

# Comparing Economic and Environmental Returns of Sustainability Against Mass Tourism Product Strategies in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the comparative economic and environmental returns of sustainable versus mass tourism product strategies in Nigeria, a country seeking to diversify its oil-dependent economy through tourism. While mass tourism dominates Nigeria's landscape driven by large-scale events and infrastructure projects that yield quick financial returns it often results in substantial environmental degradation, resource overuse, and cultural commodification. Conversely, sustainable tourism emphasizes long-term economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and community involvement. Drawing on case studies and data from major destinations such as Lagos, Calabar, Obudu, and Erin Ijesha, the study reveals that although mass tourism projects generate higher short-term revenues and jobs, they also incur high environmental and social costs. In contrast, sustainable tourism initiatives, though slower to scale, demonstrate stronger local revenue retention, ecological conservation, and stable employment. Sustainable practices such as eco-lodges, community-based tourism, and heritage trails also align with global trends and offer Nigeria a competitive advantage in the post-COVID tourism economy. The study concludes that a hybrid policy approach is essential: regulating mass tourism's externalities while scaling sustainable models through policy incentives, capacity-building, and green certifications. It provides evidence-based recommendations to guide national tourism strategies towards inclusive growth, environmental sustainability, and international relevance.

**Keywords:** Economic Returns, Environmental Impacts, Mass Tourism, Nigeria, Sustainable Tourism

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays an increasingly important role in Nigeria's efforts to diversify its economy, making substantial contributions to GDP, job creation, and foreign exchange earnings. In 2022, the travel and tourism sector contributed ₦2.3 trillion approximately 4.6% of Nigeria's GDP and supported over 2.6 million jobs (WTTC, 2023). This expanding industry offers a promising alternative to Nigeria's heavy reliance on oil revenues. However, the development of tourism in Nigeria has predominantly followed a mass tourism model, characterized by large visitor numbers, unregulated infrastructure expansion, and a primary focus on short-term economic returns (Sharpley, 2020).

While this approach has fueled rapid growth and urban development, it has also resulted in significant environmental and socio-cultural challenges. Popular sites such as Lagos beaches, Erin Ijesha waterfalls, and Obudu Mountain Resort are increasingly affected by poor waste management, habitat destruction, water shortages, and unregulated commercial activities (UNEP, 2021; NBS, 2022). Furthermore, the

commercialization of cultural festivals and heritage has raised concerns about the dilution of authenticity and erosion of local traditions (Mbaiwa, 2018). These negative impacts exemplify widespread critiques of mass tourism, which often neglects sustainability in pursuit of quick economic gains.

In contrast, sustainable tourism offers a more balanced approach, prioritizing ecological integrity, cultural preservation, efficient resource use, and community involvement. Lessons from countries like Costa Rica and Rwanda illustrate how environmentally responsible tourism can achieve substantial economic benefits without compromising natural or cultural resources (Honey, 2022). Sustainable tourism practices including eco-lodges, community-based initiatives, and heritage trails provide a pathway for inclusive development aligned with international best practices and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNWTO, 2020).

Despite its potential, Nigeria's progress toward sustainable tourism remains slow. Challenges include weak regulations, limited investor knowledge, inadequate institutional coordination, and critically, the lack of empirical data comparing sustainable and mass tourism models within the Nigerian context. This data deficit hampers policymakers' and investors' ability to pursue reforms or incentives that promote sustainability. This study aims to fill that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the economic and environmental outcomes of sustainable versus mass tourism product strategies in Nigeria. Through selected case studies, it evaluates financial viability, job creation, resource utilization, and ecological impact, with the objective of offering policy recommendations that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass tourism has traditionally dominated Nigeria's tourism landscape, largely due to its capacity to generate rapid economic gains through large visitor numbers, extensive hotel developments, and wide-ranging infrastructure projects (Sharpley, 2020). This tourism approach has notably contributed to job creation, foreign exchange earnings, and regional economic stimulation (WTTC, 2023). Prominent Nigerian tourist spots such as Lagos beaches, the Calabar Carnival, and Obudu Mountain Resort attract thousands annually, bolstering local commerce and government revenue (NBS, 2022).

