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Research article

MARKETING STRATEGIES IN CROSS RIVER NATIONAL PARK, NIGERIA: PERSPECTIVES OF PARK PERSONNEL

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the marketing strategies employed by Cross River National Park, Nigeria, from the perspectives of park personnel. The study was grounded in Social Marketing Theory, which explains how communication strategies can be used to promote public awareness and encourage positive behavioural change. A qualitative case study design was adopted, and data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews using an interview guide with fifteen (15) purposively selected staff members from the park's Ecotourism Department. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes. The findings revealed that the park relies predominantly on traditional marketing approaches, including the distribution of brochures, face-to-face interactions with visitors and stakeholders, and participation in cultural events such as the Calabar Carnival. Although the park maintains an official website, participants reported that digital marketing remains limited, with minimal use of social media and other online platforms. Inadequate funding, weak technological infrastructure, and limited staff capacity constrain the implementation of more effective digital marketing initiatives. The study concludes that the park's current marketing efforts are largely traditional, while digital marketing remains underutilised. It recommends strengthening digital marketing capacity through improved funding, technological infrastructure, staff training, and greater integration of digital platforms with existing promotional approaches to broaden the park's marketing reach.

KEYWORDS

Social Marketing Theory, ecotourism marketing, protected area management, digital marketing, and traditional marketing.

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Introduction

Over the last three decades, protected areas have increasingly embraced ecotourism because of its contribution to sustainable development worldwide. Marketing plays an important role in communicating the attractions of protected areas, promoting conservation messages, and encouraging responsible visitation (Okocha et al., 2021). Consequently, understanding the marketing strategies adopted by protected area managers is essential for informing tourism planning and destination promotion, particularly in developing countries where tourism can contribute to local economic development and conservation objectives.

The growing use of digital technologies has transformed tourism marketing, especially in developed countries. However, the adoption of digital marketing in many developing countries continues to face challenges arising from financial constraints, inadequate technical expertise, weak policy implementation, and poor planning. Traditional marketing tools such as brochures and print advertisements are increasingly being integrated with digital approaches, including social media marketing, search engine optimisation, content marketing, and online destination branding. Contemporary tourists rely heavily on online platforms when searching for travel information and making destination choices (Wang et al., 2022; Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021). Consequently, tourism organisations are increasingly expected to combine traditional and digital marketing approaches to improve the visibility of their destinations.

Nigeria possesses considerable tourism potential because of its rich natural and cultural resources. In response, the federal government and several state governments have developed tourism master plans to stimulate the growth and sustainability of the tourism sector. Despite these initiatives, however, the industry remains underdeveloped compared with many emerging tourism destinations (Adeola & Ezenwofor, 2020; Asuquo, 2025). This situation underscores the need to understand how tourism destinations are currently marketed and the institutional factors influencing marketing practice.

Cross River National Park is one of Nigeria's most biodiverse protected areas, containing extensive tropical rainforest ecosystems and exceptional ecotourism resources. Marketing is important for communicating the park's conservation and tourism values to potential visitors and other stakeholders while supporting its mandate of biodiversity conservation (Le Corre et al., 2024; Comfort et al., 2026). Since park personnel are directly involved

in planning and implementing promotional activities, their perspectives provide valuable insights into existing marketing practices, institutional capacities, and operational constraints. In addition, stakeholder perspectives are recognised as important in tourism planning and management because they influence decision-making and collaborative governance in protected areas (Imanyi, 2026).

Statement of the problem

Existing studies on marketing in protected areas have primarily examined individual strategies such as branding, digital marketing, public relations, sales promotion, advertising, and destination promotion (Odigbo et al., 2016; Anwuri & Odor, 2022). However, relatively few studies have explored how park personnel perceive the marketing strategies employed within Nigeria's national parks, particularly Cross River National Park. Consequently, there is limited understanding of the mix of traditional and digital marketing approaches currently used and the institutional challenges influencing their implementation from the perspective of those responsible for managing these activities.

