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**COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM (CBET) AND
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA: A CASE
STUDY OF MOGNORI ECO-VILLAGE ON THE FRINGE
OF MOLE NATIONAL PARK IN GHANA**

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Abstract:

The study explores CBET and sustainable development in Ghana, using Mognori Eco-village as a case study. The study seeks to explore how CBET contributes to livelihood diversification, community empowerment, environmental awareness, and socio-economic development at the local level. This study utilises a qualitative approach by integrating key informant interviews, direct observation and Focus Group Discussions to explore the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental implications of the Mognori Eco-Village CBET initiative. The findings highlight that, while the initiative has created increased economic opportunities, fostered stronger community cohesion, and raised awareness about conservation, several challenges remain, including limited market access, infrastructure deficiencies, and issues related to equitable participation in tourism governance. The study concludes that while Mognori Eco-Village represents a promising CBET model within protected-area contexts, sustained institutional support, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, and inclusive governance frameworks are critical to consolidating development gains. The paper contributes empirical insights to CBET scholarship and offers practical implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to

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enhance the resilience of rural ecotourism initiatives in Ghana and comparable contexts.

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Community-Based Ecotourism; Ecotourism, Livelihood Diversification, Mognori Eco-Village, Mole National Park, Sustainable Development



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Introduction

Community-based ecotourism (CBET) is widely recognised as a sustainable tourism model that prioritises local participation, cultural integrity, and environmental conservation while enhancing community livelihoods. Unlike conventional tourism, CBET places communities at the centre of tourism planning, management, and benefit distribution, thereby aligning tourism development with broader sustainability objectives (Scheyvens, 1999). In sub-Saharan Africa, CBET has been utilised in various ways to improve rural livelihoods, promote conservation outcomes, and address structural inequalities in the distribution of tourism benefits (Eshun & Tichaawa, 2020). In Ghana, CBET initiatives on the fringes of protected areas demonstrate a growing interest in utilising ecotourism to alleviate rural poverty, empower local residents, and promote environmental stewardship (Eshun & Asiedu, 2021; Mohammed & Osumanu, 2023). However, the extent to which community stakeholders influence and benefit from CBE remains inconsistent and varies across locations. This variability often necessitates nuanced, context-specific research to gain a deeper understanding of CBE's implications for sustainable development.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, CBET has increasingly been promoted as a mechanism for rural development, biodiversity conservation, and poverty reduction, particularly in communities located on the fringes of protected areas (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). Initiated within Ghana's collaborative community wildlife management framework, the Mognori Eco-Village serves as a tangible manifestation of CBET, aimed at enhancing livelihood opportunities for a community previously reliant on subsistence agriculture (Kuuder, Bagson & Aalangdong, 2013). This initiative incorporates various livelihood diversification strategies, including cultural performances, tour guiding, home-stay accommodations, and the sale of local crafts. Collectively, these efforts aim to lessen dependence on unsustainable

natural resource exploitation while simultaneously improving household income (Kuuder et al., 2013).

Despite its growing adoption, empirical evidence suggests that CBET outcomes across Ghana remain uneven. While some communities have experienced socio-economic benefits, others continue to face challenges related to weak governance, limited infrastructure, and inequitable benefit-sharing mechanisms (Atanga, 2019; Mohammed & Osumanu, 2023). For instance, at CBET locations in Ghana, such as the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary and Paga Crocodile Ponds, CBET has fostered economic growth and cultural revitalisation. According to Boatbil, Yorose & Yiran (2024), studies at Boabeng-Fiema and other protected areas in Ghana indicate that insufficient community involvement and uneven distribution of benefits can jeopardise sustainability and negatively affect local well-being.

