

Local Tourism Sites and Adult Recreation in Nigeria: Implications for Sports Management.

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, non-communicable diseases, and declining participation in recreational physical activities among adults has become a major public health concern globally and in Nigeria. Simultaneously, Nigeria possesses abundant tourism resources that remain underutilized for recreational sports, physical fitness, and wellness promotion. This paper examines Nigeria's local tourism sites as strategic resources for promoting adult recreation and physical fitness through innovative sports management approaches. The paper adopts a conceptual and analytical approach by reviewing literature on sports management, recreational tourism, physical fitness, wellness promotion, ecotourism, and public health. Anchored on the Ecological Systems Theory, the paper argues that tourism environments can significantly influence adults' participation in recreational physical activities when supported by appropriate policies, infrastructure, and management systems. Findings revealed that tourism destinations in Nigeria possess enormous potential for wellness retreats, and other recreational fitness programmes. However, poor infrastructure, insecurity, weak policy implementation, inadequate sports-tourism integration, and low public awareness continue to hinder effective utilization of these sites. The paper concludes that innovative sports management policies and strategic collaborations among government agencies, tourism authorities, sports administrators, private investors, and local communities can transform Nigeria's tourism destinations into viable centres for adult recreation and physical fitness. The paper recommends policy reforms, public-private partnerships, fitness-tourism integration, infrastructure development, and community-based recreational programmes as pathways toward sustainable sports tourism development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Sports management, adult recreation, physical fitness, tourism, wellness tourism, sports policy, Nigeria

Introduction

Globally, sports management has evolved beyond the organization of competitive sporting events to include recreational sports, wellness promotion, tourism development, public health advocacy, and sustainable community engagement (Masteralexis et al., 2019). Modern sports management increasingly emphasizes innovative strategies capable of improving physical activity participation, promoting healthy lifestyles, and contributing to socioeconomic development. One of such emerging innovations is the integration of tourism and recreational sports as tools for enhancing adult physical fitness and wellness.

The rapid increase in sedentary lifestyles, technological dependence, urbanization, and work-related stress has significantly reduced participation in regular physical activities among adults (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Consequently, non-communicable diseases such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular diseases, depression, and anxiety disorders have become increasingly prevalent across developing nations, including Nigeria (Akinroye & Adeyemi, 2021). This situation has intensified the need for innovative sports management policies and recreational strategies capable of encouraging active living and healthy lifestyles among adults.

Tourism has emerged globally as an important mechanism for promoting recreation, physical activity, and wellness. In many countries, tourism destinations are strategically developed to accommodate recreational sports and outdoor physical activities such as hiking, mountain climbing, jogging, cycling, swimming, camping, and nature walks (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2021). Such tourism-based recreational programmes not only improve

physical fitness and mental well-being but also contribute significantly to economic growth, community development, environmental sustainability, and national image promotion.

Nigeria is richly endowed with numerous natural and cultural tourism resources that possess enormous recreational and fitness potential. These include mountainous landscapes, waterfalls, warm springs, beaches, caves, wildlife parks, forests, historical monuments, and cultural heritage sites spread across the country (Bello & Adebayo, 2020). Notable examples include Obudu Mountain Resort in Cross River State, Yankari National Park in Bauchi State, Ikogosi Warm Springs in Ekiti State, Erin-Ijesha Waterfalls in Osun State, and the coastal beaches of Lagos State.

Despite these abundant resources, the Nigerian tourism sector remains largely underdeveloped and disconnected from sports and recreational fitness promotion. Most tourism policies and investments have historically focused on economic and hospitality dimensions with minimal emphasis on wellness tourism, recreational sports, and public health promotion (Ekundayo et al., 2022). Consequently, tourism sites that could serve as centres for adult recreation and physical fitness remain underutilized.

The underutilization of tourism resources for recreational sports raises important concerns within the field of sports management. Sports managers are increasingly expected to design innovative programmes, formulate strategic policies, mobilize stakeholders, and create sustainable systems capable of enhancing sports participation beyond competitive athletics (Hoye et al., 2021). Recreational tourism therefore presents a strategic opportunity for sports managers to expand participation in physical activities among adults while simultaneously supporting national tourism development.

Furthermore, the Nigerian government has continued to seek sustainable strategies for improving public health outcomes, diversifying the economy, and promoting youth and community development. Integrating tourism and recreational sports can significantly contribute to these national objectives by encouraging healthy lifestyles, stimulating local economies, creating employment opportunities, and strengthening social cohesion.

