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Tourism Development in Niger Delta and Its Impact on Soft Power Diplomacy of Nigeria 1960-2024

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of tourism development in the Niger Delta on Nigeria's soft power diplomacy, emphasizing how leveraging the region's rich natural resources and cultural heritage can enhance the country's global image and foster international cooperation. It aims to promote eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and community-based tourism in the Niger Delta to attract international visitors, foster positive perceptions, and strengthen Nigeria's global image through sustainable tourism initiatives. The study adopts the concept of soft power diplomacy as its theoretical framework, emphasizing cultural exchange, environmental preservation, and community development as tools for enhancing national image and fostering global cooperation. A qualitative methodology was employed, relying more on data from extant academic literature, government reports, and case studies of successful tourism initiatives in similar regions. The findings highlight the region's significant tourism potential and reveal challenges such as environmental degradation, inadequate infrastructure, and security concerns. Engaging local communities and fostering international partnerships for capacity building and knowledge transfer are identified as essential steps to harness the region's tourism potential. The study recommends developing robust tourism infrastructure, enhancing security measures, launching targeted marketing campaigns, engaging local communities in tourism activities to ensure sustainability, and establishing international partnerships for technical support. The study is of the view that by strategically addressing these challenges and implementing sustainable practices, the Niger Delta can become a pivotal element of Nigeria's soft power diplomacy, enhancing its tourism potential, improving its global image, and supporting broader diplomatic and economic objectives. The abstract should be restructured. It should follow this order.

Keywords: Tourism, Niger Delta, Soft Power, Diplomacy.

Introduction

Tourism has emerged as a powerful tool for economic growth and cultural exchange, which is instrumental in enhancing a country's national image on the global stage. The Niger Delta, a region in southern Nigeria, holds significant potential for tourism development due to its rich cultural heritage, diverse ecosystems, and unique geographical features. This area is renowned for its dense mangrove forests, vast wetlands, and vibrant traditions, which, if properly harnessed, can attract tourists worldwide. The Niger Delta has historically been associated with oil production and environmental challenges, which have overshadowed its tourism potential. Regardless, there is an impending need for the Nigerian government and various stakeholders to diversify the region's economy through tourism, focusing on sustainable development and reducing overreliance on oil production.

Initiatives include promoting eco-tourism, cultural festivals, and heritage sites, all of which can transform the Niger Delta into a major tourist destination. The strategic importance of tourism development in the Niger Delta extends beyond economic benefits. It serves as a platform for soft power diplomacy by enabling Nigeria to project a positive image internationally. Tourists who visit the region can become informal ambassadors, sharing their experiences and perceptions, thus influencing global opinions about Nigeria (Ojabor & Gilbert, 2010). The study focuses on understanding the impact of tourism development in the Niger Delta on Nigeria's soft power diplomacy. It explains how enhancing tourism infrastructure, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable practices can contribute to a positive international image. The analysis includes an examination of the current state of tourism in the Niger Delta, the challenges faced, and the potential benefits of a robust tourism sector. By leveraging its natural and cultural assets through tourism, Nigeria can enhance its soft power, making it an attractive destination for international visitors and *Abraka Turf and Country Club: A Tourist Site in Delta State*



Photo credit: Atenovo.com

investors. This can lead to improved diplomatic relations and a stronger global presence, showcasing Nigeria not just as a hub of oil production but as a country rich in heritage and natural beauty, (Ojabor & Gilbert, 2010).

Conceptual Clarification

Tourism

Tourism can be broadly defined as the activities of individuals travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, or other purposes (World Tourism Organization, 2020). Tourism is “a study of man away from his usual habitat, of the industry which responds to his needs, and of the impacts that both he and the industry have on the host’s socio-cultural, economic, and physical environments” (Jafari, 1981). Tourism as “the temporary, short-term movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live and work and their activities during their stay at these destinations” (Smith, 1988). Tourism involves “the systems of the tourist generating region, the tourist destination region, and the transit route region, with the interactions among these components and the associated industries” (Leiper, 1979).

Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is a region located in the southern part of Nigeria, characterized by a network of rivers, creeks, and estuaries formed by the Niger River. It is one of the world's largest wetland areas and rich in biodiversity, as well as significant oil and gas reserves. Niger Delta is "a densely populated region in Nigeria, rich in oil resources, but plagued by environmental degradation and socio-economic challenges" (Aaron, 2006). Niger Delta as "a complex ecological zone characterized by a vast network of rivers, mangroves, and freshwater swamps, which supports a variety of plant and animal species, as well as human communities with diverse cultures" (Alagoa, 1999). Niger



Cable car at Obudu Cattle Range, a tourist site in cross river

Photo Credit:

<https://www.obudumountainresort.com/>

Delta as "an oil-rich region in Nigeria, marked by significant ecological and environmental challenges due to oil exploration and exploitation, impacting both the natural environment and the livelihoods of the local communities" (Ekpo, 2004).