Aim and objectives of the study

Against this background, the present study examines the marketing strategies employed by Cross River National Park from the perspectives of park personnel. Specifically, it explores the traditional and digital marketing approaches currently used, identifies the challenges affecting their implementation, and documents participants' views on opportunities for strengthening the park's marketing practices. The findings are expected to contribute to knowledge on tourism marketing in protected areas and provide practical recommendations for improving marketing practice in Cross River National Park and similar protected areas in Nigeria.

Literature review

National Parks and Ecotourism

National parks are recognised as important settings for ecotourism because they conserve biodiversity while providing opportunities for nature-based recreation, research, and environmental education. Buckley (2020) describes protected areas as major ecotourism destinations because of their ecological value and scenic landscapes. Likewise, Eagles et al. (2002) argue that national parks serve both conservation and visitor functions by protecting natural resources while supporting tourism and public education. In Nigeria, Anwuri and Odor (2022) note that national parks contribute to biodiversity conservation, environmental education, tourism, and livelihood opportunities for neighbouring communities.

Although tourism can support conservation through public awareness and revenue generation, increasing visitor use also requires careful planning to protect fragile ecosystems. This places greater emphasis on management practices, including communication and marketing, that reflect the conservation mandate of protected areas.

Concept of Marketing Strategy

Marketing strategy refers to the long-term approach adopted by an organisation to achieve its objectives through the effective use of available resources. The American Marketing Association (2017) defines marketing as the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers, while Porter (1996) views strategy as a means of achieving competitive advantage. Kotler et al. (2017) explain that marketing strategy involves identifying target audiences and coordinating promotional activities to achieve organisational goals.

Within protected areas, marketing strategy differs from commercial marketing because it also communicates conservation values and encourages responsible visitor behaviour. As a result, marketing decisions are influenced not only by visitor needs but also by environmental responsibilities and institutional priorities.

Tourism Marketing in Protected Areas

Tourism marketing in protected areas focuses on communicating destination values while supporting conservation objectives. Kotler et al. (2017) identify destination branding, promotion, and stakeholder engagement as important elements of tourism marketing. Recent developments in digital communication have expanded the ways destinations interact with potential visitors, yet the adoption of these approaches varies considerably across countries.

Studies from Africa indicate that marketing activities within protected areas are often shaped by institutional capacity and financial resources rather than promotional ambition alone. Lindsey et al. (2021) observed that many protected areas on the continent receive limited marketing support, restricting their ability to reach wider audiences. Similar conditions have been reported in Nigeria, where tourism organisations frequently operate with inadequate marketing resources and weak institutional coordination (Okocha et al., 2021). These findings suggest that marketing practices in protected areas are closely linked to organisational capacity.

Digital Marketing in Tourism

Digital marketing has become an important communication tool in tourism because it enables destinations to reach potential visitors through websites, social media, and other online platforms. Bala and Verma (2018) argue that digital technologies improve communication between destinations and visitors by providing timely and accessible information. Buhalis et al. (2023), however, note that many developing countries continue to experience challenges associated with inadequate funding, poor technological infrastructure, and limited digital expertise.

Evidence from Nigeria reflects similar concerns. Odigbo et al. (2016) found that internet-based tourism marketing remains underutilised despite its potential to strengthen destination communication. Imanyi (2026) also highlighted the importance of institutional capacity, infrastructure, conservation education, and effective governance in the management of Cross River National Park. These observations indicate that the adoption of digital marketing depends not only on technology but also on organisational support and available resources.

Empirical Review

Research on tourism marketing has increasingly examined how protected areas communicate with visitors and stakeholders. Melnychenko et al. (2021) found that destination positioning and consistent communication strengthen the public image of protected areas. Le Corre et al. (2024) similarly showed that visitor segmentation assists managers in tailoring communication to different audience groups. These studies demonstrate that marketing involves understanding audiences as well as selecting appropriate communication approaches.