While CBET in Ghana demonstrates significant potential, studies highlight persistent challenges related to equitable distribution of benefits, community involvement, sustainability issues and infrastructure development. The essence of CBET is to balance conservation with livelihood outcomes, but many studies in Ghana prioritise socio-economic aspects while neglecting ecological integrity. This is in sharp contrast to what pertains in South-East Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia who incorporate environmental sustainability metrics in CBET initiatives (Nguyen et al., 2022; Wijaya, 2020). Also, studies have shown that effective CBET depends on governance arrangements, partnerships, and institutional support (Sproule, 1996; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). Yet, in Ghana, few studies investigate the roles of local institutions, NGOs, and government agencies in sustaining CBET. These issues have been observed at other ecotourism locations in Ghana, including the Paga Crocodile Ponds and the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary (Atanga, 2019; Mohammed & Osumanu, 2024). A qualitative analysis of CBET initiatives reveals that genuine community engagement, the incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge, and collaborative partnerships among stakeholders are essential for achieving both ecological conservation and sustainable community development objectives (Nartey et al., 2024). Furthermore, research conducted in Kakum and Bobiri reveals that local communities often experience limited socio-economic benefits in comparison to government entities or external organisations, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced governance frameworks and policy support for CBET (Eshun & Tichaawa, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the current landscape of CBET in Mognori Eco-Village, located on the fringe of Mole National Park, focusing on how CBET contributes to livelihood diversification, community empowerment, environmental awareness, and socio-economic development at the local level. By adopting a qualitative and conceptual approach, the study seeks to generate insights that can inform more equitable, innovative, and sustainable CBET development within Ghana's protected areas.

This conceptual paper is structured as follows: the first section provides an introduction; the second section offers a review of pertinent literature; the third section outlines the research methodology; and the final section presents the discussion and conclusion.

Literature Review

This section provides a review of the literature on key concepts of the topic under study. The review incorporates global, African, and Ghana-specific studies to situate the current study within existing scholarly discourse.

Concept of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is generally defined as responsible travel to natural areas that prioritise environmental conservation, support the well-being of local communities, and include elements of interpretation and education (TIES, 2015). While early literature on ecotourism focused primarily on conservation and low-impact tourism, more recent scholarship has embraced a broader sustainability perspective that connects ecological preservation with socio-economic development and cultural heritage (Buckley, 2019; Weaver, 2020).

Recent systematic and bibliometric reviews reveal that ecotourism has evolved into an interdisciplinary field drawing on environmental science, development studies, sociology, and economics (Narzary & Deb, 2024). Contemporary research emphasises that ecotourism extends beyond nature-based tourism; it serves as a viable development strategy that can create livelihoods, enhance conservation incentives, and promote rural development when managed effectively (Stronza et al., 2019).

In the context of developing countries, ecotourism is increasingly viewed as a means to alleviate poverty and protect biodiversity in regions that are both ecologically rich and economically marginalised (UNWTO, 2023). However, scholars warn that without robust governance and community involvement, ecotourism can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities similar to those seen in mass tourism (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Concept of Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET)

Community-based ecotourism (CBE) is a form of tourism owned, managed, and controlled by local communities, with the primary goal of conserving natural and cultural resources while generating socio-economic benefits for host communities. In contrast to conventional tourism, CBE emphasises local participation, empowerment, and equitable sharing of benefits (Scheyvens, 1999; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Recent studies frame CBE as a grassroots-driven development strategy that combines conservation objectives with livelihood diversification, particularly in rural and peripheral regions (Asiedu, 2023; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2024).

In the African context, CBE has emerged as a vital tool for addressing rural poverty, biodiversity loss, and limited employment opportunities, especially in areas surrounding protected regions (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). In Ghana, initiatives such as Mognori, the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary, and the Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary demonstrate successful CBE models, where communities play pivotal roles in tourism operations (Agyeman et al., 2021).

Sustainable Development and Tourism

Sustainable development is generally defined as development that meets present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). Within the context of tourism studies, sustainable development encompasses three interconnected dimensions: economic viability, social equity, and environmental protection—often referred to as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework (Elkington, 1997).

Contemporary literature on tourism emphasises ecotourism and community-based ecotourism (CBE) as effective means of implementing sustainable development at the local level (UNWTO, 2023). These approaches are closely aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) (UNDP, 2022).

Theoretical Perspective of the Study

Social Exchange Theory (SET) suggests that individuals and groups engage in social interactions when they perceive that the benefits outweigh the costs, leading to net rewards. In the context of CBET, this framework helps to understand how local communities assess the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of CBET activities. The fundamental premise of SET is that residents will support tourism development when they believe that the benefits, such as income, employment, and empowerment, surpass the costs, which can include the disruption of local norms and resource depletion.

