

Assessment of Trend of Tourists flow to Gashaka-Gumti National Park, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the trend of tourist influx into Gashaka-Gumti National Park. The study relied on the secondary data of the park on the rate of tourists influx into the park. The results show that the influx of tourists to Gashaka-Gumti National Park has shown consistent growth from 1993, when only 485 visitors came to the park to 2,456 in 2023. Though there was a decline in the influx of tourists in 2019 and 2020 due to the onset of COVID 19 pandemic, the influx rate was regained with total number of 1,207 tourists in 2021, and continues to rise up to 2,456 in 2023. The study recommended among others, the need for the park management to regularly conduct satisfaction surveys to assess tourists' satisfaction levels with the park's facilities, services, and overall experiences as this will serve as a feedback mechanism to the management.

Keywords: Tourists Influx, National Park, Eco-tourism, Tourist Attraction, Wildlife Conservation and Tourist Patronage

Introduction

Tourism has increasingly become an important sector in many economies worldwide, contributing to revenue generation, employment, and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage ((United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020). In particular, eco-tourism and wildlife tourism have been growing sectors, driven by a growing global awareness of environmental conservation and the need to protect biodiversity (Hamza et al., 2021). Nigeria, as a country with a rich history and diverse landscapes, offers significant potential for eco-tourism and wildlife tourism. Among its natural attractions is Gashaka Gumti National Park, located in the eastern part of the country in Taraba State.

Tourism is a major driver of economic growth globally, with potentials to generate revenue, create jobs, and promote conservation efforts (Klein, 2018). In Nigeria, however, the tourism sector remains underdeveloped, particularly in eco-tourism and wildlife tourism (Okeke, 2020). There is a growing recognition of the need to harness the potential of national parks like Gashaka Gumti as engines of sustainable development (Jumia Travel, 2019). For this to happen, however, a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing tourist visitation to the park is needed, especially in light of the challenges that these parks face.

Gashaka Gumti National Park, Nigeria's largest national park, is located in the eastern part of the country, straddling both Taraba and Adamawa states. Established in 1991, the park spans an area of over 6,000 square kilometers and is renowned for its rich biodiversity, unique ecosystems, and scenic landscapes. The park is home to a variety of wildlife, including endangered species such as chimpanzees, African elephants, lions, and over 500 species of birds (Okeke, 2020). It also boasts diverse habitats, including mountains, savannahs, rivers, and forests, making it a significant ecological area for conservation (Ayeni, 2018).

Despite its natural beauty and biodiversity, Gashaka Gumti National Park has not been able to attract a significant number of tourists. This underutilization is in stark contrast to other successful national parks in Africa, such as Kenya's Maasai Mara or Tanzania's Serengeti, which have become renowned eco-tourism destinations (World Bank, 2022). In Nigeria, while there has been an increasing interest in nature-based tourism, many of the country's parks, including Gashaka Gumti, have faced numerous challenges that limit their tourism potential (Parks & Wildlife, 2023).

The challenges include poor infrastructure, limited accessibility due to the park's remote location, inadequate marketing and promotion, security concerns, and lack of effective management strategies (Adedayo & Olatunde, 2019). Additionally, local communities surrounding the park often do not fully benefit from tourism, which reduces local support for park conservation efforts and can lead to conflicts between park authorities and residents (Afolabi, 2022). This study seeks to assess the influx of tourist into Gashaka Gumti National Park from 1993 to 2023 (30 years).

Description of the Study Area

The Gashaka-Gumti National Park is located between latitudes 7° 56' and 7° 59' N and longitudes 11° 48' and 11° 54' E. The park's total area is approximately 6,731 km². The park is located in the states of Adamawa and Taraba (Fig. 1). The park's Gumti section is located in Adamawa State, while the Gashaka area is located in Taraba State (Danjuma, 2023). The name of the park was inspired by two (2) of the region's oldest and most historic settlements: Gashaka village in Taraba State and Gumti village in Adamawa State. The Park is bounded to the north by Tongo Local Government, to the east by the Republic of Cameroon, to the west by Bali Local Government/Gashaka Local Government and to the south by Sardauna Local Government. The Federal Government of Nigeria established the Gashaka-Gumti National Park in 1991 by merging the Gashaka Game Reserve with the Gumti Game Reserve. The park, like any other park in Nigeria, was established as a protected area for the purpose of nature conservation, recreation, ecotourism, scientific and medical research and to promote art, craft and cultural value of the indigenous people surrounding the park (Mubi, 2010)