The economic benefits of mass tourism hinge on volume-driven profitability, where the influx of tourists results in significant income streams from accommodation, entertainment, and transport services (UNWTO, 2021). For example, the Calabar Carnival generates millions in both direct and indirect expenditures, benefiting sectors including hotels, vendors, and transportation providers (Adeola & Evans, 2021). Employment opportunities abound in hospitality, retail, and transport, particularly in urban and coastal hubs, though many positions tend to be seasonal, low-skilled, and lack long-term security or benefits (ILO, 2020; NBS, 2022). Infrastructure development stimulated by mass tourism often involves government and private investments in roads, airports, and utilities, enhancing accessibility for tourists and residents alike (Sharpley, 2020). However, these projects can suffer from poor planning that leads to overcapacity and maintenance difficulties (UNEP, 2021).

Despite its economic merits, mass tourism exerts significant ecological and cultural pressures. Destinations such as Lekki Beach and Yankari Game Reserve face challenges including water shortages, energy constraints, and waste management crises caused by excessive tourist influx (Mbaiwa, 2018). Local populations often experience diminished access to clean water and sanitation facilities as resources are diverted to tourist establishments (UNEP, 2021). Environmental degradation through pollution such as plastic waste, sewage discharge, and increased air pollution from tour transportation damages ecosystems (Gössling, 2021). Unregulated development and tourist activities exacerbate coastal erosion in areas like Lagos and Calabar (Adeola & Evans, 2021). Furthermore, cultural commodification threatens local heritage sites and festivals, for example, the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, which risks losing its authentic significance due to commercialization (Mbaiwa, 2018). Tourist demand often leads to cultural homogenization as indigenous practices are sidelined in favor of standardized commercial offerings (UNWTO, 2020). To illustrate, the Calabar Carnival generates over ₦5 billion annually and creates more than 20,000 temporary jobs (Cross River State Tourism Bureau, 2022), but produces over 500 tons of waste post-event, with insufficient recycling infrastructure (UNEP, 2021).

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## Sustainable Tourism: Long-Term Viability

Sustainable tourism offers a more holistic strategy that balances environmental protection, cultural preservation, and economic feasibility. Whereas Nigeria's mass tourism model favors rapid infrastructure growth and short-term profits, it often neglects the long-term damage inflicted on ecosystems, societies, and local economies. Sustainable tourism models, by contrast, aim to build systemic resilience through local community empowerment, ecological conservation, and institutional collaboration.

Sustainable tourism in Nigeria's national parks and rural ecotourism areas such as Obudu Mountain Resort and Okomu National Park demonstrate the benefits of eco-friendly practices that conserve biodiversity, reduce carbon footprints, and protect ecosystem services. These destinations typically employ low-carbon technologies like solar-powered lodges, eco-trails, and waste-sorting systems that limit strain on fragile environments (UNEP, 2019). This stands in stark contrast to coastal mass tourism centers like Lekki and Badagry, where environmental issues including beach erosion, plastic pollution, and marine biodiversity loss are prevalent (Olawumi & Chan, 2018).

Resilient tourism development necessitates integrating concepts such as carrying capacity limits, climate-adaptive infrastructure, and disaster risk management into destination planning. As climate variability intensifies particularly in Nigeria's coastal and semi-arid regions sustainable tourism presents a means to both mitigate environmental risks and lessen tourism's ecological footprint (Gössling & Hall, 2021).

A key attribute of sustainable tourism is its emphasis on local community involvement and cultural safeguarding. Unlike mass tourism ventures, which are typically investor-driven and externally managed, sustainable initiatives like those under the Nigerian Community-Based Tourism Initiative (CBTI) promote local ownership by involving residents in decision-making, development of cultural products, and profit-sharing. This approach not only empowers marginalized communities but also fosters strong stewardship over tourism resources (Ayeni & Ebohon, 2013).

Moreover, sustainable tourism enhances institutional resilience by encouraging cooperative networks among local governments, NGOs, and private sector actors. Such partnerships help ensure transparent governance, adaptive management, and responsive planning, which are especially critical in regions vulnerable to political instability or resource mismanagement. Incorporating indigenous ecological knowledge into tourism development enriches cultural resilience and creates diversified visitor experiences (Salami et al., 2020).

Although sustainable tourism often yields lower overall revenues compared to mass tourism initially, it tends to deliver more stable, long-term economic benefits. By focusing on quality rather than quantity, sustainable tourism encourages longer visitor stays, higher spending on locally produced goods and services, and improved retention of revenues within host communities (Becken, 2019). This contrasts sharply with mass tourism sectors such as cruise tourism or international hotel chains, which suffer high economic leakages as profits largely flow to foreign investors.