SET has been extensively applied in sustainable tourism research, as it effectively frames community attitudes and support for tourism development as rational responses to perceived exchanges between local hosts and tourism stakeholders. Its analytical focus on cost-benefit evaluations provides insight into why some communities embrace ecotourism, while others may resist it. A significant challenge within community-based ecotourism (CBET) is ensuring local acceptance, participation, and long-term commitment. SET addresses this by conceptualising local attitudes as exchange relationships, where residents evaluate both tangible and intangible benefits, such as economic uplift, social recognition, and environmental conservation, against perceived costs, including cultural disruption and uneven benefit distribution.

The sustainable development of CBE aims to achieve economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental protection concurrently. SET naturally aligns with this tripartite sustainability objective as it highlights perceived benefits (employment, improved infrastructure, cultural pride) as drivers of local support and perceived costs (cultural loss, environmental degradation) that may undermine community support.

Mognori Eco-Village represents a community-based ecotourism model that integrates local livelihoods with conservation goals and tourism development. The ecotourism approach in Mognori is characterised by community ownership and active participation, offering activities such as canoe safaris, cultural performances, homestays, guided tours, and the sale of locally crafted items. These interactions naturally foster exchanges among the host community, tourists, and external stakeholders, including park authorities, NGOs, and tour operators. In this context, Social Exchange Theory (SET) serves as an appropriate and contextually relevant

framework for understanding how community members in Mognori perceive, assess, and respond to the development of ecotourism.

Bridging the Gaps in the Study

Although community-based ecotourism (CBET) is conceptually designed to balance livelihood enhancement with environmental conservation, existing empirical studies in Ghana have tended to prioritise socio-economic outcomes, often at the expense of a systematic examination of ecological sustainability. For example, Kuuder et al. (2013) emphasised livelihood improvement and income generation in Mognori Eco-Village but offered limited analysis of biodiversity conservation outcomes. Similarly, Mensah (2017) evaluated the economic and social benefits of CBET in park-fringe communities its ecological implications. In contrast, CBET studies conducted in Southeast Asian contexts, particularly in Vietnam and Indonesia, have increasingly incorporated environmental sustainability indicators, including ecosystem protection, biodiversity conservation, and resource-use practices (Nguyen et al., 2022; Wijaya, 2020). This divergence highlights a critical empirical gap in the Ghanaian literature regarding the extent to which CBET initiatives, particularly around Mole National Park, effectively safeguard ecological integrity alongside economic gains.

This study addresses this gap by examining how community participation in CBET influences environmental protection practices in Mognori Eco-Village. By documenting local perceptions, everyday practices, and underlying motivations, the study provides nuanced insights into how CBET-related incentives shape residents' environmental behaviour. Specifically, the findings indicate that participation in ecotourism activities, such as canoe safaris, guiding services, homestays, and cultural performances, creates tangible livelihood benefits that discourage engagement in environmentally destructive practices, including illegal logging, bush burning, and overfishing.

Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, the study demonstrates that when community members perceive ecotourism benefits as meaningful, fair, and sustained, they are more likely to support conservation initiatives and comply with environmental regulations. This benefit–cost evaluation mechanism reinforces conservation-oriented behaviour and fosters community stewardship of natural resources. By explicitly linking livelihood incentives with conservation outcomes, the study contributes to the development of community-driven conservation strategies that reconcile economic well-being with ecological sustainability in protected-area fringe communities.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a single-case qualitative design, which is well-suited to achieving an in-depth, holistic understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). The research aims to explore how community-based ecotourism (CBET) contributes to livelihood diversification, community empowerment, environmental awareness, and socio-economic development in Mognori Eco-Village. Mognori was purposively selected as the case study site due to its proximity to Mole National Park and its long-standing and active engagement in community-based ecotourism initiatives.