Evidence from Africa points to a different challenge. Lindsey et al. (2021) reported that protected areas often struggle to implement marketing initiatives because of financial and institutional limitations. This suggests that the availability of marketing tools alone does not determine how promotional activities are implemented.

Studies conducted in Nigeria also emphasise institutional constraints. Okocha et al. (2021) observed that many tourism destinations rely on limited promotional resources, while Odigbo et al. (2016) reported low utilisation of internet-based marketing despite increasing digital opportunities. Asuquo (2025) further demonstrated that public relations influence public perceptions of tourism destinations in Cross River State, highlighting the continuing importance of communication in destination management.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into branding, digital marketing, public relations, and visitor communication, they pay less attention to the experiences of those responsible for implementing marketing activities within protected areas. Few studies have examined marketing strategies from the perspectives of park personnel in Nigerian national parks, particularly Cross River National Park. This gap limits understanding of current marketing practices and the organisational factors that shape their implementation. The present study addresses this gap by exploring the perspectives of park personnel on the marketing strategies employed by Cross River National Park.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Marketing Theory, developed by Kotler and Zaltman (1971), which explains how marketing principles can be applied to encourage socially desirable attitudes and behaviours. Andreasen (1994) later emphasised voluntary behaviour change, while Hastings and Saren (2003) described social marketing as the application of commercial marketing principles to social issues. Kotler and Lee (2011) further argued that the theory supports communication strategies that promote individual and community well-being. French and Gordon (2015) added that successful social marketing requires audience segmentation and evidence-based communication.

The theory is relevant to protected area management because it explains how communication can promote conservation awareness and encourage stakeholder participation (Kotler & Lee, 2011). Although it gives limited attention to structural constraints such as funding, infrastructure, and institutional capacity, it provides a suitable framework for examining the marketing strategies employed by Cross River National Park from the perspectives of park personnel.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine the marketing strategies employed in Cross River National Park (CRNP), Nigeria, and their implications for ecotourism promotion. A case study approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and allows the exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions and institutional practices (Yin, 2018).

Study Area

The study was conducted in Cross River National Park (CRNP), located in Cross River State, south-eastern Nigeria. The park lies approximately between latitudes 5°05' and 6°29' N and longitudes 8°15' and 9°30' E,

covering an estimated 4,000 km² of tropical rainforest. Cross River National Park comprises two geographically separated divisions: the Oban Division in the southern part of the state and the Okwangwo Division in the northern part, adjacent to the Cameroon border. The two divisions are separated by the Cross River Valley but together form one of the largest remaining blocks of lowland and montane rainforest in Nigeria (Oates et al., 2004; National Park Service, 2020). Figure 1 presents the map of Cross River State showing the location of the two divisions of Cross River National Park, namely the Oban and Okwangwo Divisions. The map provides an overview of the spatial distribution of the park within the state and illustrates the geographical separation between the two divisions. Figure 2 shows the Okwangwo Division, highlighting its boundaries, surrounding communities and major physical features relevant to the study. Figure 3 presents the Oban Division, showing its location, boundaries, access routes and other geographical features that support ecotourism activities. These maps provide the geographical context for understanding the study area and the locations where the research was conducted.

Cross River National Park is recognised as one of Africa's biodiversity hotspots because of its rich flora and fauna. The park harbours numerous endemic and endangered species, including the Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*), Nigeria–Cameroon chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*), drill monkey (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*) and forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), among many other mammals, birds, reptiles and plant species (Oates et al., 2004). Its diverse ecosystems, scenic landscapes, waterfalls, forest trails and cultural attractions make it one of Nigeria's most important ecotourism destinations.

