



Research Paper

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PROFILE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE CONSERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN BONNY LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to evaluate community participation in the conservation of natural resources in Bonny Island and to investigate the sources of information on community participation, determine the demographic characteristics of respondents in the study area. The demographic information of respondents showed age bracket 25-34 as the dominant respondents representing 25%, 33.33% of respondents are employed full-time representing the highest percentage regarding occupation. Result showed local news outlet as the most reliable source of information with 97.5% of respondents selecting the option. 100% of respondent agreed that conservation activities are on in the study area and 52.2% indicated that they had contributed to conservation activities in the study area. Respondents showed a high perception that community participation in the conservation of natural resources lead to the creation of employment opportunities for residents. Respondents showed a high perception when asked if involvement in conservation has significantly enhanced the protection of natural resources. 85.83% of respondents emphasized the significance of community unity as a driving force for their participation. The results revealed that fostering a sense of shared responsibility and providing accessible information are critical elements in promoting community participation in conservation initiatives. It is recommended that government and environmental agencies should encourage greater collaboration and outreach to extend the positive effects of conservation efforts beyond the immediate community boundaries, Community leaders should organize regular awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to encourage more community members to participate in conservation efforts. Relevant agencies should encourage educational outreach programme or communication strategies to enhance local understanding and engagement in conservation initiatives.

Key words: Community Participation, Conservation, Natural resources

INTRODUCTION

Community participation in the conservation of natural resources plays a vital role in environmental management and sustainability. Involving local

communities in the management and conservation of natural resources creates incentives for them to become good stewards of these resources (Agrawal and Gibson,1999).This inclusiveness is more

likely to build a conservation ethic where people understand that involvement in the conservation of resources is crucial (Sam *et al.*, 2014). The involvement of community members in the conservation of resources is considered the best alternative, especially in the face of the gradual extinction of forest and wildlife resources (Sam *et al.*, 2014). The social-ecological system framework indicates that rural communities interact with nature through resource management, highlighting the importance of community participation in nature conservation (He *et al.*, 2020). Successful conservation efforts recognize that people depend on nature for their livelihood and involving communities in decision-making and management can strengthen the performance of community-based natural resource management (Aquino *et al.*, 2017).

Community participation helps in the conservation of natural resources and curbs threats that could undermine proper management. Some roles of community participation in the wild include: monitoring resources, protecting forests from illegal hunting (poaching) and bush burning, reducing the level of poverty, increasing wildlife habitat, improving water and air quality, increases productivity as well as income to all involved, increased community vitality, pride, identity and cohesiveness, decrease human disturbance, provision of health benefits such as reduced levels of anxiety, aggression and conflict resolution (Ghimire and Phuyal, 2013). Other benefits include tourism, recreational use, spiritual and cultural significance, genetic resources preservation, wildlife habitat protection and watershed protection (Brendler and Carey 1998). A case study of community-managed forests in Nepal demonstrates the success of community participation in halting deforestation and

promoting sustainable forest management (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001).

The community participation in the conservation of natural resources in Bonny, Rivers State, Nigeria, has been the subject of several studies. Research conducted in the area has evaluated the present level of community involvement in natural resources management options, emphasizing the importance of participatory approaches and the role of social capital in sustainable livelihoods and community development (Ezenwaka and Abere, 2010; Abere and Ezenwaka 2011). Studies have also highlighted the awareness of the local communities on the declining rate of natural resources and the need for public enlightenment on the conservation of the resources (Abere and Opara 2018). Evaluating community participation in conservation of natural resources is essential to assess the effectiveness of ongoing efforts, identify areas for improvement, and ensure the sustainability of conservation initiatives. Bonny is a fast-developing city in Rivers State with rapid urbanization, and other forms of settlements expansions and is prone to suffer natural resources loss. Therefore, there is need to create a solution/alternative for proper management of available natural resources. This research aims to fill this knowledge gap by providing insights into the community-based conservation practices in Bonny.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study Location

Bonny (originally Ibani) is a traditional, coastal town and a Local Government Area in Rivers State, Southern Nigeria. It is also the capital of the Kingdom of Bonny. Traditionally (especially between the 15th and 19th centuries) it was a major trading post of the Eastern Delta, especially active

in the sale of enslaved people. Bonny Island is a major export point for oil (Frynas, 2000), with an area of 249.27 sq mi (645.60 km²),

and a total population of 214,983. The GPS coordinates are approximately 4.4488 N Latitude and 7.1763 E Longitude.