Against this background, this paper examines Nigeria's local tourism sites as untapped resources for promoting adult recreation and physical fitness within the broader framework of innovative sports management. The paper specifically explores the theoretical foundations linking tourism and recreation, analyzes the recreational and fitness potentials of Nigeria's tourism destinations, discusses policy and management challenges, and proposes innovative sports management strategies for repositioning tourism sites as centres for wellness and physical activity promotion.

Conceptual Clarifications

Sports management refers to the application of managerial principles and practices to sports organizations, recreational programmes, tourism activities, wellness promotion, and sporting events (Pedersen & Lucie, 2017). It involves planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, staffing, budgeting, policy formulation, and evaluation of sports-related programmes and facilities. Modern sports management extends beyond elite sports to include recreational sports, community wellness programmes, sports tourism, fitness promotion, and public health advocacy. Innovative sports management therefore requires strategic approaches capable of integrating tourism, recreation, and health promotion into sustainable sports development systems.

Adult recreation on the other hand, refers to voluntary leisure-time activities undertaken by adults for enjoyment, relaxation, social interaction, health improvement, and psychological well-being. Recreational activities may be indoor or outdoor and often involve physical movement and energy expenditure (Udo, 2020). Examples include jogging, hiking, swimming, cycling, dancing, camping, nature walks, wellness retreats, and beach sports. Participation in recreational activities contributes significantly to physical fitness, emotional stability, stress reduction, and improved quality of life.

Physical fitness is described to the ability of an individual to perform daily tasks effectively without undue fatigue while maintaining adequate energy for leisure and emergency activities (Corbin et al., 2020). Components of physical fitness include cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, flexibility, body composition, agility, and muscular endurance. Regular participation in physical activities improves physical fitness and reduces the risk of chronic diseases associated with sedentary lifestyles.

Sports tourism refers to travel undertaken for the purpose of participating in, watching, or experiencing sports and recreational activities (Higham & Hinch, 2018). Sports tourism includes recreational tourism, wellness tourism, adventure tourism, ecotourism, and event tourism. Fitness tourism, a dimension of sports tourism, involves travel motivated by physical activity participation, health promotion, relaxation, and wellness experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded on Ecological Systems Theory propounded by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which explains that human behaviour and development are influenced by interactions within physical, social, institutional, cultural, and policy environments. The theory is relevant to this study

because participation in adult recreation and physical fitness is greatly shaped by factors such as accessibility, safety, infrastructure, tourism facilities, government policies, and social support systems. In the Nigerian context, tourism destinations such as mountains, beaches, waterfalls, wildlife parks, and recreational resorts can provide enabling environments for activities including hiking, trekking, jogging, cycling, swimming, and wellness retreats when properly developed and managed (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; United Nations World Tourism Organization [UN Tourism], 2024). Ecological Systems Theory further emphasizes that participation in such recreational activities is influenced by the interaction between individuals and their surrounding environmental, institutional, and policy systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Consequently, sports councils, tourism boards, local governments, private organizations, and sports managers have complementary responsibilities in developing accessible infrastructure, implementing supportive policies, and creating sustainable recreational systems that encourage lifelong participation in physical activity (Wylleman, 2019; Weed & Bull, 2012; UN Tourism, 2024). Therefore, Ecological Systems Theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how environmental conditions, tourism resources, and sports management practices interact to influence recreational participation and wellness promotion among Nigerian adults (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Nigeria's Local Tourism Sites and Their Recreational Potentials

From a sports management perspective, the ecological framework highlights the importance of creating supportive environments that encourage active lifestyles. Nigeria is endowed with diverse tourism destinations that, if strategically developed and sustainably managed, can serve as recreation hubs for adult physical activity, wellness promotion, and community sport participation,

thereby contributing to both public health and tourism development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Wylleman, 2019; WHO, 2022; UN Tourism, 2024).

Mountain and Highland Tourism Destinations. Mountainous tourism sites provide excellent opportunities for outdoor recreational activities such as hiking, mountain climbing, jogging, trekking, camping, and cycling. Obudu Mountain Resort located in Cross River State remains one of Nigeria's most prominent mountain tourism destinations. The resort's hilly terrain, natural environment, cable car system, and cool climate create suitable conditions for recreational fitness activities (Bello & Adebayo, 2020). Hiking and mountain trekking within such environments contribute significantly to cardiovascular endurance, muscular development, and weight management. Similarly, the Mambilla Plateau in Taraba State offers scenic landscapes suitable for recreational trekking, jogging, and wellness retreats. Nature-based recreational activities within these locations can significantly improve adults' physical and psychological well-being.