Soft Power

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. Soft power diplomacy involves leveraging cultural assets, political values, and foreign policies to build a favourable image and foster international relationships. The ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. In the context of Nigeria, the development of tourism in the Niger Delta presents an opportunity to enhance its soft power by showcasing its cultural richness and environmental beauty (Nye, 2004). Wilson elaborates on the concept by stating that "soft power is the capacity to influence others through positive attraction and persuasion to achieve the outcomes one wants" (Wilson, 2008). "The power of a country to obtain its preferred outcomes through the co-option means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction so that the other parties willingly follow or agree" (Fan, 2008).

Diplomacy

Diplomacy can be defined as the practice of conducting negotiations and managing relations between nations. It involves dialogue, negotiation, and other measures short of war or violence to resolve issues, build relationships, and promote national interests. Under Foreign Policy, Diplomacy is a Tool, Under International Relations, Diplomacy is a means, Under Government, Diplomacy is a Machinery. As an Art, Diplomacy is all about dealing with people sensitively and tactfully. Thus, it is the art, science and means by which nations, groups, and individuals conduct their affairs to safeguard their interests and promote their political, economic, cultural or scientific relations while maintaining peaceful relationships (Nwala, 2022). Diplomacy is "the conduct of relations between sovereign states through the medium of officials based at home or abroad, the former being either members of the foreign ministry or specially appointed" (Berridge, 2010). Diplomacy is "the art of restraining power," emphasizing the role of diplomatic practice in managing international relations and conflicts (Kissinger, 1994). Diplomacy is "a process of communication between political entities which seek to resolve conflict or promote cooperation" (Watson, 1983).

Tourism Development

Tourism development is the process of enhancing and expanding the tourism sector in a specific region or country. This involves creating and improving infrastructure, services, and attractions to make a destination more appealing and accessible to tourists. The objective of tourism development is to foster economic growth, provide positive experiences for visitors, and ensure sustainability for the local environment and culture.



l site of the first oil well in Nigeria at Olibiri Bayelsa state.A valuable Site for Tourist Development in Nigera

Credit: phmundial

Key aspects of tourism development include;

- **Infrastructure Development:** Building and upgrading facilities such as airports, roads, hotels, and attractions to accommodate tourists. Ensuring accessibility and convenience for travelers, (Inskeep, 1991).
- **Service Improvement:** Training local staff to provide high-quality services in hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions. Enhancing customer service to improve tourist experiences, (Gunn, 1994).
- **Marketing and Promotion:** Advertising the destination to attract visitors. Highlighting unique cultural, historical, and natural attractions to stand out from other destinations, (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006).
- **Sustainability:** Implementing practices that protect the environment and preserve local culture. Promoting eco-friendly tourism and responsible travel behaviors (Hall, 2008).
- **Economic Impact:** Generating income and employment opportunities for local communities. Boosting local businesses by increasing demand for goods and services, (Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert, & Wanhill, 2017).

Tourism development aims to create a thriving tourism industry that benefits both visitors and the host community while maintaining a balance between growth and sustainability.

Overview of Tourism Development in Nigeria with examples of Tourists Attractions.

Tourism in Nigeria is an emerging industry with significant potential due to its diverse cultural heritage, historical sites, and natural landscapes. The Nigerian government has recognized the importance of tourism as a catalyst for economic growth and has implemented various strategies to develop the sector. The Nigerian government has taken several steps to develop tourism. This include the establishment of the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) to promote and regulate tourism activities. Policies such as the National Tourism Development Master Plan aim to improve infrastructure, enhance security, and create a conducive environment for both domestic and international tourists (NTDC, 2021). Tourism development in the Niger Delta serves as a vital instrument of soft power diplomacy for Nigeria, leveraging its unique ecological, historical, and cultural assets to foster international goodwill, attract global audiences, and promote a positive

image abroad. Historically, the Niger Delta has been a nexus of international interests, particularly during the colonial era. Its extensive waterways, which include the Niger River and creeks around the Atlantic coast, were key channels through which colonial powers, especially the British, exerted influence over the region. By 1849, the significance of the region to British interests led to the establishment of the first British Consulate on Bonny Island, a major trading port and a gateway to the lucrative palm oil trade (Smith, 2019). This event signified the Niger Delta's early role in global commerce and diplomacy, setting the stage for its modern-day strategic importance.

