokoja as a state capital is fast emerging a leading tourist and business destination in the country, being the link between the northern part of the country and to most part of the western and southern Nigerian, the major tourist attractions in Lokoja are quite unique and distinctive. This present the consideration or connections between 'niche' and tourism, some of these attractions can only be seen in Lokoja and no other parts of the world. The tourism authorities in Nigeria at present are not recognized this product as niche but rather as normal generic tourist products.

The researcher, observed the following tourist resources as niche products scattered around Lokoja Township.

1. **Colonial Relics:**
 - a) **Lord Lugard Staff Quarters:** Pre-fabricated buildings imported from Britain and assembled to provide accommodation for his senior staff.
 - b) **European Cemeteries:** European Soldiers, Africans of West African Frontier Force (WAFF) and 17th century missionary burial place. These will promote dark tourism.
 - c) **Club 1901:** The first European club in Lokoja and the first organized club in Northern Nigeria.
 - d) The spot where the flag of the Royal Niger Company was lowered in 1900.
 - e) The first primary school in Northern Nigeria, the Holy Trinity School, which was pioneered by Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1865.

- f) Iron of Liberty (dark Tourism). The spot where slave were freed was marked with a piece of Iron poles which slaves touched to regain their freedom.
- g) **The Cenotaph:** War monument for the remembrance of the fallen heroes of the first and second world wars (dark Tourism). The tombs of deposed Emirs of Bida, Kano council and Zaria.
- h) 1st prison-yard in Northern Nigeria
 1. The exiled Northern Emirs grave yards (dark tourism).
 2. **Unique natural attractions**
 - a. **The Confluence of River Niger and Benue:** The Y shape confluence of the Benue and Niger are the longest River in West African.
 - b. **Mount Patti:** This is a hill with a wide flat top. A place of refuge for the earliest inhabitants of Lokoja (adventure/Ecotourism).
 3. **The Museum of Colonial History:** House objects photography and documents of the colonial era, and the formation of the country Nigeria.

HINDERANCE OF NICHE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN LOKOJA TOWNSHIP

- Lack of reliable information on the tourism industry/statistics data of tourist flow and expenditure.
- The perception that Nigeria is not a safe destination, especially with the issues of Boko Haram, kidnap and robbery.
- Misuse of financial facilities for the expansion and development of tourism industry.
- Inadequate provision of basic infrastructure e.g. water, sanitation, electricity, this need to be addressed to attract investors and tourist.
- A major problem with the Lokoja tourism attraction that the authority are not giving prior attention to, is the conflict in land use, areas that house major attractions are not preserved in Lokoja, instead, other developers encroach on them e.g. the first primary school in northern Nigeria, the European cemetery, the Iron of Liberty, to name a few.
- Lack of interest from the government in developing tourism resources. This results in giving political loyalists positions in tourism sector rather than experts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to develop niche tourism product in Lokoja to meet the tourist requirements, it is necessary to address the following issues: -

- A statistical framework to be developed to acquire the actual size of the market. This is because tourism growth relies heavily on forecast.
- The Kogi State Tourism department should encourage and assist different tour operators to plan and offer tour packages incorporating various niche products and this may be published in the international tourist magazines and media.
- The security of the country needs to be addressed for any meaningful tourism activity to take place.

The preservation of national monument should be a prime objective of the Nigeria Tourism Development Cooperation, hence, all monuments in Lokoja needs to be given urgent attention; encroachers should steer clear of premises that house monuments.

The research context explores the niche tourism frame work, the positioning of niche tourism product in Lokoja township:- dark tourism, colonial relic, adventure and ecotourism as

niche tourism products and niche tourism as a contributor to destination it is imperative to suggest that the development, marketing and management of niche tourism product in Lokoja should be a major priority of those in charge of tourism development a careful planning and promotion of the tourism resources will put Kogi State in the global Tourism map.

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