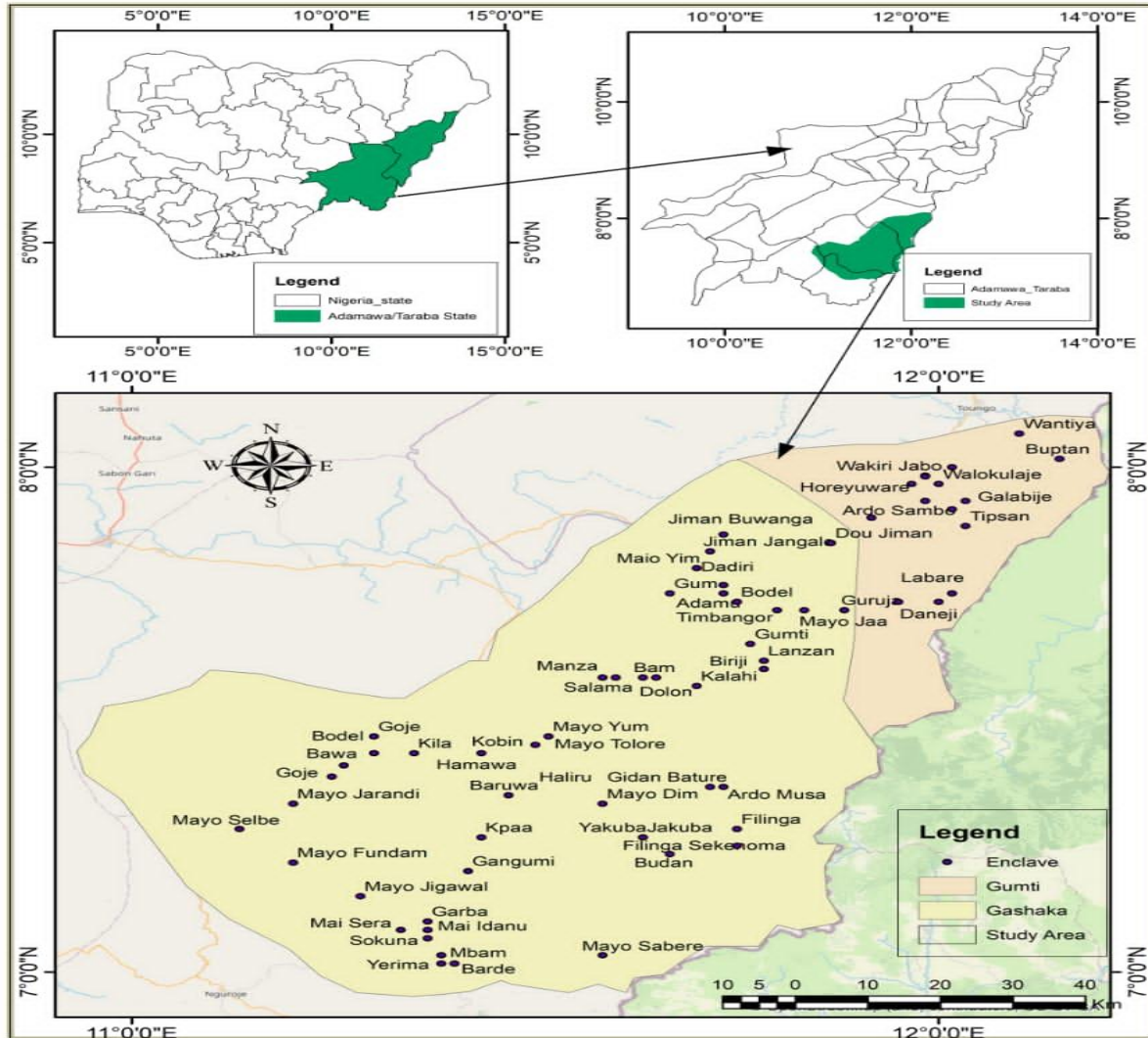


Figure 1. Gashaka Gumti National Park, the Study Area
Source: Danjuma (2023)

The climate of Gashaka-Gumti National Park is marked by rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season usually starts in March/April and lasts till October/November, while the dry season begins in October/November to March/April of every year. The park has temperature range of 18°C (64°F) to 36°C (96°F) and an annual rainfall of about 1,500mm with a single rainfall maximum in September (Danjuma, 2023). The dry season experienced in the study area begins in November and lasts till March. It is characterized by northeasterly or the harmattan wind from Sahara Desert. The average temperature of Gashaka-Gumti National Park is 29°C while the humidity level of the area is at an average of 38 percent (Mubi, 2010).

The Northern, Gumti sector of the park is relatively flat, whilst the Southern, Gashaka sector is more mountainous. This rugged terrain is characterized by steep, thickly forested slopes, deep plunging valleys, precipitous escarpments and swiftly flowing rivers. Altitude ranges from 450 metres above sea level in the plains of the Northern sector, to the peaks and pinnacles of Mount

Gangirwal (Mountain of Death) in the Southern Park sector, which at a staggering 2,400 metres above sea level, represents Nigeria's highest mountain (Mubi, 2010; Dunn, 2001).