Today, the Niger Delta is not only the center of Nigeria's oil and gas industry but also an emerging ecotourism destination. Despite the challenges associated with environmental degradation due to oil exploration, the region offers remarkable natural attractions, such as the mangrove forests, diverse wildlife, and serene beaches that appeal to international tourists and environmentalists. For instance, the Finima Nature Park, located on Bonny Island, is a 1,000-hectare natural reserve that promotes conservation and eco-friendly tourism activities (Adefolalu, 2021). By preserving and promoting such ecotourism sites, Nigeria can project itself as a responsible nation committed to environmental sustainability, which aligns with global values of conservation and sustainable development. Moreover, ecotourism in the Niger Delta offers Nigeria an opportunity to engage in soft power diplomacy by attracting foreign tourists, researchers, and investors, who, through their experiences, develop favorable perceptions of the country. This engagement enhances Nigeria's cultural



diplomacy, as tourism allows for the showcasing of local traditions, arts, and festivals. An example is the annual Bole Festival, which celebrates the region's rich culinary heritage and attracts visitors from within and outside the country. Such events contribute to soft power by enabling cultural exchange and fostering international understanding and cooperation. The Niger Delta's position as the economic powerhouse of Nigeria's oil and gas sector allows it to serve as a hub for business tourism. The region hosts various international energy conferences and workshops, which not only boost the local economy but also enhance Nigeria's diplomatic ties. The World

Economic Forum on

Heroes Square at Owerri: Another Tourist site in the Niger Delta

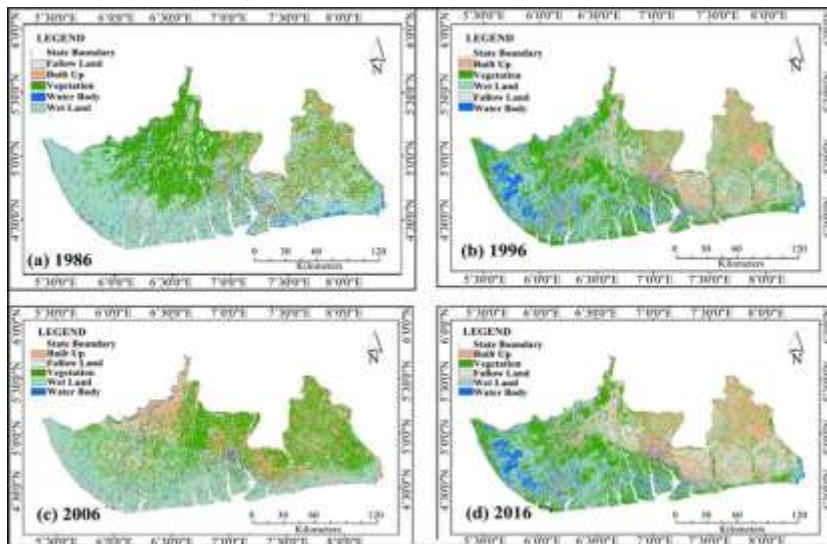
Photo Credit: ijeawele

Africa (WEFA) held in Nigeria in 2014 is a prime example of how the country uses major international events to showcase its capacity as a leader in Africa's economic development, with the Niger Delta at the center of these efforts (Okoye, 2020). The development of tourism in the Niger Delta is a strategic means of soft power diplomacy for Nigeria. By emphasizing both its natural beauty and cultural vibrancy, the country can improve its international image, attract foreign investment, and enhance diplomatic relations through non-coercive means.

Water Bodies that Promote Unique Tourism Potentials in the Niger Delta.

Ecosystem: The term Ecosystem refers to a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment. It encompasses the complex relationships between living organisms, such as plants, animals, and microorganisms, as well as their interactions with non-living components like air, water, and minerals. An ecosystem is characterized by energy flows and nutrient cycles that sustain the organisms within it (Odum, 1971). In the context of tourism development, the ecosystem can be understood as the interconnected natural environment and socio-cultural systems that sustain and influence tourism activities. In the Niger Delta, this ecosystem includes both natural resources (such as rivers, forests, and biodiversity) and the local communities, whose cultural practices and livelihoods are closely tied to these environments (Bramwell & Lane, 2000).

