

Socio-Economic Impacts and Community Engagement in Cross River State National Park: Implications for Tourism in Nigeria

Iwuchukwu, Goodluck Ndubuisi

*Department of Tourism, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria*

Abstract: This study investigates the socio-economic impacts and community engagement in Cross River State National Park, with a focus on their implications for tourism in Nigeria. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through periodicals, archives, museums and published journals and observations from local communities and park visitors. The findings revealed that the national park has significant positive socio-economic effects on the surrounding communities, including employment opportunities and income generation through ecotourism activities. However, challenges such as limited community engagement and unequal distribution of benefits were identified. The study highlights the need for improved community participation and empowerment in decision-making processes, as well as the development of sustainable tourism practices that prioritize local communities' well-being. Recommendations are provided for enhancing community engagement, fostering equitable distribution of benefits, and promoting responsible tourism practices to ensure the long-term sustainability of Cross River State National Park and its tourism industry in Nigeria.

Keywords: Socio-economic impacts, Community Engagement, Cross River State National Park, Tourism, Ecotourism, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is commonly defined as the act of people traveling away from their homes to visit other places that are of interest to them. Today, it stands as one of the largest and fastest-growing industries worldwide (Agbor, 2023). Many countries heavily rely on tourism as a significant source of employment, which in turn depends on various environmental resources such as warm climates, ecosystems, scenic landscapes, and clean air. These resources are effectively utilized to facilitate the overall development of the tourism industry.

According to a study by Dongho and Enilama (2023), natural environments and parks have consistently captivated human attention and interest for multiple reasons. Research has demonstrated that spending more time indoors and lacking exposure to nature can have negative impacts on our mental health and overall well-being. In line with this, a group of

postgraduate students recently embarked on a field trip to the national park in Akampka, Cross River State. The objectives of the trip were to engage in adventurous activities, acquire educational knowledge, and foster social interactions.

A national park is a designated protected area aimed at conserving the wildlife within it, both now and in the future, while also offering opportunities for people to enjoy and appreciate its natural resources. According to Eke and Effiom (2023), national parks hold immense value in terms of ecology, recreation, and culture, making them attractive destinations for visitors. In a national park, private rights are non-existent, and activities such as forestry operations and grazing of domestic animals are strictly prohibited. One such national park that draws tourists from around the world is the Cross River National Park, established in 1991 with the primary goal of conserving its unique biodiversity. Located in Nigeria, this national park holds significant historical and cultural importance, which played a crucial role in the decision to

establish and protect it. The commitment to preserving the park's heritage stems from the recognition of its historical and cultural significance.

Overview of the Location, Size and Biodiversity of Cross River State National Park

Located in the south-eastern part of Nigeria and sharing a border with Cameroon, Cross River National Park spans an expansive area of approximately 4,000 square kilometres, making it one of the largest protected areas in the country (Ekong, 2023). The Park is renowned for its rich biodiversity, housing a wide array of plant and animal species. Its diverse ecosystems, including rainforests, montane grasslands, and water bodies, create an ideal environment for various flora and fauna to flourish.

Within Cross River National Park, the Oban Hills stand as a significant division established in 1988. According to Idiong (2023), these hills serve as a vital habitat for numerous species of animals and plants, some of which remain unknown to science. The presence of these unique and undiscovered species has attracted significant international attention, leading to recognition by UNESCO. The Oban Hills Division of Cross River National Park holds immense value as a wildlife sanctuary and natural habitat, contributing to the park's overall ecological importance.

It shares a significant border with Korup National Park in the Republic of Cameroon, forming a cohesive and protected ecological zone with a longitude of $^{\circ}25'0''N$ $8^{\circ}35'0''E$ of the Equator and $416667^{\circ}N$ $8.583333^{\circ}E$ of the Greenish Meridian (Ogar, Ushie & Akun, 2023). Located approximately 7.5 kilometers from the main entrance, the Erokut town serves as the gateway to the Oban Hills Division. The camp within the division is under the management of the Ecological Research Management (ERM). The camp operates under the guidance and instructions of the head of the ERM department, ensuring efficient and organized operations within the division.