In Nigeria, sustainable tourism clusters linked to agro-tourism, cultural heritage, and the management of protected areas have shown promise in diversifying local economies, generating steady employment, and alleviating urban migration pressures. With adequate support, these clusters can foster resilient local economies that are better insulated against global disruptions like pandemics, currency fluctuations, and travel restrictions.

In the post-COVID era, travelers worldwide increasingly prefer destinations that emphasize health safety, sustainability, and genuine cultural experiences. This shift in tourist behavior presents Nigeria with a distinctive opportunity to reposition itself as a promising sustainable tourism destination. By capitalizing on its wide-ranging ecological zones from the savannahs of the North to the tropical forests of the South and its diverse cultural heritage, Nigeria can leverage sustainable tourism as a catalyst for resilience and competitive edge in the global tourism sector (UNWTO, 2020).

However, to fully realize this potential, the country must pursue deliberate alignment in national policy. Essential steps include embedding sustainability metrics into tourism development plans, fostering incentives for green investments, and enhancing technical expertise dedicated to sustainable tourism management. Without such comprehensive reforms, Nigeria risks sustaining the cyclical instability associated with mass tourism models, which frequently result in environmental degradation and the marginalization of local communities.

### **Tourism in Nigeria: A Dual Dilemma**

Nigeria stands at a critical juncture in its tourism development trajectory, facing the challenge of balancing the urgency for rapid economic growth with the need for sustainable resource management. Traditionally, investments and policy frameworks have favored mass tourism approaches characterized by urban-centric leisure facilities, large-scale events, beach resorts, and entertainment precincts. Cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Calabar, and Port Harcourt have grown into hubs for music festivals, carnivals, religious assemblies, and conference tourism, attracting large crowds and stimulating spending across hospitality, retail, and transportation sectors (Adeleke & Ijeoma, 2020).

Yet, this growth-oriented approach has also inflicted significant environmental and social costs. Rapid expansion of tourism infrastructure, especially along coastal areas and urban green spaces, has contributed to ecological harm including coastal erosion, mangrove depletion, deforestation, and unsustainable water usage. Weak enforcement of waste management in popular tourist zones has led to the accumulation of plastic debris and sewage infiltration into natural habitats (Otekunrin et al., 2021). Furthermore, reliance on fossil fuel-driven transport and energy systems elevates the carbon footprint of tourism activities, undermining Nigeria's commitments to climate change mitigation.

Conversely, community-based and decentralized tourism models such as ecotourism, agro-tourism, and cultural heritage tourism have garnered growing support from academics, civil society groups, and some state tourism agencies. These approaches emphasize conservation of natural resources, preservation of cultural identity, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits, particularly in less-developed or ecologically sensitive areas like the Jos Plateau, Obudu Cattle Ranch, Idanre Hills, and parts of the Niger Delta. Rooted in local ownership and requiring lower capital inputs, these models promote endogenous growth and social resilience (Ayeni & Ebohon, 2013). However, despite their potential, such initiatives often suffer from inadequate funding, limited promotion, and marginalization within Nigeria's overarching national tourism strategy.

Compounding these challenges is Nigeria's complex governance framework and fragmented federal tourism policies, which frequently lack coordination across ministries, agencies, and sub-national entities. Political instability, inconsistent regulations, and insufficient data collection impede effective monitoring of tourism's socio-economic and environmental impacts (Nwokorie & Olufemi, 2019). Consequently, systematic empirical research comparing mass and sustainable tourism pathways remains sparse in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly. Most existing information is anecdotal or project-specific, restricting policymakers' capacity to adopt evidence-driven approaches to investment and regulation.

Ultimately, Nigeria's tourism challenge extends beyond selecting between development paradigms; it demands reconciling immediate economic aspirations with long-term environmental stewardship and social wellbeing. As global tourism increasingly shifts towards sustainable, responsible consumption, Nigeria risks lagging behind unless it adopts a clear, data-driven, and forward-looking national tourism framework. Comparative analyses, such as the present study, are therefore vital for informing policy adjustments and encouraging investments in tourism products that can deliver both competitiveness and sustainability.

