



NIGER DELTA BEYOND OIL AND GAS: EXPERIENCING AUTHENTIC INDIGENOUS HERITAGE AND NATURE TOURISM

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Abstract:

For decades, the Niger Delta has been synonymous with oil extraction, characterized by severe environmental degradation, social conflict, and limited livelihood diversification, yet the region holds untapped potential. If sustainably harnessed, its rich natural ecosystems and vibrant indigenous heritage resources can support resilient and inclusive post-extractive economies. This paper explores the prospects of developing authentic indigenous heritage and nature-based tourism as a pathway to socio-economic regeneration and ecological restoration. The study is framed within the Triple Helix Model (THM), Sustainable Development Framework (SDF), and Cultural Identity Theory (CIT), offering both theoretical insights and practical policy recommendations for diversification. Drawing on contemporary literature and a qualitative methodology involving reconnaissance, ethnography, and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, it explores the potential for successful community-based tourism (CBT). Early findings reveal significant opportunities for innovations for economic empowerment, cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and habitat restoration. It further presents a methodology for mapping heritage assets and assessing socio-economic enablers and barriers. The paper identifies significant gaps in existing research, including the lack of integrated tourism-ecology studies, and weak governance frameworks linking tourism, restoration, and a sustainable transition to a resilient post-extractive future for the Niger Delta region.

Keywords:

Niger Delta, heritage-nature tourism, authentic indigenous experiences, community-based tourism, post-extractive economies.

INTRODUCTION

For over sixty years, the Niger Delta, often referred to as the “*oil belt of Nigeria*,” has been the bedrock of the nation’s economy. Having transited from a mainly an agriculture-based economy to relying solely on oil from the 1960s, the vast oil and gas reserves of the region have contributed over 70% of the country’s income (Iortyer & Kayode, 2025). This economic overdependence, however, has not been without catastrophic environmental and social costs. Decades of extractive activities have resulted in severe environmental degradation, disrupting the region’s delicate ecosystems, and weakening traditional livelihoods on which its indigenous communities have long depended on prior to the discovery of oil (Obida *et al.*, 2021; Ukhurebor *et al.*, 2023).

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Oil spills from pipelines that crisscross the delta, and persistent gas flaring have polluted waterways, destroyed hitherto fertile farmlands, and contaminated the atmosphere, severely diminishing traditional activities like fishing, crafts, and farming. Mangrove forests, which are critical natural defenses that shield coastlines from the Atlantic Ocean, rivers and estuaries, acting also as vital wildlife habitats, are increasingly threatened by environmental destruction (Asari *et al.*, 2021). This degradation has resulted in severe biodiversity loss, alienating local people from their ancestral lands and further exacerbating poverty, food insecurity, and environmental injustice (Babatunde, 2023).

As global discussions on energy tend towards cleaner and sustainable alternatives, oil-dependent regions like the Niger Delta face urgent and existential challenges of economic transition and ecological restoration (Nalule *et al.*, 2022). Past development efforts in the region have often been disconnected from local communities, were top-down in nature and fragmented, contributing to project failures and the rise of informal, environmentally damaging economies like artisanal refining (Orhero & Edo, 2020). Despite the Niger Delta's history of challenges, the region boasts of extraordinary, yet severely unharnessed, natural and cultural resources. The intricate river ecosystems, extensive wetlands, rich tapestry of diverse indigenous traditions, customs, festivals, architecture, and cuisine, which dot the entire landscape of the region can collectively offer immense potential beyond the oil and gas economy.

This context presents a timely need to reimagine the region, leveraging its rich biodiversity and profound cultural heritage as a new economic engine. Nature and heritage tourism are viable alternatives that can foster genuine economic diversification, ecological restoration, and authentic community empowerment for the region (Ezenagu, 2020; Madandola & Boussaa, 2023). A divestment towards community-driven, participatory approaches that links cultural preservation with ecosystem protection is crucial for a successful post-oil future. This study, "Niger Delta beyond oil and gas: Experiencing authentic indigenous heritage and nature tourism", investigates how sustainably-developed, community-led heritage and ecotourism initiatives can reveal the region's many authentic indigenous potentials, create sustainable employment and livelihoods, reinforce local identities, restore ecosystems, and, most importantly, offer unique, compelling tourism experiences for both domestic and international interests.