The Ecosystem of the Niger Delta plays a vital role in promoting unique tourism potentials by offering rich biodiversity, lush mangrove forests, waterways, and diverse wildlife that attract eco-tourists and nature enthusiasts.



The region's natural beauty, including its wetlands and rivers, provides opportunities for activities like bird watching, river cruises, and wildlife tours, showcasing the area's distinct environmental attributes (World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF, 2018). Additionally, the cultural ecosystems, such as indigenous festivals and traditions, offer visitors a

*Spatiotemporal changes in ecosystem in the Niger Delta Region
Photo Credit: ResearchGate*

deeper connection to the heritage of the Niger Delta. Tourism impacts the ecosystem by either promoting conservation or, if not managed properly, leading to environmental degradation. By preserving these ecosystems, the region can capitalize on sustainable tourism, which also enhances its soft power on the international stage, (Bramwell & Lane, 2000).

Biodiversity: Biodiversity refers to the diversity of plant and animal species, ecosystems, and genetic material within a particular environment or region. In the context of tourism development, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas like the Niger Delta, biodiversity plays a critical role. It not only supports the ecosystems that tourism depends on but also enhances the attractiveness of the region for eco-tourists. The preservation of biodiversity is therefore essential for sustainable tourism development, as it ensures that natural resources and ecosystems are maintained for future generations, while also promoting Nigeria's image globally through environmental stewardship, (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022). Biodiversity promotes unique tourism potentials in the Niger Delta by offering a rich variety of ecosystems, wildlife, and plant species that attract eco-tourists. The region's mangrove forests, riverine flora, creeks, and diverse fauna provide opportunities for nature-based tourism activities such as wildlife observation, bird watching, and river tours. These activities not only draw tourists but also contribute to environmental conservation efforts by raising awareness of the importance of preserving biodiversity. As eco-tourism grows, it boosts local economies while promoting Nigeria's image as a country committed to sustainable tourism and environmental stewardship, thereby enhancing its soft power diplomacy, (World Tourism Organization, 2018).

Riverine Flora: Riverine flora refers to the plant life that thrives along rivers and streams, characterized by species that are adapted to wet environments, frequent flooding, and nutrient-rich soils. This type of flora includes a variety of aquatic and semi-aquatic plants such as reeds, grasses, shrubs, and trees that play an essential role in maintaining river ecosystems, preventing erosion, and supporting biodiversity. In Niger Delta, Riverine flora is the vegetation found along the banks of rivers and streams, typically consisting of plants that are well-adapted to wet and periodically flooded environments. It plays a vital role in maintaining the health of aquatic ecosystems, providing habitat for wildlife, preventing soil erosion, and supporting local livelihoods. The preservation of these plant species is essential for eco-tourism and sustainable tourism development, as it enhances the region's natural beauty and promotes environmental conservation, contributing to Nigeria's soft power diplomacy by positioning the country as an advocate for environmental sustainability, (Environmental Protection Agency, 2017). Riverine flora promotes unique tourism potentials in the Niger Delta by creating scenic landscapes and supporting a rich diversity of ecosystems that attract eco-tourists. The lush vegetation along Rivers and Creeks provides habitat for various wildlife species, making the region ideal for activities like boat tours, wildlife observation, and nature photography. The preservation of riverine flora also plays a critical role in maintaining the health of waterways, which are essential for the Delta's Eco-tourism infrastructure. This, in turn, enhances the appeal of the region for sustainable tourism, helping to position Nigeria as a leader in environmental conservation and ecotourism, and further strengthening its soft power diplomacy (World Wildlife Fund, 2018).

Fauna Resources: Fauna resources refer to the animal species that inhabit a specific geographic area, including both terrestrial and aquatic animals. In the Niger Delta, fauna resources are diverse, consisting of various species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and aquatic life that contribute to the region's rich biodiversity. These animal resources not only support local ecosystems but also play a key role in tourism development, particularly eco-tourism, which attracts visitors interested in wildlife. By promoting the conservation of these fauna resources, Nigeria can enhance its soft power diplomacy, positioning itself as a country committed to environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation. Fauna resources in the Niger Delta promote unique tourism potentials by offering visitors opportunities to engage in wildlife observation, bird watching, and eco-



safaris, which are key attractions in the region. The Niger Delta is home to a wide range of animal species, including endangered

Showcasing the beautiful mangrove of the niger delta

Photo Credit:

Shutterstock

wildlife, aquatic life, and migratory birds, making it a hotspot for biodiversity tourism. This rich diversity attracts eco-tourists and conservation enthusiasts, helping to raise awareness about the importance of preserving fauna resources while contributing to the local economy. Additionally, promoting these fauna resources as part of eco-

tourism initiatives enhances Nigeria's image globally, strengthening its soft power diplomacy through environmental sustainability efforts (World Tourism Organization, 2020).