Strict rules and regulations govern the activities within the park, with a particular emphasis on not removing anything from its premises. Unfortunately, there have been instances where some students took plant leaves from the park upon hearing claims of their potential to cure HIV/AIDS (Osamudiamé & Odunewu, 2023). In response to this, stringent measures have been implemented to prohibit littering and the removal of any items from the national park. The Oban Hills Division spans an area of 2,800 square kilometres, centered around the coordinates $5^{\circ}25'0''N$ $8^{\circ}35'0''E$; $416667^{\circ}N$ $8.583333^{\circ}E$. Its close proximity to Korup National Park and its strict conservation measures contribute to the preservation of this ecologically significant region (Ukpong, 2023).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to provide students with an opportunity to identify and explore the geographical location, landform features, and biodiversity of the natural environment within Cross River National Park, specifically in Akamkpa. The study also aims to broaden their general knowledge about the national park.

Additionally, the research seeks to depict the historical background of the national park, both past and present, highlighting the species and the measures taken to protect them. By immersing themselves in the magnificent beauty of nature, the students develop a deeper appreciation for the arts and the conservation of biodiversity.

Furthermore, this research aims to observe the subject in its natural state and potentially collect samples for further analysis. Field trips serve as an important equalizer, providing students from both more advantaged and less advantaged backgrounds with the opportunity to engage in shared cultural experiences outside of the classroom. This common ground encourages cultural understanding and bridges the gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Significance of the Park in Preserving the Region's Natural Resources

Cross River National Park stands as a shining example of unwavering commitment to preserving the natural resources of the region. It serves as a sanctuary for numerous threatened and endangered species, including the Cross River dark gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*), the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan Troglodytes*), and the drill monkey. These three important hominoids are endemic to the park and rely on its protection for their survival.

In addition to safeguarding these iconic species, the park plays a vital role in the conservation of freshwater ecosystems. It serves as a crucial catchment area for major rivers such as the Cross River, which sustains the livelihoods of nearby communities. Preserving the park ensures the maintenance of water quality and quantity, as well as the preservation of aquatic biodiversity.

Furthermore, Cross River National Park contributes significantly to the ecotourism industry in Nigeria. Its exceptional biodiversity and natural beauty attract visitors from all corners of the globe, generating income for local communities. This economic benefit serves as an incentive for the sustainable management and protection of the park, creating a positive cycle of conservation and development. With its expansive size and diverse ecosystems, the park plays a pivotal role in preserving the natural resources of the region. By

protecting endangered species, conserving freshwater ecosystems, and promoting ecotourism, Cross River National Park continues to be a remarkable success story in safeguarding Nigeria's rich natural heritage.

Field Trip Report of Cross River State National Park

A field trip refers to a group excursion to a location outside of one's usual environment, often to a place of interest or educational value. In the case of the field trip conducted at Cross River National Park in Akamkpa Local Government Area, both Ph.D. and M.Sc. students participated, accompanied by Professor Eja Eja Iwara, an esteemed figure in the field of tourism who provided guidance and oversaw the activities.

Prior to the trip, tutors diligently familiarized themselves with the destination and the subject matter to enhance the learning experience. Field trip activities typically encompass lectures, tours, photography, videography, and demonstrations, allowing participants to engage actively with the environment and gain hands-on experience. The administrative block of Cross River National Park, which ranks as one of the largest parks in Nigeria, houses several departments. Among them is the Ecotourism Resource Management department, responsible for managing the park's ecotourism resources, including its natural geographical features, microclimate conditions, wildlife, vegetation, natural beauty, and geomorphic structure.

The Park itself is divided into two divisions: Okwangwo and Oban. Currently, the park is under the leadership of Mrs. Caroline Samuel Olauri, serving as the conservator. With her effective park management strategies, she oversees various aspects of the park's management and conservation, ensuring the implementation of sound practices to protect its resources. Above all, the field trip to Cross River National Park provided an enriching learning experience for the students, facilitated by knowledgeable faculty and park management personnel who are dedicated to preserving and managing the park's natural treasures.

Rain Forest Ecosystem as Ecotourism Attraction in Cross River State National Park

The Flora

Oban Division of the park has a documented 1,568 plant species, 77 of which are unique to Nigeria, with a notable abundance of epiphytic ferns and orchids. Okwangwo Division, which is roughly 1000 square kilometers in size, is home to around 1,545 species of plants in 98 families, some of which are extremely rare. This division is also known for two specific plant species, ANCEISTOCLADUS KORUPENSIS and PRUNUS AFRICANA, which are highly valued for their

medicinal properties, particularly in the treatment of HIV/AIDS and prostate cancer, respectively. Additionally, Okwangwo Division is the natural habitat of the Cross River Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) and 17 other primate species. Due to the park's significant scientific discoveries, it has garnered global attention and has been nominated as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. (Admin, 2013)

The Fauna

The fauna species inventory of Cross River National Park is exceptionally diverse, with many species being endemic to the area. Among the 23 primate species found in Nigeria, 18 of them can be observed within the park. Notably, the park is home to two essential hominoids: the Cross River Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) and the Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*).