### **Global Trends and Nigeria's Position**

Over recent decades, the global tourism industry has experienced a marked evolution, gravitating toward sustainability-oriented models in response to mounting concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, and cultural erosion. Countries like Costa Rica, Rwanda, and Bhutan stand out as exemplars of sustainable tourism, effectively marrying environmental conservation with inclusive economic growth (Honey, 2022; World Bank, 2021).



Costa Rica, for instance, has integrated eco-tourism into its national identity by protecting over a quarter of its land through national parks and reserves. This strategy preserves rich biodiversity while positioning tourism as a major economic pillar, contributing nearly 6% of GDP with relatively low ecological footprints per visitor (Weaver, 2020). Rwanda, similarly, has harnessed high-end conservation tourism such as gorilla trekking in Volcanoes National Park to empower rural communities through revenue-sharing and strengthen conservation efforts (Spenceley et al., 2019).

These nations demonstrate that sustainability can serve as a strategic competitive advantage by delivering premium experiences with minimized environmental and social costs. They rely heavily on coherent policy frameworks, collaborative multi-stakeholder governance, and investment in green infrastructure areas where Nigeria's tourism policies remain comparatively underdeveloped.

Despite Nigeria's abundant natural and cultural tourism assets, it remains marginal in the global sustainable tourism arena. Destinations like Yankari Game Reserve, Obudu Mountain Resort, Erin Ijesha Waterfalls, and Ogbunike Caves offer biodiversity and landscapes on par with international eco-tourism locations. Nonetheless, inadequate infrastructure, policy inconsistency, and weak environmental regulations hinder these sites from realizing their full potential (Eja et al., 2012; Ayeni, 2020). Moreover, ineffective coordination between federal and state tourism authorities often results in duplicated efforts and fragmented development plans, limiting sustained investment.

Furthermore, Nigeria's prevailing tourism strategy heavily favors mass tourism formats such as large-scale cultural festivals, entertainment districts, and urban hospitality clusters that frequently lack environmental safeguards. These initiatives typically prioritize short-term revenue generation at the expense of critical social and ecological considerations, including overcrowding, pollution, and cultural commodification (Okech, 2021).

In comparison, countries like Rwanda have implemented measures such as carrying capacity controls, community co-management arrangements, and green certification schemes. Nigeria, however, has yet to establish a comprehensive, effective national framework for sustainable tourism. Existing documents, like the 2005 National Tourism Master Plan, have neither been thoroughly implemented nor updated to align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national climate objectives.

To reposition itself internationally, Nigeria must move beyond rhetorical commitments to sustainable eco-tourism and towards concrete strategic actions. These include developing and enforcing sustainability indicators, promoting community-owned tourism initiatives, and incorporating environmental impact assessments into all tourism development projects. Aligning with global best practices will not only enhance Nigeria's tourism brand but also contribute to environmental protection, rural economic development, and broader economic diversification.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Mass vs. sustainable tourism reveals a sharp contrast between the short-term profitability of mass tourism and the steady, long-term value generation of sustainable tourism. Mass tourism projects, such as the Lagos Beach Carnival, Abuja's entertainment complexes, and Calabar Festival, reported high gross revenue and employment creation during peak seasons. On average, these projects generated between ₦500 million to ₦2 billion in revenue annually and provided over 5,000 direct and indirect jobs per event (Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation, 2023). However, sustainable tourism initiatives such as eco-resorts in Obudu and community-led heritage tourism in Osun and Ekiti States though smaller in scale, reported higher revenue retention within host communities. For instance, over 60% of the revenue from community-based eco-lodges was reinvested locally in micro-enterprises, skill development, and environmental education programs. Furthermore, employment in these projects was more stable and locally sourced, reducing leakage and supporting endogenous development. Importantly, while mass tourism tends to rely on external investors and urban-based contractors, sustainable tourism empowers local entrepreneurs and custodians of cultural or ecological assets. This distinction enhances economic resilience, as local communities become less dependent on external capital and more engaged in destination stewardship.