Creeks: Creeks are small, narrow, shallow bodies of water that flow into larger rivers, lakes, or the sea, often tidal watercourses that flow through coastal regions, connecting larger bodies of water such as rivers and seas. In the Niger Delta, creeks are a vital part of the ecosystem, providing transportation routes, supporting local

fishing industries, and offering unique opportunities for eco-tourism. The intricate network of creeks in the Delta region plays a crucial role in promoting tourism, allowing visitors to experience the natural beauty and biodiversity of the area. Additionally, the conservation of these creeks highlights Nigeria's commitment to environmental sustainability, enhancing its soft power diplomacy by showcasing the country's rich natural resources. In the Niger Delta, creeks form a complex network of waterways, providing habitat for a variety of



aquatic species and supporting the livelihoods of local communities through fishing and transportation. Creeks also play a crucial role in the region's tourism, offering opportunities for eco-tourism activities such as boat tours and wildlife observation. Creeks in the Niger Delta promote unique tourism potentials by offering serene and scenic waterways that attract eco-tourists interested in exploring the region's natural beauty. The intricate network of creeks provides opportunities for boat tours, kayaking, and fishing expeditions, allowing visitors to experience the rich biodiversity and tranquil environment of the Delta. These waterways also serve as important

habitats for various plant and animal species, making them ideal for wildlife observation and photography. By promoting eco-friendly tourism activities in and around the creeks, the Niger Delta can enhance its appeal as a sustainable tourism destination, contributing to both local economic development and Nigeria's soft power diplomacy through environmental stewardship, (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2015).

Aerial view of the Niger River

Credit: Alamy

Rain Forests: Rainforests in the Niger Delta are dense, tropical ecosystems characterized by high rainfall and a wide variety of plant and animal species. These rainforests are vital for maintaining the region's biodiversity and contribute to its appeal as an eco-tourism destination. Visitors are drawn to the unique flora and fauna, including endangered species, making the Niger Delta a prime location for nature-based tourism. The conservation of these rainforests not only supports sustainable tourism but also enhances Nigeria's international image as a country committed to environmental protection, thereby contributing to its soft power diplomacy. Rainforests in the Niger Delta promote unique tourism potentials by offering eco-tourism experiences that allow visitors to immerse themselves in the region's rich biodiversity. For instance, tourists can explore the Okomu National Park, which is part of the rainforest ecosystem and home to endangered species such as the white-throated monkey and the African forest elephant. These rare species attract nature enthusiasts and wildlife photographers. Additionally, guided tours through the dense rainforests allow visitors to experience the local culture and natural beauty, enhancing the Delta's appeal as an eco-tourism hotspot. The region's rainforests also contribute to adventure tourism, with activities like canopy walks, jungle treks, and bird watching, all of which promote sustainable tourism. By preserving these rainforests, Nigeria not only protects its natural heritage but also strengthens its soft power diplomacy by showcasing its commitment to environmental conservation (World Wildlife Fund, 2016).

Rivers Transportation System: The river transportation system in the Niger Delta plays a vital role in facilitating movement and commerce within the region. This network of rivers and creeks serves as an alternative transportation route for goods and people, particularly in areas where road infrastructure is inadequate. Ferries, boats, and barges are commonly used to transport agricultural products, fuel, and other essential goods, significantly contributing to the local economy. The rivers also provide access to remote communities, enhancing trade and tourism opportunities. Furthermore, the efficient use of river transportation

promotes environmental sustainability by reducing road congestion and minimizing carbon emissions, making it a critical component of Nigeria's overall transportation strategy. The river transportation system in the Niger Delta promotes unique tourism potentials by providing access to various natural attractions, cultural sites, and local communities that would otherwise be difficult to reach due to inadequate road infrastructure. For example, the use of canoes and ferries allows tourists to explore the stunning mangrove forests and wildlife in places like the Okwori River and the Finima Nature Park. These waterways facilitate eco-tours and bird watching, attracting nature enthusiasts. Additionally, river cruises along the Niger Delta's extensive waterways offer scenic views and immersive experiences of the local culture, such as traditional fishing practices and vibrant community festivals. The rivers also serve as transportation routes for visitors attending cultural events, enhancing their engagement with local heritage. By integrating river transportation into tourism, the Niger Delta not only promotes environmental sustainability but also supports local economies and fosters cultural exchange, contributing to Nigeria's soft power diplomacy (World Bank, 2015).