The Cross River Gorilla holds significant importance as it represents the only colony of gorillas in sub-Saharan Africa. Gorilla tracking, considered the best in Nigeria, is an activity that can be enjoyed throughout the year. The Nigerian government, in collaboration with its Cameroonian counterpart, is diligently working to protect and ensure the survival of this critically endangered gorilla species.

In addition to the gorillas, two new butterfly species, *Tetrahanis okwanwo* and *Thermoniphys barahingam*, have been discovered within the park. Other mammalian species endemic to the park includes the giant pangolin, the Golden Potto or Calabar Angwantibo, and the Preuss guenon. Furthermore, the once thought to be extinct bird species, the bare-headed rockfowl (*Picathartes oreas*), has resurfaced within the park. These remarkable "ecostars" are a must-see and serve as compelling reasons to visit the park. The rich biodiversity and the presence of these unique and endangered species make Cross River National Park an extraordinary destination for nature enthusiasts and conservationists alike.

Cross River National Park plays a crucial role as a habitat for a vast array of species. It is home to 199 mammal species, 63 frog and toad species, 20 reptile species, 380 bird species, 48 fish species, and 950 butterfly species. This rich biodiversity is truly remarkable and highlights the park's significance for conservation efforts. In addition to its diverse wildlife, the park is also home to a community of 105 support zone villages. These villages consist of people who have traditionally lived in and around the forest, forming an integral part of the park's ecosystem. However, it is important to note that animal sightings within high rainforest areas, such as Cross River National Park, can be rare due to the dense vegetation, which limits visibility. To increase the chances of observing

wildlife, visitors are advised to allocate more time for exploring the field. Spending extended periods in the park enhances the opportunities for encountering and appreciating the incredible biodiversity that thrives within the rainforest. By immersing oneself in the natural environment of Cross River National Park and dedicating ample time to explore, visitors can have a greater chance of experiencing the wonders of the park's unique wildlife.

Importance of Field Trip of Cross River State National Park

The significance of field experience in the field of tourism studies cannot be overstated. It is widely acknowledged that knowledge is best acquired through first-hand observation. When individuals have the opportunity to see, touch, and experience something themselves, they gain a deeper understanding and can describe it more effectively than if they were simply told about it. Field trips offer numerous advantages in terms of knowledge and experience, particularly in the context of tourism studies. These trips provide students with invaluable exposure to real-world scenarios before they graduate. By venturing into the field, students are empowered to witness first-hand the physical, social, and economic aspects of various environments and ecosystems. This direct experience allows them to appreciate the true value and inherent friendliness of these environments.

Engaging in field trips enables students to go beyond theoretical knowledge and engage with the practical realities of the tourism industry. They can observe how different elements come together, interact with local communities, and witness the impact of tourism on both the environment and society. This immersive learning experience equips students with a comprehensive understanding of tourism and its effects, enhancing their ability to analyze, evaluate, and contribute meaningfully to the field. Above all, field trips serve as a powerful tool in tourism studies, enabling students to bridge the gap between theory and practice. By exposing them to real-world situations and allowing them to engage with their surroundings, field experiences empower students to develop a well-rounded perspective and make informed decisions in their future careers in the tourism industry.