**Table 1:** Economic Performance:

Indicator	Mass Tourism	Sustainable Tourism
Avg. Revenue	High (short-term)	Moderate (long-term)
Employment	Seasonal jobs	Skilled, stable jobs
Local Community Benefits	Limited	High (community ownership)

**NTDC (2023):** Annual Tourism Enterprise Survey

The comparative environmental impact analysis indicates that mass tourism exerts significantly higher ecological stress. Coastal sites like Tarkwa Bay and Lekki Beach were found to generate approximately 5–10 tons of plastic waste weekly during peak tourist periods. Additionally, inadequate sanitation infrastructure resulted in direct effluent discharge into water bodies, threatening marine biodiversity and public health (Otekunrin et al., 2021). In contrast, sustainable tourism projects implemented resource-efficient practices, such as rainwater harvesting, composting toilets, and low-carbon transport systems. Sites in Cross River and the Mambilla Plateau reported stronger compliance with environmental safeguards, partly due to partnerships with NGOs and international donors. These locations also benefitted from higher environmental awareness among tourists, which translated into better adherence to “leave-no-trace” principles. Moreover, carbon footprint estimations suggest that mass tourism activities produce 3 to 4 times more greenhouse gas emissions per visitor than sustainable tourism products, primarily due to higher reliance on air-conditioned buses, diesel generators, and wasteful resource use. This raises concerns about Nigeria’s tourism sector aligning with its nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement.

**Table 2:** Environmental Impact Assessment

Impact Factor	Mass Tourism	Sustainable Tourism
Carbon Emissions	High	Low
Waste Generation	Significant	Minimal (recycling)
Biodiversity Loss	High risk	Conservation-focused

**UNEP (2021):** Tourism Carbon Footprint Assessment for Nigeria

The cost-benefit analysis reveals a nuanced trade-off. While mass tourism offers immediate economic inflows and visibility, the hidden costs such as environmental degradation, infrastructural strain, and socio-cultural erosion accumulate over time. These externalities are rarely accounted for in conventional tourism planning, leading to a false perception of profitability. Sustainable tourism, although slower in scaling, exhibited more favorable long-term cost-benefit ratios. Operational costs were lower due to minimal environmental damage and community-led maintenance. Additionally, visitor surveys indicated higher levels of satisfaction and repeat visitation in eco-tourism destinations compared to crowded mass tourism sites. This suggests that sustainable tourism, though less flashy, can outperform mass tourism in terms of visitor loyalty and destination brand equity.

**Table 3:** 10-Year Projected NPV Comparison (₦ million)

Impact Factor	Mass Tourism	Sustainable Tourism
Carbon Emissions	High	Low
Waste Generation	Significant	Minimal (recycling)

Biodiversity Loss	High risk	Conservation-focused
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**Source:** Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) Reports (2020-2023)

While mass tourism shows higher absolute NPV, sustainable tourism has 87% lower environmental costs, delivers greater social benefits and shows more stable long-term growth potential

Implications for tourism policy underscore the need for Nigeria to redefine its tourism growth strategy. The evidence favors a mixed-model approach whereby mass tourism zones are more strictly regulated for environmental compliance, while sustainable tourism is actively promoted through incentives, capacity-building, and destination branding. Policy recommendations include creating a national green certification scheme for tourism businesses, revising land-use and development permits to restrict unsustainable expansion in fragile environments, funding community-based tourism through public-private partnerships (PPPs) and international climate finance mechanisms and integrating sustainability metrics into tourism performance indicators at national and state levels.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights the trade-offs between economic scale and environmental responsibility in Nigeria's tourism development. While mass tourism provides immediate financial benefits, it risks undermining environmental sustainability and community inclusion. Sustainable tourism, though slower to scale, offers a resilient and equitable growth pathway. A hybrid strategy scaling sustainable tourism while regulating mass tourism can help Nigeria achieve both development and conservation goals.

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to realign Nigeria's tourism strategy towards sustainability and long-term competitiveness:

1. **Develop and Enforce a National Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework:** Nigeria needs to update its National Tourism Master Plan with a dedicated sustainable tourism framework aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This should include clear guidelines on environmental impact assessments, community participation, and green infrastructure standards.
2. **Promote Community-Based and Ecotourism Models:** Government and private investors should prioritize tourism projects that are community-owned or co-managed. These models ensure revenue retention at the local level and incentivize environmental conservation, especially in rural or ecologically sensitive areas.
3. **Introduce Sustainability Certification and Monitoring Tools:** Establish a national green certification scheme (in partnership with global bodies such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council - GSTC) to monitor tourism businesses' environmental compliance and social responsibility. Regular audits and incentive programs can encourage broader adoption.
4. **Invest in Capacity Building and Public Awareness:** Tourism operators, local communities, and government agencies should receive training on sustainable practices, environmental management, and tourist engagement. Public education campaigns can also increase tourist demand for eco-friendly options.

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