These water bodies not only support local economies through sustainable tourism but also contribute to Nigeria's soft power diplomacy by showcasing the country's commitment to environmental stewardship and cultural heritage preservation. Through the responsible development of these natural and cultural assets, the Niger Delta has the potential to become a leading destination for eco-tourism in West Africa.

Benefits of Tourism Development in Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta, known for its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage, has immense potential for tourism development. Despite being primarily known for its oil resources, tourism can play a significant role in diversifying the region's economy. This overview outlines the key benefits of tourism development in the Niger Delta region. Benefits include;

Job Creation: Tourism can generate numerous employment opportunities in the Niger Delta, ranging from hospitality and tour guiding to transportation and retail. This can significantly reduce the region's high unemployment rates (World Bank, 2020).

Income Generation: Increased tourist activity can lead to higher income levels for residents through direct spending on services such as accommodation, food, and entertainment. This influx of money can enhance the overall economic wellbeing of the communities (Niger Delta Development Commission, 2019).

Infrastructure Development: Investment in tourism often necessitates the development of infrastructure such as roads, airports, and communication networks. These improvements can benefit local communities by enhancing connectivity and accessibility (African Development Bank, 2021).

Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Tourism can lead to the preservation and revitalization of the region's cultural heritage, including festivals, music, dance, and traditional crafts. The interest of tourists in these cultural expressions can encourage local communities to maintain their traditions (UNESCO, 2020).

Community Empowerment: Tourism development can empower local communities by involving them in tourism planning and decision-making processes. This can foster a sense of ownership and pride among residents, leading to more sustainable tourism practices (Tisdell, 2013).

Education and Awareness: Tourism can raise awareness about the importance of conserving natural and cultural resources. Tourists often seek authentic experiences, which can motivate local communities to preserve their environment and heritage (Honey & Gilpin, 2009).

Conservation Efforts: Tourism can provide financial incentives for the conservation of natural areas. Entrance fees to parks and wildlife reserves can be reinvested in conservation projects, protecting biodiversity and natural landscapes (Buckley, 2011).

Sustainable Practices: The development of eco-tourism in the Niger Delta can promote sustainable practices, such as low-impact infrastructure, waste management, and the use of renewable energy sources. These practices can reduce the environmental footprint of tourism activities (Das & Chatterjee, 2015).

Community Displacement: Development projects must ensure that local communities are not displaced or marginalized. Effective planning and community involvement are crucial to maximizing the benefits of tourism while mitigating its negative impacts, (Buckley, 2011).

Economic Growth: Creates jobs and generates revenue for the local economy (Fletcher et al., 2017).

Cultural Exchange: Allows visitors to experience and learn about different cultures, fostering understanding and appreciation (Richards, 2007).

Environmental Conservation: Encourages the protection of natural resources and promotes sustainable practices (Hall, 2008).

Challenges of Tourism Development in Niger Delta.

Over tourism: Excessive numbers of tourists can strain local resources and infrastructure (Goodwin, 2017).

Environmental Impact: Development can lead to habitat destruction and pollution if not managed sustainably (Hall, 2008).

Cultural Displacement: Risk of eroding local traditions and cultures due to the influence of external factors (Richards, 2007).

Security Concerns: Issues related to terrorism, kidnappings, and general insecurity have hindered tourist inflow.

Infrastructure Deficiency: Poor road networks, inadequate transportation facilities, and limited accommodation options in remote areas are significant obstacles.

Lack of Promotion: Insufficient marketing and international promotion have led to underutilization of the country's tourism potential (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021).

Ways in which Tourism Development in the Niger Delta will impact on Soft Power Diplomacy of Nigeria.

Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a country to influence others through cultural appeal, values, and policies rather than coercion or force. Tourism development in the Niger Delta can significantly enhance Nigeria's soft power by showcasing its rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, and commitment to sustainable development.

Cultural Diplomacy

- **Showcasing Cultural Heritage:** The Niger Delta is rich in cultural heritage, including traditional festivals, music, dance, and art. Promoting these through tourism can enhance Nigeria's cultural appeal on the global stage, fostering a positive image and greater international understanding and appreciation of Nigerian culture (UNESCO, 2020).
- **Cultural Exchanges:** Tourism encourages cultural exchanges between locals and international visitors, fostering mutual respect and understanding. These exchanges can lead to stronger cultural ties and a more favorable perception of Nigeria globally (Nye, 2004).