The Two Significant Tourism Sites at the Cross River State National Park

- 1) Cross River National Park Akamkpa
- 2) Oban and Okwangwo division

Visiting Days and Activities

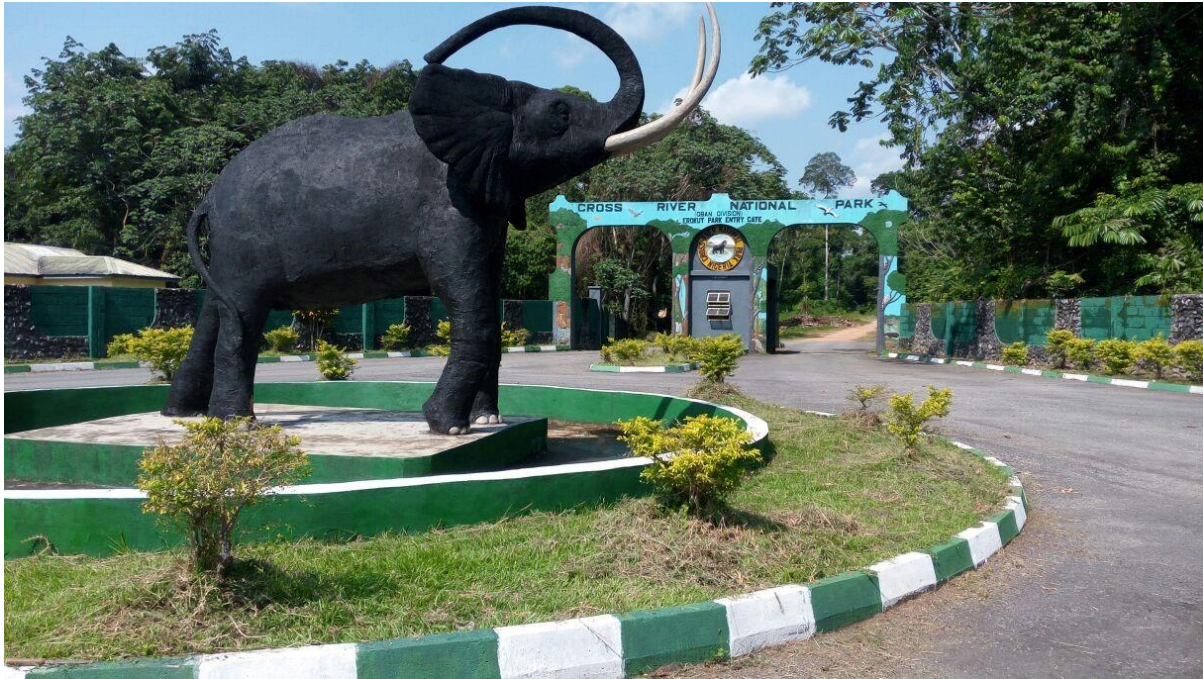
On Tuesday, February 20, 2024, some students embarked on their field trip, departing from the campus at 9:00 am. They reached Cross River National Park at 12:03 pm, with a slight delay occurring on the road when the driver needed to fix the vehicle at the mechanic shop in Akamkpa. Upon arrival, the students enjoyed some snacks and beverages, which served as part of their lunch. They continued their journey towards the Oban division. At 1:39 pm, the group arrived at Erokut in the Oban division. After spending some time exploring the area, they departed from the entry park of the Oban division at 4:15 pm.

Tourism Attractions

Cross River National Park is a truly exceptional and captivating destination, boasting a remarkable abundance of fauna and flora species. Its unique biodiversity and natural beauty have garnered global recognition and appeal. Among the 23 primate species found in Nigeria, an impressive eighteen of them can be observed within the boundaries of Cross River National Park. Notably, the rare and endangered dark gorilla is exclusively found in the Okpagu division, located in Cross River State.

During their visit, the students made an exciting discovery in the Okpangu division. They came across a plant with potential medicinal properties for treating HIV/AIDS (Ushie & Akpabio, 2023). This plant, known by its botanical name *Anciestocladus Korupensis*, holds promising therapeutic value. Subsequently, samples of the plant were collected and sent to the United Kingdom for further examination and research. Cross River National Park holds immense ecological importance as it serves as a vital gene pool, harbouring one of the oldest rainforests in Africa. The Park is situated in the Guineo Congolian rainforest refugia, characterized by a dense canopy and scattered emergent trees that tower at heights ranging between 40 to 50 meters. The vegetation within the park has evolved over an astonishing span of 60 million years, adding to its scientific and historical significance.

The Park is divided into two distinct and non-contiguous divisions: Oban and Okwangwo. The larger of the two divisions is Oban, spanning an area of approximately 3,000 square kilometers. Ecologically, it shares a contiguous relationship with Korup National Park in the Republic of Cameroon. The Oban division is further divided into the East and West ranges, each offering unique and diverse ecosystems to explore and study. Cross River National Park stands as a testament to the extraordinary natural wonders that exist within the region. Its rich biodiversity, ancient rainforest, and distinct divisions make it a captivating destination for researchers, conservationists, and nature enthusiasts from around the world.