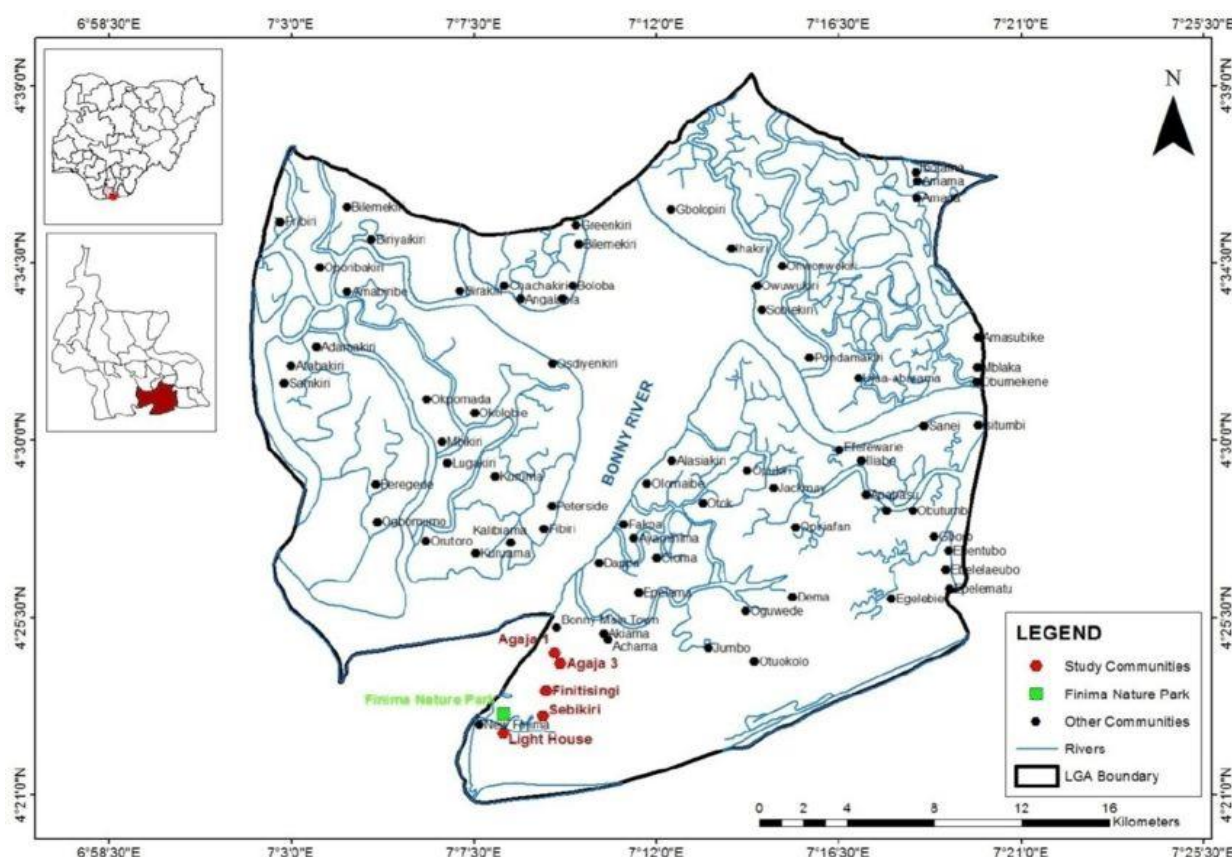


Fig 1: Map of Bonny

Source: (Ijeomah and Duke 2016)