Scholars have cited tourism as a potent tool for sustainable development, particularly in environmentally challenged areas (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019; Castillo-Salazar *et al.*, 2025; Pahwa & Khwairakpam, 2025). Strong connections exist between authentic heritage, nature tourism and community-based tourism (CBT) (Gantait *et al.*, 2024; Wani *et al.*, 2025; Yodsurang *et al.*, 2022); revealing that CBT naturally clusters around nature-based ecotourism, heritage-building-based tourism, and cultural landscape agritourism, with all sharing resource-based management perspectives (Yodsurang *et al.*, 2022). Lately, CBT is increasingly seen in African as a model that generates local income, enhances cultural pride, and encourages environmental stewardship (Mokoena, 2020). However, literature focusing on authentic indigenous tourism experiences in the Niger Delta remains scarce.

While existing research predominantly concentrates on the impacts of oil pollution (Ikhumetse *et al.*, 2022) and conflicts (Isiaq, 2022), there is limited interest on the region's potential for harnessing alternative sectors like tourism. This constitutes a significant research gap, though a few studies have looked at attractions like Obudu Cattle Ranch (Ugwukah & Obomanu, 2020); and the sustainable development of Bayelsa State through ecotourism resources planning (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2023); and visitors' perception of avitourism in Finima nature park (Efenakpo *et al.*, 2022). A holistic, policy-oriented approach integrating both indigenous heritage and natural assets into CBT development in the region is still lacking. CBT initiatives demonstrate significant potential for empowering indigenous communities through economic diversification and cultural preservation.

Key gaps require attention in the literature on the Niger Delta region. Regarding the *integration gap*, research is needed to combine ecological restoration efforts with cultural tourism. The *governance gap* points to weakness and the need for current mechanisms to connect Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), local authorities, and communities in tourism projects. A *gender and inclusion gap* exist as roles of women and youth, who are key participants in tourism development are not fully addressed. The environmental monitoring gap requires enhanced tools to continuously monitor sites to determine the sustainable tourism capacity. Finally, *pilot evidence gap*, shows that documented community-based tourism projects with measurable clear outcomes are not available. There is also a need to address oil industry dominance, environmental degradation, and traditional barriers to stakeholder's participation in creating authentic indigenous CBT initiatives.



The study is anchored on 3 frameworks, namely: the Triple Helix Model (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995), the Sustainable Development Framework (SDF), and Cultural Identity Theory (CIT) (Collier, 2009), to explore sustainable tourism development in the Niger Delta. The Triple Helix Model extends traditional interactions between academia, industry, providers of funding, technical know-how, resources and innovation, and government as a regulator and facilitator that provides enabling policies, infrastructure, and environmental oversight for other sectors to thrive, to include communities who are custodians as equal partners, emphasizing their role as custodians of heritage. This collaborative approach fosters sustainable tourism outcomes through multi-actor partnerships, while the SDF examines the balance of economic viability, environmental protection (Ijose & Birendra, 2025; Uduji *et al.*, 2020), and social equity (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). CIT highlights the importance of reclaiming and presenting authentic indigenous heritage, aiding cultural revitalization and community identity (Tian *et al.*, 2020), amidst globalization and resource extraction.

This study investigates how authentic indigenous heritage and nature tourism can be developed in the Niger Delta as a sustainable, community-led post-extractive livelihood strategy. To achieve this, the study would (a) map and document priority indigenous heritage and natural assets with potential for tourism development in selected Niger Delta communities; (b) examine socio-economic enablers and barriers, including governance and gender dynamics, that influence community participation; co-design of a participatory, community-based tourism model that integrates indigenous heritage with environmental sustainability and development of policy and practice recommendations for scaling these initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the potential and challenges for creating authentic indigenous heritage and nature tourism experiences in the Niger Delta, this study triangulated qualitative methods and participatory approaches to engage communities and key stakeholders. This research design was used to ascertain feasibility, review governance instruments, document lived heritage practices, and link ecological conditions to visitor experience. Consequently, data collection was conducted between August 2024 and May 2025.

a) Data collection methods:

- i. *Documentary Analysis*: A review of existing literature was undertaken. This included academic publications, government reports, GMOUs, CSR reports, and NGO briefs related to the Niger Delta's economy, environment, and socio-cultural landscape.
- ii. *Non-invasive site walks* (reconnaissance and ecological): Using an observation guide, to identify simple biodiversity.
- iii. *Empirical Fieldwork*: This was conducted across three states in the region, namely Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Imo, over ($n=6$) weekends for 2 months. It involved ethnographic exploration and participant observation. Field notes and audio/visual recording of events, were made with each respondent's consent, while mapping of cultural sites and visitor routes ensued. Cultural events and guided creek visits with hosts to ecolodges/guesthouses were also undertaken.
- iv. *Key Informants (KIIs)*: Key stakeholders ($n=18$), were purposively chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews, using topic guides that covered 7 broad domains: heritage, governance, perceptions of authenticity, livelihood aspirations, CSR experiences, ecological observations, and attitudes toward tourism. Interviewees included community leaders, youth, Elders' council members, local women's associations, state tourism boards, environmental NGO officers, youth entrepreneurs, boat operators, fishermen, guesthouse and ecolodge hosts, local government tourism and environment desk officers, and tour operators. Table 1 shows the categories of stakeholders interviewed.



Table 1. Key Informants Stakeholder Categorizations

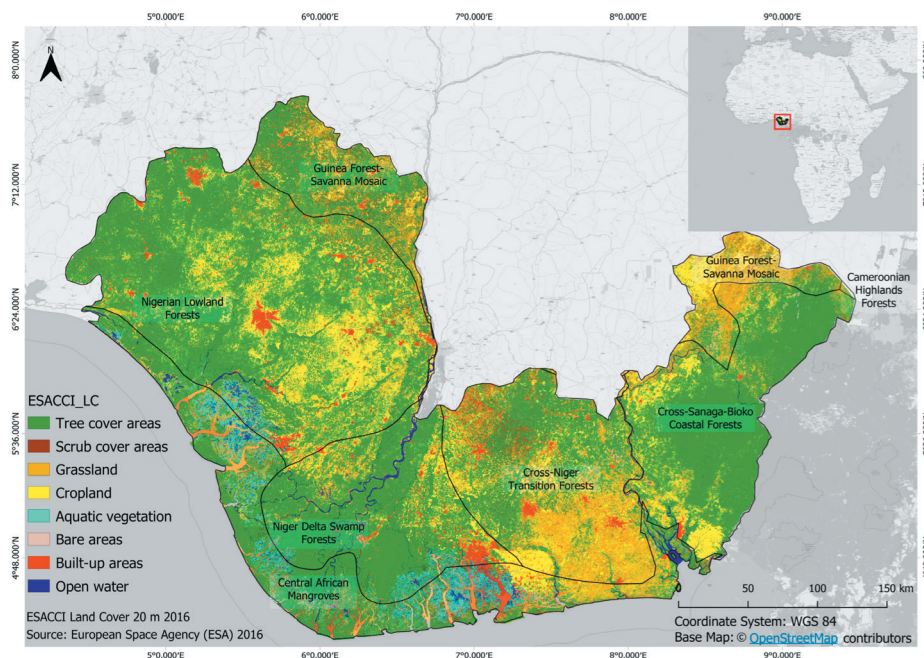
S/No	Stakeholder Category	Number
1	Community Leaders/Elders' Council Members	3
2	Youth Representatives	2
3	Local Women's Associations	2
4	State Tourism Board Representatives	2
5	Environmental NGO Officers	3
6	Youth Entrepreneurs/Ecolodge (Guest House) Host	1
7	Boat operators	2
8	Fishermen	1
9	Local government tourism and environment desk officers	1
10	Tour operators	1
Total		18

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2025

b) Sampling strategy:

Consistent with Ahmad and Wilkins (2024), the choice of purposive sampling methods was made to ensure the inclusion of various stakeholder groups, enabling the recognition of crucial viewpoints necessary for decision-making and implementation. These participants provide rich insights that are adjudged relevant to the study. Also, the method ensures that the study effectively leverages the expertise and abilities of various facilitators, while maintaining the integrity of those who hold valuable indigenous knowledge. The interviews aimed to collect insights on different aspects, including the perceived resources and strengths related to tourism; the community's readiness and interest in engaging in proposed activities, potential frameworks for distributing benefits and community roles, as well as key socio-political and infrastructure challenges. The study area selection criteria included ecological diversity, heritage significance, and readiness for tourism engagement. The acquired data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and narratives. Figure 1 below, shows the Niger Delta region.