There is a good drainage system in Gashaka-Gumti National Park as seen in Danjuma (2023). The park is transversed by rivers such as Mayo Kam, Mayo Yim, Mayo Kpa, Mayo Gamgam, Mayo Beriji and Mayo Burtali which serve as a home to some aquatic animals and a good source of water to the surrounding settlements (Oruonye *et al*, 2017).

According to Mubi (2010), Gashaka-Gumti is composed of sedimentary rock. The sedimentary rocks in the region are known to be mineralized with lead (pb) and zinc (zn). The pre-Cambrian Basin also is considered the "oldest, crystalline, solid foundation in the country" and contains the igneous and metamorphic rock. The sedimentary rock is found in the basins that separate the basement complex landmass. The sedimentary rock, which is the main rock type in the area, leads to erosion and weathering of landforms within the park. The mountainous region of Gashaka-Gumti National Park provides an optimal landform for the local watershed.

The Gumti sector has very fertile soil which supports various agricultural activities of the enclave settlements within and around the park. Humic ferrisol and lithosols are mostly found in the higher altitudes, and ferruginous tropical soils at the lower elevations, with alluvial soils in river valleys (Danjuma, 2023).

Materials and Methods

The data used for this study were the records of tourists' visits to Gashaka-Gumti National Park. The data were therefore obtained from the park's head office in Serti, Gashaka Local Government Area of Taraba State. To gather data on visitors' statistics and profiles, an official letter was written to the park management requesting for such information to be made available for the study. The data were therefore collected through a formal written request to the park management in Serti, Gashaka-Gumti Local Government Area. All the data collected were carefully sorted out and their results were analysed contextually.

Results of the Findings

The result of the findings the field is presented in Table 1 and figure 1 below:

Table 1: Trend of Influx of tourists to Gashaka-Gumti National Park

Year	Number of Tourists	Remarks
1993	485	Initial years post-establishment, minimal awareness.
1994	523	Gradual increase in awareness.
1995	602	Early eco-tourism promotion begins.
1996	647	Local tourism events and promotions.
1997	715	Growing interest in biodiversity.
1998	763	Increased domestic tourism interest.
1999	820	Better accessibility draws more tourists.
2000	872	Increased local interest in eco-tourism.
2001	920	International interest begins to rise.
2002	983	Collaboration with tour operators increases visibility.
2003	1,035	Promotion of the park as a conservation hub.
2004	1,071	International recognition grows.
2005	1,113	Increased park infrastructure improvements.
2006	1,198	Improved park facilities attract more visitors.
2007	1,251	More international tourists due to media coverage.
2008	1,330	Strong marketing campaigns help increase visits.
2009	1,422	Increased eco-tourism activities.
2010	1,503	Strong domestic tourism and increased security.
2011	1,589	More international tourists, boosted by wildlife programs.
2012	1,636	Better tourism infrastructure attracts higher visits.
2013	1,702	Growing focus on sustainable tourism.
2014	1,821	Steady increase in foreign tourists.
2015	1,933	New tourism campaigns and events attract more tourists.
2016	2,006	Increase in international tourists.
2017	2,092	Enhanced marketing and promotion efforts.
2018	2,184	Continued development of eco-tourism facilities.
2019	2,276	Collaboration with international conservation bodies.
2020	1,133	Significant drop due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2021	1,207	Gradual recovery as COVID-19 restrictions ease.
2022	2,019	Post-pandemic recovery begins, with strong local tourism.
2023	2,456	Full recovery, with increased international visitors.

Source: Gashaka-Gumti National Park (2025)

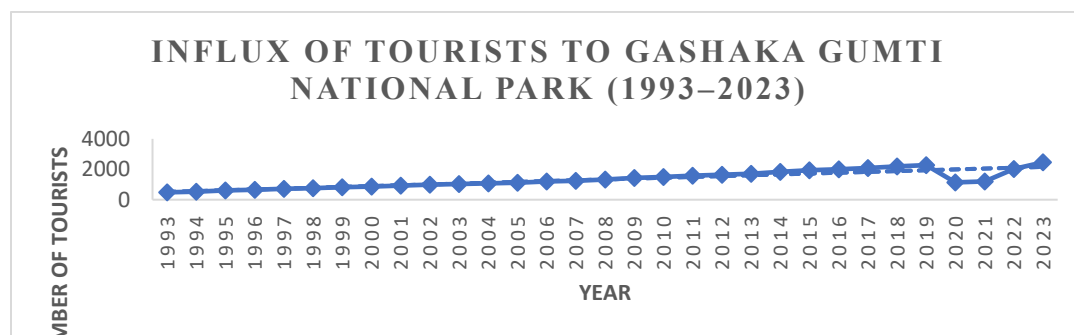


Figure 1: Trend of Influx of Tourists to Gashaka-Gumti National Park

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

The influx of tourists to Gashaka-Gumti National Park has shown consistent growth from 1993, when only 485 visitors came to the park. In the early years, awareness was minimal, and visitation was low. However, by 1994, the park saw a gradual increase in awareness, which continued through the years. In 1995, early efforts to promote eco-tourism began, and by 1996, local tourism