A single-case study design was deemed appropriate because the study focuses on a specific and bounded research setting, allowing for a nuanced, context-specific examination of CBET processes and outcomes as experienced by local stakeholders (Yin, 2018). This approach enables the researcher to capture the complex interactions between community participation, tourism development, and conservation practices within the village context.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, particularly effective for eliciting participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of social phenomena (Saldaña, 2011). The development of the interview and discussion questions was informed by relevant literature and closely aligned with the study's research objectives. All interview and focus group sessions were digitally recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The study ensured methodological rigour through data source and method triangulation. It engaged community leaders, residents, and park officials to triangulate data sources, and employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation to triangulate methods. This approach captured diverse perspectives on community-based ecotourism and sustainable development in Mognori Eco-Village. Data credibility was enhanced through member checking, where preliminary interpretations were reviewed with participants from each stakeholder group. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software, to systematically identify recurring patterns and themes related to CBET impacts and challenges.

Discussions

The findings from the Mognori Eco-Village case study reinforce the growing scholarly consensus that CBET constitutes a viable pathway for advancing sustainable development in rural and fringe communities of protected areas in Ghana. For instance, the study revealed that in Mognori Eco-Village, CBET has enabled households to combine farming with tourism-based micro-enterprises. These enterprises encompass a variety of activities, including village and nature guiding, canoeing and river excursions, homestay hosting, catering services, cultural performances, handicraft production, and the small-scale trading of local goods. This diversification of livelihoods has significantly reduced reliance on rain-fed agriculture, particularly generating income opportunities during the dry season when agricultural activities typically decline. From an empowerment perspective, CBET has significantly enhanced local governance over economic activities. The operational frameworks of tourism enterprises are structured and overseen by a management committee composed of local stakeholders. This committee is responsible for the organisation and regulation of guiding and hosting services, management of visitor interactions, and oversight of revenue allocation. Similarly, the study revealed that CBET has fostered human capital development through practical, job-oriented training initiatives. These programmes encompass a range of skills, including guiding techniques, visitor management, hygiene practices, food preparation, basic financial record-keeping, and customer service competencies.

Furthermore, the study revealed that CBET has significantly enhanced both environmental and institutional empowerment. Residents engaged in guiding and visitor interpretation have acquired practical conservation knowledge, which in turn enables them to actively participate in wildlife protection initiatives and visitor regulation. Consequently, community members increasingly identify themselves as collaborators in the management of protected areas,

eschewing the role of passive recipients of conservation directives. This shift in perception has led to improved collaboration with park authorities and reduced tensions over resource utilisation. Finally, CBET has broadened residents' market access and strengthened institutional linkages. Through regular interactions with tour operators, conservation agencies, and development partners, local service providers have gained exposure to broader tourism networks, enhanced service standards, and new marketing opportunities. This linkage effect facilitates the distribution of local products and services to both domestic and international visitors, thereby enhancing the sustainability and viability of community-based enterprises.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case of Mognori Eco-Village underscores the significant potential of CBET to contribute to sustainable rural development in Ghana, particularly through meaningful community engagement, empowerment, and locally grounded management practices, supported by a conducive policy and institutional environment. For instance, there is a need to align policies to better integrate Mognori's CBET operations with national tourism, decentralisation, and protected-area governance. Clear connections between district development plans, tourism policies, and community wildlife management strategies can reduce regulatory overlaps, strengthen community institutions, and improve coordination among the key stakeholders. Also, targeted financial support is crucial to address the structural challenges facing the CBET initiative. Funding should prioritise (i) small-scale eco-infrastructure development (like canoe landing facilities and waste management systems), (ii) improvements in digital and market access, and (iii) seed funding for community-owned tourism micro-enterprises, such as homestays and craft cooperatives. Continuous capacity building is also crucial for transforming community participation into effective governance. Training in tourism business management, financial accountability, marketing, digital promotion, visitor experience design, conflict resolution, and basic environmental monitoring is essential. Improving these skills enhances the performance of CBET enterprises and strengthens the community's ability to manage tourism and protect local environmental resources. The long-term viability of CBET in Mognori relies not just on tourism demand but more importantly on strong multi-level governance systems. These systems should link community institutions, district assemblies, park management, and development partners to enhance accountability, ensure coordinated planning, and protect ecological integrity and social equity as tourism grows (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; UNWTO, 2023).

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