Cross River National Park was selected for this study because of its ecological significance, rich ecotourism resources and strategic role in biodiversity conservation in Nigeria. The park has also been the focus of various conservation and tourism development initiatives, making it an appropriate setting for examining the marketing strategies employed in promoting ecotourism.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Fifteen (15) participants were purposively selected from the Ecotourism Department of Cross River National Park because of their direct involvement in tourism promotion, visitor management and ecotourism development. The participants occupied different positions within the department and possessed varying years of professional experience, enabling them to provide rich insights into the park's marketing strategies and promotional activities. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because it facilitated the selection of information-rich participants with extensive knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The Ecotourism Department was selected because it has primary responsibility for tourism promotion, visitor services and destination marketing within the park, making its personnel the most appropriate informants for this study.

Data collection continued until no substantially new information or themes emerged from successive interviews, indicating that data saturation had been achieved (Guest et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Primary data were collected between January and March 2026 through semi-structured interviews with the use of an interview guide to explore participants' perspectives on the marketing strategies employed by Cross River National Park, stakeholder engagement, marketing challenges, and opportunities for strengthening ecotourism promotion.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the fifteen purposively selected participants at their respective workplaces within the park. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. With participants' informed consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with detailed field notes to capture contextual information and non-verbal cues that enhanced data interpretation.

Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final report. Codes and themes were developed inductively from participants' responses, while findings from interviews and field observations were compared to enhance analytical depth through methodological triangulation.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced through several strategies consistent with qualitative research. Credibility was achieved by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants who possessed direct knowledge of tourism promotion and marketing activities within Cross River National Park. During the interviews, participants were asked follow-up and probing questions where necessary to clarify meanings and ensure the accuracy of their responses. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the study setting, participants, and research procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar protected-area contexts. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining comprehensive documentation of the research process, including the interview guide, interview transcripts, and coding procedures. Confirmability was

enhanced through the maintenance of an audit trail and reflective notes to minimise researcher bias and ensure that the findings were grounded in participants' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledged that personal experiences and professional interests could influence data interpretation. To minimise potential bias, open-ended questions were used throughout the interviews, participants were encouraged to express their views freely, and reflexive notes were maintained during the transcription, coding, and interpretation of the interview data. These measures helped ensure that the findings reflected participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles governing research involving human participants were strictly observed. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the management of Cross River National Park before fieldwork commenced. All participants received information about the purpose of the study and voluntarily provided informed consent prior to participation. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no personally identifiable information was included in the transcripts or the final report. Audio recordings, transcripts and field notes were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