National Parks and Wildlife Reserves. Nigeria's national parks provide opportunities for ecotourism and recreational fitness activities. Yankari National Park in Bauchi State and Gashaka-Gumti National Park in Taraba State possess expansive landscapes that support nature walks, wildlife trekking, camping, and jogging. Research indicates that ecotourism activities encourage physical movement while simultaneously promoting environmental awareness and conservation (Falaye & Akindele, 2021). Recreational activities within wildlife parks also contribute to stress reduction and psychological relaxation.

Waterfalls and Warm Springs. Waterfalls and warm spring destinations provide opportunities for swimming, climbing, hiking, and relaxation. Ikogosi Warm Springs in Ekiti State and Erin-Ijesha Waterfalls in Osun State attract visitors for recreational activities and wellness experiences.

Recreational swimming and hiking associated with these environments improve muscular endurance, flexibility, and mental wellness (Ekundayo et al., 2022).

Coastal and Beach Tourism. Nigeria's coastal tourism destinations provide opportunities for beach sports, jogging, swimming, aerobics, and wellness retreats. Beaches such as Tarkwa Bay and La Campagne Tropicana in Lagos State can serve as strategic centres for organized recreational sports programmes including beach volleyball, beach football, fitness boot camps, and community wellness events. Beach-based recreational activities have been associated with improved mental relaxation, social interaction, and physical fitness (UNWTO, 2021).

Health Benefits of Recreational Tourism to Adults

Physical Health Benefits: Outdoor recreational activities significantly contribute to physical health improvement. Regular participation in hiking, jogging, swimming, cycling, and trekking improves cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, body composition, and flexibility (Corbin et al., 2020). The WHO (2022) emphasized that regular physical activity reduces the risk of hypertension, obesity, diabetes mellitus, stroke, cardiovascular diseases, and other non-communicable diseases. Recreational tourism therefore provides an innovative platform for increasing adults' participation in physical activities.

Psychological and Mental Health Benefits: Nature-based recreational activities contribute significantly to mental wellness. Studies have shown that exposure to natural environments reduces stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue while enhancing mood, cognitive functioning, and psychological restoration (Ekundayo et al., 2022). Adults who participate in recreational tourism activities often experience improved emotional balance, self-esteem, and social well-being.

Social Benefits of Recreational Tourism

Recreational tourism promotes social interaction, community integration, family bonding, and cultural exchange by providing opportunities for shared participation in physical and leisure activities (UN Tourism, 2024; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Recreational events such as hiking festivals, wellness retreats, cycling competitions, and camping programmes encourage collective participation, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and foster social cohesion within communities (Gibson et al., 2018; Hinch & Higham, 2019). From a sports management perspective, tourism destinations can be strategically utilized to organize community-based wellness programmes, thereby promoting active lifestyles, social inclusion, and community engagement while contributing to sustainable recreation development (Weed & Bull, 2012; Wicker & Breuer, 2022).

Sports Management Innovations in Recreational Tourism

The changing dynamics of sports participation require innovative sports management strategies capable of expanding recreational opportunities for adults. One major innovation involves integrating sports development policies with tourism policies. Sports managers and tourism authorities should collaboratively design recreational tourism frameworks that promote wellness-oriented physical activities. Such integrated policies can facilitate the development of fitness trails, recreational parks, outdoor gyms, cycling routes, and structured wellness programmes within tourism destinations, thereby enhancing public participation in physical activity and promoting sustainable destination management (UN Tourism, 2024; Weed & Bull, 2012; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

Another important innovation is digital promotion and recreational marketing. Contemporary sports management increasingly relies on digital technologies, social media platforms, and data-driven marketing strategies to attract participants and visitors. Tourism destinations can be promoted through fitness influencers, digital campaigns, virtual destination experiences, wellness tourism advertisements, and online recreational communities. These approaches have been shown to increase public awareness of recreation opportunities, encourage healthy lifestyles, and improve destination competitiveness (Hudson & Hudson, 2021; UN Tourism, 2024).

Community-based recreational programming also represents an effective innovation in recreational tourism management. Sports managers can organize hiking festivals, wellness camps, recreational marathons, beach fitness programmes, cycling competitions, and nature walk events that encourage sustained participation in physical activity while strengthening community ownership of recreational resources (Gibson et al., 2018; Wicker & Breuer, 2022).