Data Collection

Data were collected from the host community with the aid of well-structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. Questionnaires were structured to obtain information on respondents' demographic characteristics, level of awareness, sources of information on community participation, effect of community participation and factors that motivates or hinders community participation in natural resources conservation. The sample size of the study was 120 respondents. Questionnaires were administered to indigenes and non-indigent employees including civil servant, students, private workers, farmers, and fishermen. Participants were asked to select responses

that best describe their opinions. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 revealed that the age of respondents varies, with the age bracket of 25-34 (25.83%) with the highest percentage, followed by 35-44 (20.83%), 55-64 (15.83%), 18-24 (14.17%), 45-54 (14.17%), 65 and above (9.17%). The result on educational qualifications shows that 43.33% of respondents had secondary education while 6.67% had no formal education. The occupation of respondents ranges from Student 12.5%, full-time employment 33.33%, part-time employment 14.17%, Self-

employed 29.17%, Retired 7.5%, Unemployed 3.33%. 97.5% of respondents were Christian, Pagan 2.5%, Islam and other religions 0%. Results on marital status indicate; married (50.83%), Single (33.33%), Separated (0.83%) and Widow(er) (15%). 70.83% have lived in the community for over 16 years.

The demographic profile suggests that community participation in natural resource conservation is influenced by various factors. The highest engagement comes from the age group of 25-34, implying a potential correlation between youthful demographics and environmental involvement. Tanvir and Afroze (2016) opined that this group of people if properly sensitized, can produce valuable impacts on the conservation initiatives, both by community and government. Furthermore, individuals with secondary education are

more likely to participate, indicating that education plays a role in fostering conservation awareness. This is in agreement with the findings of Børresen *et al.*, 2022 which suggested that an increased proportion of students could identify ecosystem services after the education programme, with increased knowledge of ecosystem services. The diversity in occupations, with notable contributions from both full-time and self-employed individuals, suggests a broad spectrum of involvement. Religious affiliation may not be a significant determinant, given the predominant Christian majority. The extended residency period of over 16 years in the community appears to positively correlate with higher participation, potentially indicating a strong sense of community and environmental responsibility.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-24	17	14.17
25-34	31	28.83
35-44	25	20.83
45-54	17	14.17
55-64	19	15.3
64 and above	11	9.17
Level of Education		
Primary	24	20
Secondary	36	30
Tertiary	52	43.33
No formal education	8	6.67
Occupation		
Student	15	12.5
Employed full-time	40	33.33
Employed part-time	17	14.17
Self-employed	35	29.17
Retired	9	7.5
Unemployed	4	3.33
Religion		
Christian	117	97.5

Islam	0	0
Pagan	3	2.5
Marital status		
Single	40	33.33
Married	61	50.83
Separated	1	0.83
Widow(er)	18	15
Length of residence in the community		
1-5 years	1	0.87
6-10 years	8	6.67
11-15 years	26	21.67
16 and above	85	70.83

Sources of information on community participation in natural resources conservation

Respondents' feedback as shown in table 2 shows that 97.5% learnt about community conservation activities via local news outlets. 67.17% via social media, 42.5% via community meetings and events, 25% via environmental organizations, 31.67% via government announcements and 35% via Word of mouth (35%). The most reliable source of information on conservation efforts as indicated by respondents in Table 2 are Local news outlets (100%) and word of mouth (100%). The least reliable are Environmental Organizations and NGOs (41.67%). A striking finding is the high reliance on local news outlets; this underscores the pivotal role that the traditional media continues to play in disseminating information about community conservation efforts. Local news

outlets are seen as credible and accessible sources of information, reaching a wide and varied audience. This research agrees with Smith, *et al.*, (2019) which discusses how local news outlets can effectively convey conservation messages, raise awareness, and mobilize communities. The unanimous selection of "word of mouth" as the most reliable source of information indicates the profound influence of personal recommendations and community discussions. This agrees with the work by Wee *et al.*, (1995) which asserted that a word of mouth (WOM) source was generally considered to be reliable and influential. It reflects the inherent trust in information shared among peers and within one's community.