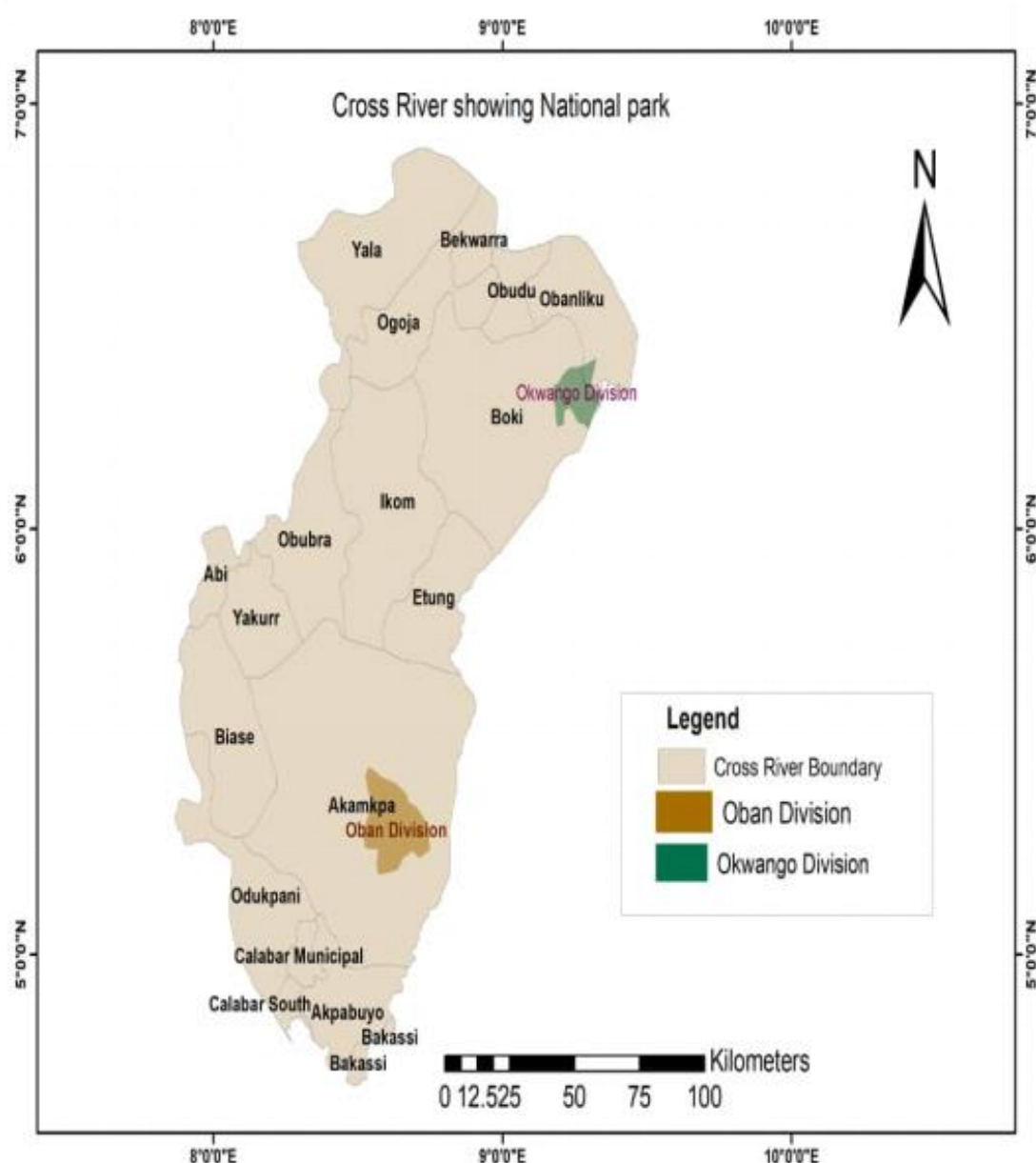


Figure 1: Map of Cross River State showing National Park

Source: GIS Lab, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 2018.