Furthermore, collaboration between government agencies and private organizations remains fundamental to sustainable recreational tourism development. Public-private partnerships can facilitate infrastructure development, facility management, event sponsorship, destination marketing, security enhancement, and long-term investment in recreation and tourism facilities. Such collaborative arrangements have been widely recognized as effective mechanisms for improving service delivery and ensuring the sustainability of tourism destinations (UN Tourism, 2024; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

Challenges Facing Recreational Tourism Development in Nigeria

Poor Infrastructure

Many tourism destinations in Nigeria lack essential infrastructure, including quality road networks, recreational facilities, accommodation, healthcare services, sanitation systems, and emergency response mechanisms. These deficiencies reduce accessibility, visitor satisfaction, and opportunities for participation in recreational activities, thereby limiting the growth of recreational tourism (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

Insecurity

Security challenges, including kidnapping, banditry, terrorism, and communal conflicts, continue to undermine tourism development in several parts of Nigeria. Perceived insecurity discourages both domestic and international tourists from participating in recreational tourism activities and negatively affects investment in tourism infrastructure (Akinroye & Adeyemi, 2021; UN Tourism, 2024).

Weak Policy Implementation

Nigeria's tourism and sports sectors continue to experience weak policy implementation, inadequate funding, fragmented institutional coordination, and limited inter-agency collaboration. The absence of integrated sports–tourism policies has constrained the development of sustainable fitness-oriented recreational programmes capable of promoting active lifestyles (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021; National Sports Commission, 2024).

Low Public Awareness

Many Nigerians remain unaware of the physical, psychological, and social benefits associated with recreational tourism. Limited public awareness, inadequate health promotion campaigns, and poor recreation education have contributed to low participation in outdoor physical activities despite the country's abundant tourism resources (WHO, 2022; UN Tourism, 2024).

Socio-Cultural Constraints

Socio-cultural beliefs, religious practices, gender norms, and prevailing attitudes toward recreation and physical activity may discourage participation among certain adult populations, particularly women and older adults. These cultural influences affect recreation preferences and access to tourism destinations, thereby limiting the effectiveness of programmes designed to promote active lifestyles (Akindutire & Oyeniyi, 2020; WHO, 2022).

Implications for Sports Management in Nigeria

The utilization of tourism destinations for recreational fitness has important implications for sports management practice in Nigeria. Firstly, sports managers must expand their focus beyond competitive sports to include wellness promotion, recreational sports, and community health development. Secondly, sports management professionals should collaborate with tourism authorities, healthcare professionals, urban planners, and environmental agencies to develop integrated recreational systems. Thirdly, sports managers must adopt innovative approaches involving digital technologies, recreational event management, fitness tourism marketing, and community engagement. Finally, tertiary institutions offering sports management programmes should incorporate sports tourism, wellness management, and recreational programming into their curricula to prepare future professionals for emerging industry demands.

Conclusion

Nigeria's local tourism destinations possess enormous but largely untapped potential for promoting adult recreation and physical fitness. Mountains, waterfalls, national parks, beaches, wildlife reserves, and warm springs can serve as strategic centres for wellness tourism and recreational sports development. Within the framework of innovative sports management, tourism

destinations can be transformed into organized environments for physical activity participation, public health promotion, community recreation, and socioeconomic development. Recreational tourism not only contributes to physical and mental wellness but also stimulates local economies, promotes environmental sustainability, and strengthens social cohesion.

However, poor infrastructure, insecurity, weak policy implementation, inadequate sports-tourism integration, and low public awareness continue to hinder effective utilization of these resources. A strategic and collaborative approach involving government agencies, sports managers, tourism authorities, private investors, local communities, and public health stakeholders is therefore essential for repositioning Nigeria's tourism destinations as centres for adult recreation and physical fitness.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions in this paper, the following recommendations are made:

- Government should formulate integrated sports-tourism policies that promote recreational fitness and wellness tourism.
- Tourism destinations should be equipped with recreational facilities such as fitness trails, cycling routes, outdoor gyms, and wellness centres.
- Sports managers should organize community-based recreational programmes including hiking festivals, beach fitness events, wellness retreats, and cycling competitions.
- Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to support infrastructure development, tourism marketing, security enhancement, and recreational programming.

- Aggressive awareness campaigns should be conducted through mass media and digital platforms to educate the public on the health benefits of recreational tourism.
- Security systems around tourism destinations should be strengthened to encourage safe recreational participation.
- Institutions of higher learning should incorporate sports tourism and recreational wellness management into sports management curricula.

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