events and promotions sparked further interest. The number of tourists continued to rise each year, with 647 visitors in 1996 and 715 in 1997, driven by growing interest in the park's biodiversity. Also, by 1999, the park became more accessible, which drew in even more visitors, reaching 820 tourists. As interest in eco-tourism grew, the park saw a steady rise, surpassing 1,000 visitors by 2003, reaching 1,035 that year, and growing to 1,113 in 2005, due in part to increased infrastructure and improvements in general services of the park.

The period from 2006 to 2019 marked a period of continued development and international recognition. In 2006, the number of tourists rose to 1,198, and by 2008, strong marketing campaigns helped the park attract 1,330 visitors. Eco-tourism activities and improved facilities played a significant role in this growth. Furthermore, by 2010, tourist numbers had surpassed 1,500, reaching 1,503 that year. This growth continued through the 2010s, with the number of tourists reaching 1,933 in 2015 and 2,006 in 2016, driven by international tourist interest and further improvements in park facilities. Moreover, by 2019, the park reached its highest visitor numbers yet, with 2,276 tourists. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant drop in visitation, with only 1,133 visitors in 2020. As the world recovered from the pandemic, the park's tourism numbers began to rise again, reaching 1,207 in 2021 and 2,019 in 2022, signaling a strong post-pandemic recovery. Also, by 2023, the park had fully recovered, with 2,456 visitors, including a significant increase in international tourists. This data reflects Gashaka-Gumti National Park's resilience and growth, turning it into a prominent eco-tourism destination despite challenges.

Discussion of Findings

The data on tourists' influx reveal a positive trajectory in the park's popularity. From a modest 485 visitors in 1993, the park saw substantial growth in the following decades, reaching 2,276 visitors in 2019. This upward trend is particularly notable after the mid-1990s when eco-tourism initiatives, including infrastructural development and promotional efforts, gained traction. This is consistent with the study of Mohammed *et al* (2022) which found that biodiversity and scenic landscapes are primary drivers of eco-tourism. This result also concurs with the work of Owusu and Asare (2022) whose results revealed a significant increase in tourist arrivals due to eco-tourism initiatives, which had also led to economic benefits for local communities. In 2020 however, the COVID-19 pandemic marked a sharp decline in visitation, with the number of tourists dropping significantly to 1,133. This was partly due to restriction in movement imposed by different governments of the world. The data further revealed that GGNP has experienced a robust post-pandemic recovery, with visitation numbers rebounding to 2,456 in 2023, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. This was due to restoration of free movement all over the world. The recovery speaks to the resilience of eco-tourism destinations and the enduring appeal of natural spaces despite global disruptions. This fast recovery may be due to high satisfaction levels among tourists visiting the area. This is in agreement with the study of Wilson and Taylor (2022) whose results showed high satisfaction levels among tourists participating in nature-based activities like snorkeling and diving. The growth of GGNP in the post-pandemic era aligns with broader trends observed globally, where nature-based tourism has gained increasing popularity as a safe and healthy way to travel (Ismail *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

The study found that Gashaka-Gumti National Park has experienced consistent growth in tourist numbers despite several challenges, including poor infrastructure and security concerns. The park has been successful in creating awareness and attracting visitors through its unique wildlife, natural

beauty, and opportunities for adventure activities. The data confirm that GGNP has attracted both local and international attention, particularly in recent years due to improvements in infrastructure and marketing.

Tourists are mainly motivated by the park's biodiversity and the chance to engage in eco-tourism activities such as trekking, bird watching, and camping. Additionally, the park's reputation as a conservation area has been a key pull factor. This suggests that the park's conservation efforts are recognized and appreciated by tourists, both domestically and internationally.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to enhance patronage of Gashaka Gumti National Park, Nigeria by tourists:

- i. The park management should establish a more robust system for monitoring and recording tourist data to assess the influx of visitors over time.
- ii. The park should conduct detailed surveys to identify the key pull factors that influence tourists' preference for choosing the park, and work towards their improvement.
- iii. The park should regularly conduct satisfaction surveys to assess tourists' satisfaction levels with the park's facilities, services, and overall experience.
- iv. The park should regularly assess and address challenges hindering tourist patronage, such as infrastructure, accessibility, and security concerns.

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