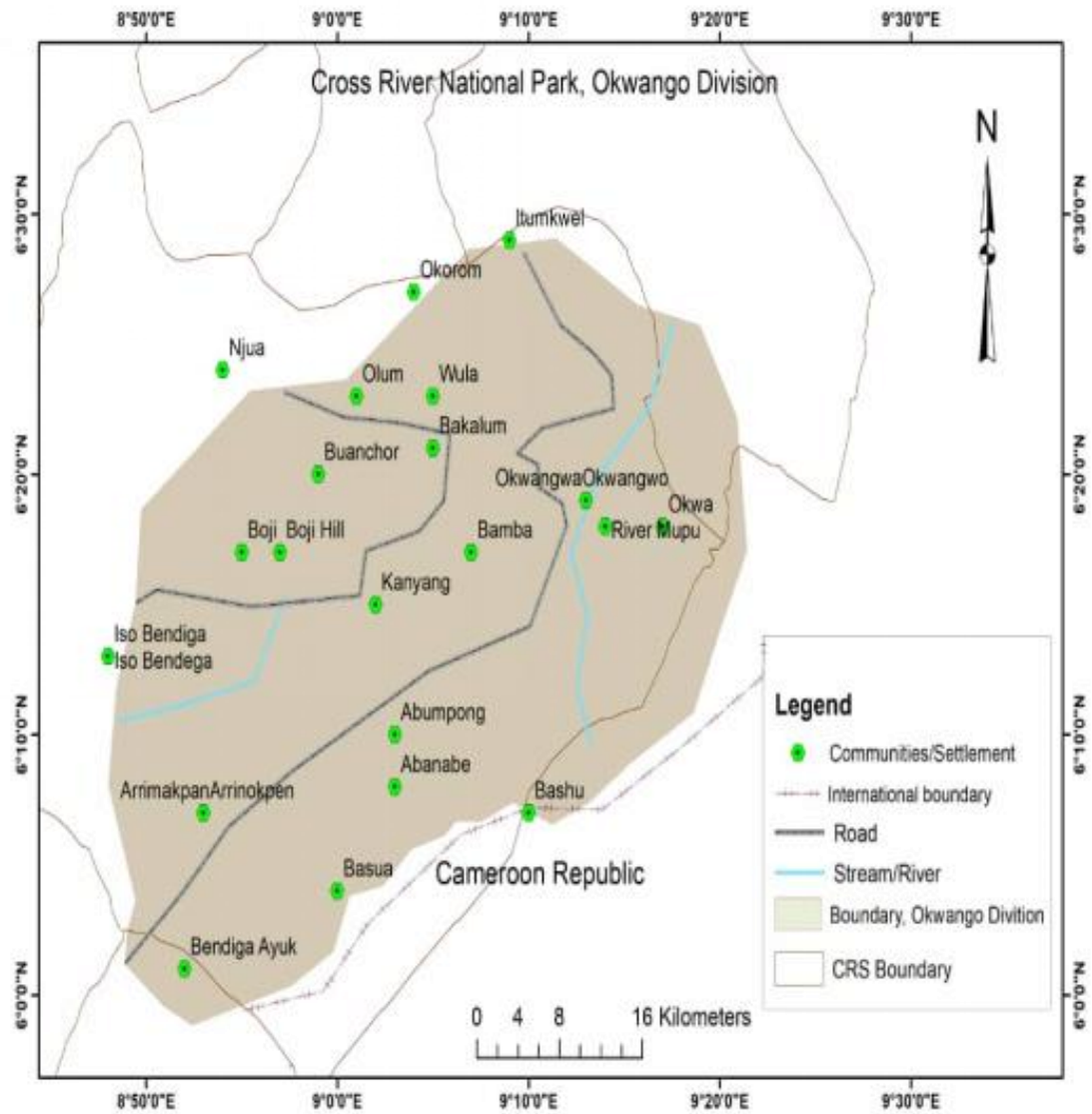


Figure 2: Map of CRNP Okwango Division.

Source: GIS Lab, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 2018.