Table 2: Respondents source of information on Community's Participation

Source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Local news outlets (TV, Radio, Newspapers)	117	97.5
Social media	83	69.17
Community meetings and events	51	42.5
Environmental Organization or NGO's	30	25.0
Government announcements and reports	38	31.67
Words of mouth from friends and neighbors	42	35.0

Source: (Field Survey, 2023)

Community's Involvement in Natural Resource Conservation

Respondents of 93.33% indicated the presence of ongoing conservation efforts, 6.67% are unsure and 0% indicated no current conservation efforts (Fig 2). 59.17% are aware of groups dedicated to natural resources conservation, 15.83% are unsure and 25% are not aware of any groups dedicated to natural resources conservation. 64.17% have attended meetings relating to natural resources conservation while 35.83% have not attended any of such meetings. 52.5% of respondents have contributed to conservation efforts in the community while 28.33% have never contributed. 41.67% are not satisfied with the level of community involvement in natural resources conservation while 32.5% are satisfied with the level of community involvement (Fig 2). This research finding indicate a notable level of awareness among the respondents regarding organized groups and associations dedicated to the conservation of natural resources in the community. 59.17% are aware of such groups, reflecting a substantial portion of the surveyed population. 25% are not aware of any such organizations. 15.83% expressed uncertainty about the existence of such groups. This suggests that majority of the community

has knowledge of conservation-focused organizations. However, some respondents are either not aware or unsure of organized groups or associations dedicated to conservation in the community. This might be due to a lack of awareness as it is possible that such groups exist but has not effectively communicated its activities to the broader community, resulting in low visibility. The research results reveal a significant level of community engagement in conservation-related activities as 64.17% indicated attendance to such meetings. The result also showed that most respondents, 52.5% have actively contributed to the conservation of natural resources in the community. The results revealed mixed sentiments regarding satisfaction with the level of community involvement in the conservation of natural resources. 32.5% expressed satisfaction; a larger proportion 41.67% indicated dissatisfaction and 25.83% were unsure. Some respondents expressed dissatisfaction due to perceived limited opportunities for engagement. These findings suggest a need for increased efforts to gauge community expectations, improve engagement, and address concerns to foster a more positive perception of community involvement in conservation initiatives.