Economic Benefits with local Communities and Stakeholders

The Cross River National Park brings several economic benefits to the local communities and stakeholders. Here are some of the key economic advantages:

1. **Employment Opportunities:** The Park creates direct employment opportunities for local communities through various roles, such as park rangers, guides, and support staff. These jobs provide a source of income for local residents, contributing to poverty alleviation and improving livelihoods.
2. **Tourism Revenue:** The Park has significant tourism potential, attracting both domestic and international visitors. Tourism activities generate revenue through entrance fees, guided tours, accommodations, and other related services. This revenue can be reinvested in the local economy, supporting local businesses and infrastructure development.
3. **Community-Based Tourism Initiatives:** Cross River National Park offers opportunities for community-based tourism initiatives. Local communities can establish their own tourism enterprises, providing services such as traditional craft sales, cultural performances, and community-led tours. This empowers communities, preserves local traditions, and allows them to directly benefit from tourism activities.
4. **Market for Local Products:** The Park can serve as a market for locally produced goods and services. Local

artisans and craftsmen can sell their products to tourists, showcasing traditional arts and crafts unique to the region. This promotes cultural heritage and provides additional income-generating opportunities for local artisans.

5. **Conservation Incentives:** The presence of Cross River National Park encourages conservation practices among local communities. The park's conservation efforts often involve community participation and support. This promotes sustainable resource management practices, such as agroforestry and sustainable agriculture, which can lead to increased crop yields and income diversification for local farmers.
6. **Research and Education Opportunities:** The Park's ecological significance and biodiversity create opportunities for research collaborations and educational programs. Research institutions and universities can collaborate with the park to conduct studies and fieldwork, bringing in researchers and students. This exchange of knowledge and expertise benefits both the local communities and the broader scientific community.

By providing employment opportunities, generating tourism revenue, supporting local businesses, and promoting sustainable practices, Cross River National Park contributes to the economic development of the local communities and stakeholders. These economic benefits help foster a sense of

ownership and support for the park's conservation efforts, ensuring its long-term sustainability.

Gap between the Local Community and Management of National Park

Despite the provision of social amenities and assistance to the communities surrounding Cross River National Park, there continues to be challenges in fostering a harmonious relationship between park management and the local residents. The conservation of the primate species within the park remains a significant concern as they face threats such as habitat loss and hunting. However, it is noteworthy that there has been a notable increase in the primate population within the park. Efforts to mitigate these threats and protect the primate species are ongoing, but the complex nature of the challenges makes it difficult to achieve complete success. Habitat loss, primarily driven by human activities such as deforestation and agricultural expansion, poses a significant risk to the primate populations and their survival. Addressing this issue requires collaborative efforts between park management, local communities, and relevant stakeholders to find sustainable solutions that balance conservation needs with the livelihoods of the communities.

Additionally, hunting remains a concern, as it directly impacts the primate populations and their long-term viability. Raising awareness about the importance of conservation and implementing effective measures to deter hunting activities are crucial steps in safeguarding the primates within the park. Despite these challenges, it is encouraging to note that the efforts to protect the primate species have yielded positive results, as evidenced by the increase in population within the park. This highlights the significance of conservation initiatives and the potential for successful conservation outcomes when the right strategies are implemented. Continued collaboration, community engagement, and sustainable conservation practices are vital in addressing the threats faced by the primates and ensuring their long-term survival within Cross River National Park.

Challenges faced by Cross River National Park

Cross River National Park faces several challenges in its conservation efforts. Here are some of the key challenges:

1. **Habitat Loss:** One of the primary challenges is habitat loss, primarily driven by deforestation and agricultural activities. The conversion of land for farming, logging, and infrastructure development fragments and degrades the natural habitat within the park. This loss of habitat negatively impacts the biodiversity and disrupts the ecological balance within the park.