Figure 1. The Niger Delta Region



Source: ESACCI Land Cover 20 m (2016), European Space Agency (ESA); bazna karta: © OpenStreetMap contributors; koordinatni sistem: WGS 84



RESULTS

A thematic analysis of the empirical fieldwork yielded compelling evidence on the Niger Delta's tourism potential and the challenges the region faces. The identified indigenous resources and four major emerging themes are described below:

i. Indigenous Heritage and Natural Assets:

The region's indigenous resources suitable for a thriving tourism sector are grouped into two broad categories:

Natural Resources: The presence of various ecosystems confirms the potential for nature-based ecotourism. These include a vast array of ecologically significant mangrove ecosystems, complemented by beautiful beaches along the Atlantic coastline, which, as of 2018, was noted as approximately 450km (Adewumi *et al.*, 2018); diverse wildlife, and intricate river networks ideal for recreational activities like boat cruises and sport fishing.

Cultural Heritage Resources: Endowed with a variety of tangible and intangible heritage, the region is rich in indigenous cultural offerings, made up of unique music and dance forms, traditional festivals, intricate wood carvings, distinctive local cuisine, and historical sites related to pre-colonial kingdoms and the transatlantic trade. These cultural resources strongly support the possibility of developing authentic indigenous experiences in the region.

ii. Emerging Thematic Insights

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews yielded four key themes, as summarized in Table 2. below.

Table 2. Emerging Themes

Theme 1	Heritage and Identity
Theme 2	Livelihood Aspirations and Barriers
Theme 3	Governance, CSR, and Community Trust
Theme 4	Ecological Concerns and Environmental Stewardship

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2025

i) Theme 1: Heritage and Identity

Participants, especially the Elders' Council Members and local women's associations, showed a strong attachment to their indigenous heritage, viewing tourism as a tool for cultural revitalization. They expressed strong desires to showcase their festivals and craft-making trades, which align with the Cultural Identity Theory (CIT). Residents see tourism as a viable way to preserve their local languages and traditions for future generations, effectively countering the cultural erosion often associated with the resource extraction activities they are exposed to. As articulated by the respondents, the core of the authentic experiences lies in the performance of their living practices and the consumption of local cuisine.

ii) Theme 2: Livelihood Aspirations and Barriers

Women and youth residents generally voiced their widespread desire for the transition from oil-related activities (including informal artisanal refining) towards community-led, owned, and managed tourism projects. This aspiration for economic diversification is driven by pervasive poverty and persistent environmental degradation which has, over the years, negatively impacted their traditional livelihoods.

However, respondents in some states, particularly Bayelsa, and Imo states, reported significant obstacles, namely:

Infrastructural Deficits: Poor road networks, unreliable electricity, and limited access to clean water. They considered these as major barriers to welcoming and hosting tourists, particularly for homestay and ecolodge ventures.

Security Concerns: Noting that militancy still persists, as well as general insecurity linked to the region's socio-political conflicts, the tour and boat operators see these as major deterrents for both domestic and international visitors.



Funding Gaps: Dearth of low-cost funding sources was cited by youth entrepreneurs as a deterrent for establishing small-scale tourism enterprises (SMEs).

iii) Theme 3: Governance, CSR, and Community Trust

The semi-structured interviews revealed a complex relationship that exists between communities, government, and the oil industry, which implements CSR initiatives.

Weak Local Governance: Limited capacity and poor funding were cited by local government desk officers charged with enforcing tourism policies. The absence of necessary regulatory and infrastructural support was cited, thus highlighting a governance gap.

Distrust in CSR: Existing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives were often viewed with suspicion by community leaders. Perceived corporate insincerity, a lack of community involvement, and systemic power disparities that cast communities as passive recipients rather than true collaborators are the main causes of community leaders' mistrust of CSR initiatives in rural areas. Companies that use corporate social responsibility (CSR) mainly to obtain a social license to operate rather than to actually promote community welfare are among the key distrust issues cited (Meribe *et al.*, 2021). Some of the projects are often perceived as misaligned with the exact needs of the local communities, fragmented, top-down, and often fail to create sustainable livelihoods. Fishermen and women's associations noted that CSR projects rarely focused on their top priority, which is environmental remediation.