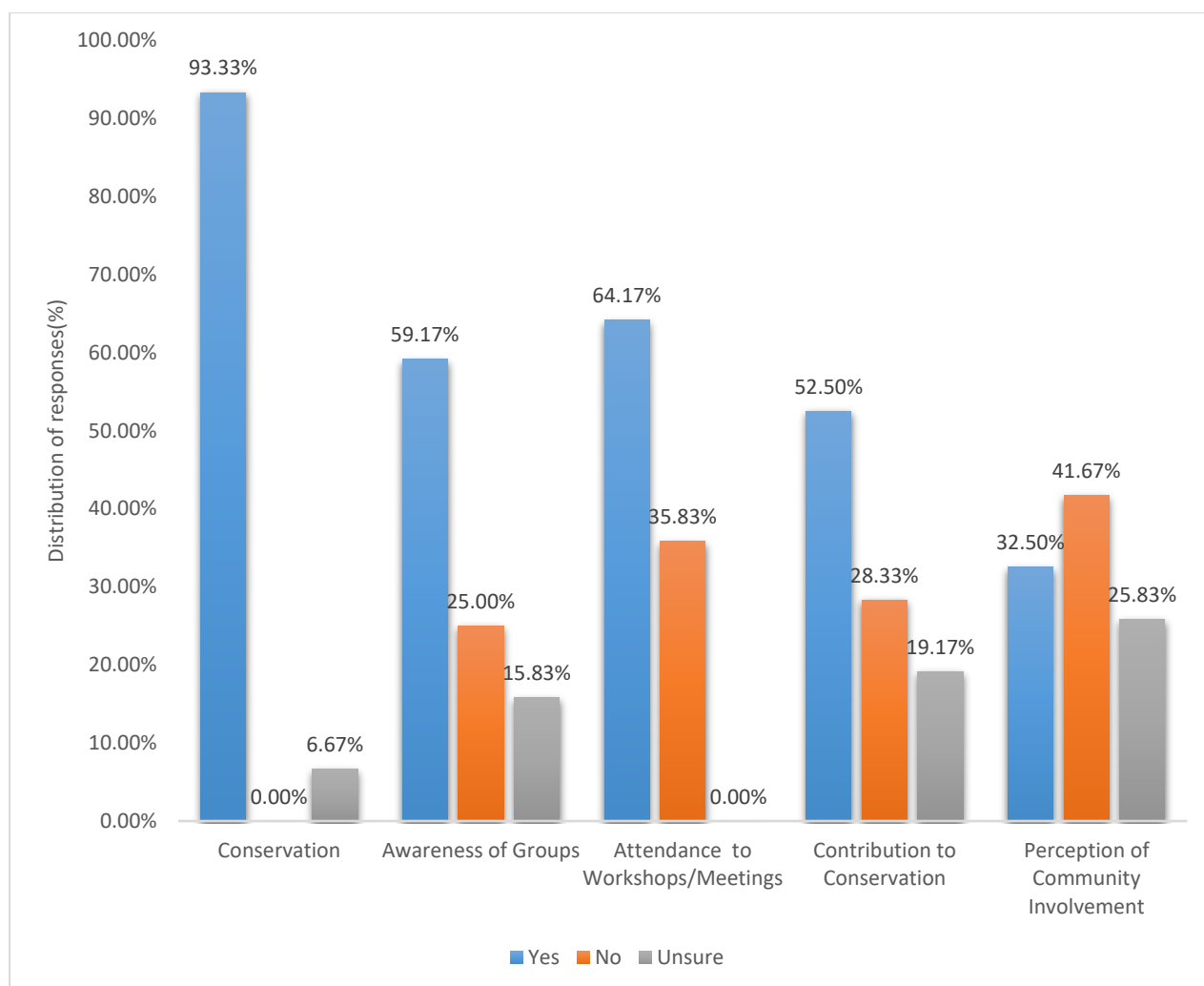


Fig. 2: Assessment of community involvement in natural resource conservation
Source: (Field Survey, 2023)

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of community participation in the conservation of natural resources has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of community engagement and its impact on environmental sustainability. This study has provided a comprehensive understanding of how residents perceive, contribute to, and are informed about conservation efforts in their community.

The findings underscore the significance of community involvement as a driving force behind successful conservation initiatives. A substantial number of respondents demonstrated a strong commitment to conservation activities, attending community meetings, staying informed

through various channels, and actively contributing to conservation efforts. However, there are also areas of concern. A notable portion of the community expressed dissatisfaction with the current level of involvement, highlighting the need for more inclusive and effective engagement strategies. Additionally, a percentage of respondents remained unsure about various aspects of conservation, emphasizing the importance of targeted education and awareness campaigns.

Considering these results, it is clear that fostering a sense of shared responsibility and providing accessible information are critical elements in promoting community

participation in conservation initiatives. It is, therefore, imperative to build upon the strengths of community involvement while addressing the concerns and uncertainties that have surfaced. Collaboration among community members, local organizations, and government entities will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of conservation efforts in our community and ultimately contributing to the long-term health and sustainability of our natural environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Government and environmental agencies should encourage greater collaboration and outreach to extend the positive effects of conservation efforts beyond the immediate community boundaries.
2. Community leaders should organize regular awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to encourage more community involvement in conservation efforts.
3. Relevant agencies should encourage education outreach programs or communication strategies to enhance local understanding and engagement in conservation initiatives.

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