Economic Diplomacy

- **Boosting Economic Image:** Successful tourism development can demonstrate Nigeria's potential for economic diversification and stability beyond its oil industry. Showcasing thriving tourism can attract

foreign investments and partnerships, enhancing Nigeria's economic image internationally (World Bank, 2020).

- **Promoting Trade and Investment:** Tourists exposed to Nigeria's business environment may be more likely to invest in the country or promote Nigerian products and services abroad, thereby strengthening economic ties and diplomatic relations (African Development Bank, 2021).

Environmental Diplomacy

- **Showcasing Conservation Efforts:** Sustainable tourism initiatives in the Niger Delta can highlight Nigeria's commitment to environmental conservation and climate action. This can enhance Nigeria's reputation as a responsible global actor, contributing to international environmental diplomacy (Buckley, 2011).
- **Promoting Eco-Tourism:** Eco-tourism can position Nigeria as a leader in sustainable tourism, appealing to environmentally conscious travellers and countries. This can foster collaborations on environmental projects and policies, boosting Nigeria's influence in international environmental forums (Das & Chatterjee, 2015).

Political Diplomacy

- **Enhancing National Image:** Positive tourist experiences can improve Nigeria's global image, countering negative stereotypes related to security issues and corruption. This improved perception can strengthen Nigeria's diplomatic standing and its ability to influence international opinion (Aghedo, 2015).
- **Peacebuilding and Stability:** Tourism can contribute to regional stability by providing economic opportunities and fostering social cohesion. A stable Niger Delta can enhance Nigeria's image as a peaceful and secure destination, which is crucial for diplomatic relations (NDDC, 2019).

Social Diplomacy

- **Human Connections:** Tourism fosters people-to-people connections, which are a cornerstone of soft power. Personal interactions between tourists and locals can create lasting positive impressions and build informal networks that support diplomatic relations (Honey & Gilpin, 2009).
- **Educational Tourism:** Initiatives such as cultural tours, language courses, and historical site visits can serve as educational tools, promoting greater global awareness of Nigeria's history and culture. This can enhance international goodwill and cultural diplomacy (UNESCO, 2020).

Tourism development in the Niger Delta offers a powerful avenue for enhancing Nigeria's soft power. By showcasing its cultural heritage, promoting sustainable practices, and fostering economic and social ties, Nigeria can improve its global image, attract foreign investments, and strengthen diplomatic relationships. Effective tourism strategies can thus play a crucial role in boosting Nigeria's influence and appeal on the international stage.

Practical Instances of Ways in which Tourism Development in the Niger Delta will impact on Soft Power Diplomacy of Nigeria.

Tourism development in the Niger Delta can serve as a potent tool for enhancing Nigeria's soft power diplomacy. Practical instances of such impacts include cultural festivals, eco-tourism initiatives, community-based tourism, international partnerships, and educational tourism. These activities not only promote Nigeria's rich heritage and commitment to sustainable practices but also foster positive international relationships.

In terms of Culture;

Festivals as Diplomatic Tools: Hosting and promoting cultural festivals such as the Argungu Fishing Festival or the New Yam Festival can attract international tourists and media, showcasing Nigeria's vibrant culture. These events serve as platforms for cultural exchange, enhancing Nigeria's cultural appeal and fostering mutual understanding (Niger Delta Development Commission [NDDC], 2019).

International Cultural Collaborations: Collaboration with international cultural organizations to host joint festivals can enhance diplomatic ties. For example, partnering with UNESCO to recognize and promote

Nigerian festivals can elevate their status and draw global attention, reinforcing Nigeria's cultural diplomacy (UNESCO, 2020).

Eco-Tourism Initiatives

Promoting Conservation Efforts: Developing eco-tourism projects such as the Cross River National Park can highlight Nigeria's commitment to environmental sustainability. These projects attract eco-conscious tourists and NGOs, enhancing Nigeria's reputation as an environmentally responsible nation (Buckley, 2011).

International Eco-Tourism Conferences: Hosting international eco-tourism conferences in the Niger Delta can position Nigeria as a leader in sustainable tourism. Such events can draw global experts, fostering knowledge exchange and international collaboration on environmental issues (Das & Chatterjee, 2015).