Triple Helix Adaptation: A model where the local community is recognized as an equal partner, not just a beneficiary, was strongly favoured by stakeholders. This is in line with the adapted Triple Helix Model (THM). This participatory approach is seen as very important to ensure equitable benefit sharing and project viability.

iv) Theme 4: Ecological Concerns and Environmental Stewardship

Another group that identified issues of equally high relevance are the environmental NGO officers and fishermen, who cited ecological damage. They drew attention to the rapid degradation of mangroves due to oil spills, gas flaring, and the spread of invasive species, particularly Nipa Palms. As Nwobi *et al.*, (2020) noted, between 2007 and 2017, mangrove areas decreased by about 12% while the invasive Nipa Palms increased by 694%.

On the ecological-tourism link, the respondents strongly agreed that it would be crucial to properly set the stage for tourism by implementing an environmental cleanup, which can also run concurrently with its tourism development, in recognition of healthy ecosystems (clean water, dense mangroves) as foundations for nature tourism (boat tours, birdwatching). This is imperative to address the existing integration gap between ecological restoration and cultural tourism.

The residents showed high willingness, especially local boat operators and youth, despite the challenges, to engage in conservation-oriented activities. While willing to participate in guiding, restoring mangroves, and implementing waste management practices, the community people emphasized the importance of capacity building and financial support.

DISCUSSION

The importance of an inclusive approach to tourism development in the Niger Delta, aligning with the principles of community involvement and sustainable development, cannot be overemphasized. The region's cultural heritage is rich and diverse, spanning tangible monuments, oral traditions, and living practices. Heritage tourism has also demonstrated its potential to foster economic development, cultural continuity, and identity strengthening (Ezenagu, 2020; Tian *et al.* 2020). However, many heritage sites suffer neglect due to inadequate funding, weak policy enforcement, and a lack of community ownership (Madandola & Boussaa, 2023). Sustainable models must therefore focus on participatory governance and co-management. The mangroves and riverine systems are ecologically significant, supporting fisheries, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity (Nwobi & Williams, 2021). Unfortunately, these ecosystems face rapid degradation from oil spills and invasive species such as Nipa palms (Obida *et al.*, 2021). Protecting and restoring these habitats is not only



an environmental imperative but also foundational for building tourism products like boat tours, birdwatching trails, and conservation-oriented experiences. Empirical studies in oil-host communities highlight the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in fostering tourism participation, particularly when programs are gender-sensitive and youth-focused (Uduji & Okolo-Obasi, 2023). Conversely, misaligned CSR projects have exacerbated social tensions and failed to create sustainable livelihoods (Orhero & Edo, 2020). Genuine community involvement in decision-making remains a critical success factor to enhance trust in both governance and structures (Tichaawa *et al.*, 2021), which would naturally bring out the exposition of authentic experiences. Globally, community-based homestays and ecolodges have emerged as low-cost, high-impact tourism models that offer authentic visitor experiences while generating direct household income (Ijose & Birendra, 2025). Such models are still nascent but represent promising avenues for integrating cultural and ecological tourism in the Niger Delta region. By diversifying its economy, the region can offer authentic indigenous experiences to tourists, beyond oil and gas.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the development of authentic indigenous heritage and nature tourism as a sustainable livelihood strategy in the Niger Delta, grounded in the THM, SDF, and CIT. Findings indicate a strong community interest in transitioning to tourism; however, this potential is hindered by ecological degradation, infrastructural deficits, and governance issues, particularly distrust in CSR projects. To promote sustainable heritage-nature tourism in the Niger Delta, it is crucial to develop targeted policies that address the oil industry's dominance and environmental challenges. Recommended actions include: Creating a comprehensive tourism master plan to prioritize indigenous assets, establishing partnerships among stakeholders to facilitate socio-economic growth, raising awareness and building capacity considering governance and gender issues, identifying low-cost funding for local tourism SMEs, and co-designing community-based tourism models that merge heritage with sustainability. These measures aim to enhance community-led tourism and position the region as a unique destination. It also requires implementing a participatory CBT model, establishing partnerships for environmental cleanup, and building local capacities. Future research should address the evidence gap with pilot projects that utilize geospatial monitoring tools for informed decision-making on ecological health and visitor capacity, fostering a sustainable management model post-oil and gas economy.

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