2. **Human-Wildlife Conflict:** Encounters between wildlife and local communities can result in conflicts. Animals such as elephants and primates may raid crops or cause damage to property, leading to economic losses for the communities. These conflicts strain the relationship between the park management and local residents and can hinder conservation efforts.
3. **Poaching and Illegal Wildlife Trade:** Poaching poses a significant threat to the wildlife in the park, particularly the primates. The demand for bushmeat, traditional medicine, and exotic pets drives illegal hunting and wildlife trade. Poachers target endangered species, leading to population decline and disruption of ecological dynamics.
4. **Lack of Awareness and Education:** Limited awareness and understanding of the importance of conservation among local communities can hinder conservation efforts. Lack of knowledge about sustainable practices and the value of preserving biodiversity may contribute to destructive activities within the park.
5. **Limited Resources:** Insufficient funding and resources pose challenges to effective management and conservation. Adequate funding is required for conservation activities, anti-poaching efforts, community engagement programs, and infrastructure development within the park.
6. **Climate Change:** The impacts of climate change, such as changing rainfall patterns and increased temperatures, affect the park's ecosystems. These changes can disrupt species' habitats, alter species distribution, and affect the overall ecological balance within the park.

Addressing these Challenges Requires a Multi-Faceted Approach:

1. Strengthening law enforcement to combat poaching and illegal wildlife trade.
2. Engaging local communities through awareness campaigns, education, and alternative livelihood programs.
3. Collaborating with relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and local communities, to develop sustainable conservation strategies.
4. Investing in research and monitoring to better understand and manage the park's ecosystems.
5. Promoting sustainable tourism practices that support conservation efforts and provide economic benefits to local communities.

6. Implementing climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies to minimize the impacts on the park's biodiversity.

By addressing these challenges collectively, Cross River National Park can enhance its conservation efforts, protect its unique biodiversity, and foster a harmonious relationship between park management and the local communities.

Implications of Cross River State National Park for Tourism in Nigeria

The Cross River State National Park holds significant implications for tourism in Nigeria. Firstly, its diverse ecosystem and rich biodiversity make it an attractive destination for nature enthusiasts and wildlife lovers. The Park offers opportunities for activities such as birdwatching, hiking, and wildlife safaris, which can contribute to the growth of nature-based tourism in the country. Secondly, the park's cultural heritage and historical significance provide a unique cultural tourism experience. Indigenous communities living in and around the park can share their traditions, rituals, and local knowledge, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and immersive tourism experiences. Thirdly, the park's conservation efforts and sustainable management practices serve as a model for responsible tourism. It promotes environmental awareness, conservation education, and the importance of preserving natural resources, which can attract eco-conscious travellers. However, challenges such as limited infrastructure, inadequate marketing, and insufficient community involvement need to be addressed to fully harness the tourism potential of the Cross River State National Park. By addressing these challenges, Nigeria can leverage the park's natural and cultural assets to enhance the tourism sector, generate economic growth, and promote sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the tourism experience in Cross River National Park offers a remarkable opportunity to witness the rich biodiversity and natural beauty of this unique destination. Despite the challenges faced, such as habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict, the park's conservation efforts have yielded positive results, with an increase in primate populations. Through collaborative efforts, including community engagement and sustainable practices, the park strives to protect

its valuable ecosystems and promote the well-being of both wildlife and local communities. Visiting Cross River National Park offers a chance to appreciate the wonders of nature and contribute to its preservation for future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are some recommendations for enhancing the tourism experience in Cross River National Park:

1. The government should foster closer collaboration with local communities by involving them in decision-making processes, providing training opportunities, and promoting sustainable livelihood options that align with conservation goals. This will foster a sense of ownership and support for the park's conservation efforts.
2. The government should create well-planned and managed ecotourism activities that offer visitors unique experiences while minimizing negative impacts on the environment. This can include guided nature walks, birdwatching tours, and educational programs that highlight the park's biodiversity and conservation efforts.
3. The government should invest in improving visitor facilities such as visitor centers, information kiosks, and well-maintained trails. Adequate signage, interpretive materials, and trained guides will enhance the visitor experience and provide valuable information about the park's ecological significance.
4. The government should increase funding and support for scientific research and monitoring within the park. This will help gather valuable data on wildlife populations, habitat health, and the impacts of climate change. The findings can inform conservation strategies and contribute to the understanding of the park's ecological dynamics.
5. The government should forge partnerships with international conservation organizations and research institutions to access additional resources, expertise, and funding. These collaborations can support capacity building, research initiatives, and the implementation of best practices in conservation and sustainable tourism.

By implementing these recommendations, Cross River National Park can further enhance its tourism offerings, foster sustainable practices, and ensure the long-term preservation of its unique biodiversity.

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