Community-Based Tourism

Empowering Local Communities: Community-based tourism projects, like homestays and local guides, can empower local populations and showcase Nigeria's hospitality. These initiatives foster people-to-people connections, creating positive impressions and informal diplomatic ties (Honey & Gilpin, 2009).

Cultural Immersion Programs: Developing programs where tourists can immerse themselves in local cultures, such as participating in traditional crafts or cooking, can enhance cultural diplomacy. These experiences promote cultural appreciation and long-term goodwill towards Nigeria (Tisdell, 2013).

International Partnerships

Global Tourism Campaigns: Partnering with international travel agencies and influencers to promote the Niger Delta can significantly enhance Nigeria's global image. Well-executed marketing campaigns can reach wide audiences, promoting Nigeria as a must-visit destination and fostering international interest and tourism (World Bank, 2020).

Tourism Exchange Programs: Establishing tourism exchange programs with other countries can enhance bilateral relations. These programs enable mutual visits by tourism professionals, fostering an exchange of best practices and strengthening diplomatic ties (African Development Bank, 2021).

Educational Tourism

Historical and Cultural Education: Promoting visits to historical sites and cultural landmarks in the Niger Delta, such as slave trade routes and ancient kingdoms, can educate international visitors about Nigeria's rich history. This educational aspect can foster a deeper appreciation and respect for Nigeria's cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2020).

Study Abroad Programs: Partnering with international universities to develop study abroad programs focused on Nigeria's culture and environment can attract students and academics. These programs promote educational diplomacy, creating long-term cultural ambassadors for Nigeria (Eke, 2020). These initiatives not only promote Nigeria as a desirable destination but also contribute to building a positive and influential international presence.

Conclusion

Tourism in Nigeria is poised for growth, supported by the country's rich cultural heritage and natural attractions. With concerted efforts from the government and private sector, the industry can overcome its challenges and become a major contributor to Nigeria's economy. Tourism development in the Niger Delta offers substantial opportunities to enhance Nigeria's soft power diplomacy. By leveraging the region's rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, and commitment to sustainable practices, Nigeria can significantly improve its global image and influence. It has the potential to address multiple objectives. Economically, it can provide alternative livelihoods for local communities, reducing dependence on oil and fostering sustainable development. Socially, it can promote cultural exchange and understanding, both domestically and internationally. Politically, it can strengthen Nigeria's soft power by highlighting its commitment to environmental conservation and cultural preservation.

Tourism development in the Niger Delta holds significant promise for economic, social, and environmental benefits. With strategic planning and sustainable practices, tourism can become a vital tool for the region's development, enhancing the quality of life for its residents and preserving its rich cultural and natural heritage. Tourism development in this region of Nigeria is a promising avenue for enhancing Nigeria's soft power diplomacy. By focusing on sustainable tourism practices and cultural preservation, Nigeria can project a positive image that resonates globally. This not only boosts the local economy but also reinforces Nigeria's position as a country with diverse attractions and a commitment to sustainable development. Thus, has the potential to significantly boost Nigeria's soft power by promoting cultural heritage, fostering economic growth, supporting environmental sustainability, and enhancing political and social relationships. Effective tourism strategies can transform the Niger Delta into a powerful tool for Nigeria's soft power diplomacy, improving its influence and appeal and the strategic promotion of tourism in the Niger Delta can transform the region into a symbol of Nigeria's cultural and natural wealth, contributing significantly to its soft power on the international stage.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the study gives the following recommendations to enable Nigeria harness the prospects of her soft power diplomacy through tourism development in the Niger Delta Region.

- The Nigerian government should channel efforts to building eco-friendly tourism facilities, improving transportation networks, and upgrading existing infrastructure to meet international standards and further strengthen security through community policing, modern surveillance, and collaboration between local authorities and stakeholders to ensure a safe environment for tourists.
- Involving local communities in tourism planning and activities will ensure ownership and sustainability. Thus relevant stakeholders should employ measures to foster capacity building. This can be achieved by providing targeted training programs in hospitality, tour guiding, and cultural heritage management to empower locals and create jobs.
- There is need to invest in digital marketing campaigns highlighting eco-tourism, cultural festivals, and the region's natural beauty to attract international attention. There should be further collaborations with influencers and tourism ambassadors to reshape global perceptions of the Niger Delta. Collaborating with international organizations and foreign governments for funding, technical expertise, and best practices. These partnerships can be used to develop programs that focus on environmental restoration, eco-tourism, and knowledge transfer to boost the region's global appeal. Thus, using soft power diplomacy to achieve the nation's interest.

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