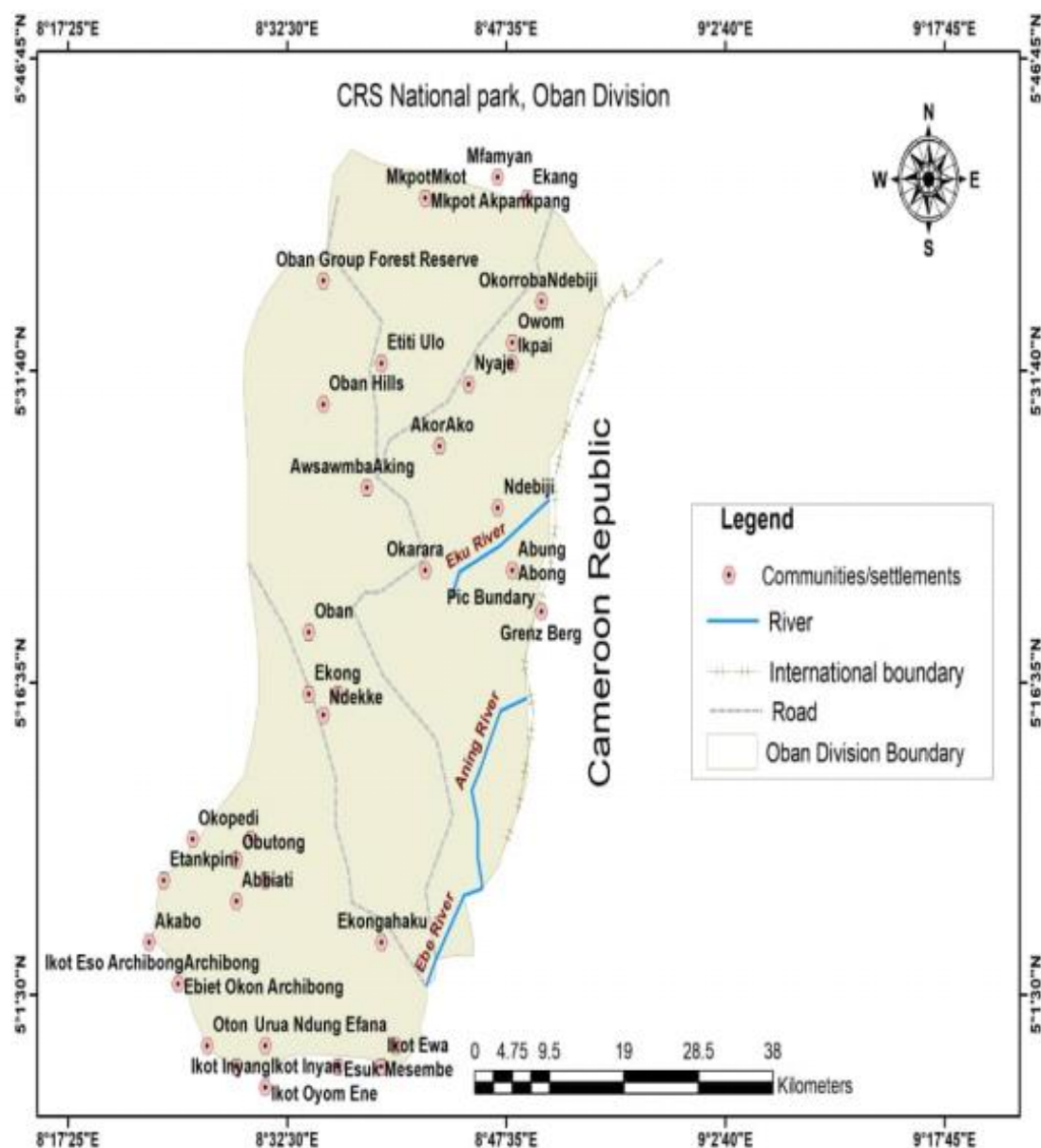


Figure 3: Map of CRNP Oban Division.

Source: GIS Lab, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 2018.

Results and discussion

Insights obtained from interviews with personnel of the Ecotourism Department indicate that the management of Cross River National Park (CRNP) adopts a structured, though resource-constrained, approach to tourism marketing. Participants consistently explained that promotional activities are centred on public sensitisation, institutional engagement and participation in selected tourism events aimed at increasing awareness of the park's ecological resources and attracting visitors. These activities are generally planned on an annual basis and implemented within the available financial and logistical capacity of the park. Analysis of the interview data generated four interrelated themes that explain the park's current marketing strategies, the channels through which they are implemented, the challenges affecting their effectiveness and opportunities for improving tourism promotion. The themes are presented and discussed as follows.

Institutional Sensitisation as a Core Marketing Strategy

The interviews revealed that institutional sensitisation is one of the main marketing strategies used by Cross River National Park. Instead of relying heavily on digital platforms, the park focuses primarily on direct engagement with stakeholders and the distribution of printed promotional materials. Participants explained that annual marketing activities are designed to create public awareness of the park's biodiversity, conservation

importance, and ecotourism potential. Beyond attracting visitors, these campaigns are intended to promote environmental awareness and strengthen public support for conservation.

A common promotional activity involves distributing brochures to hotels and guest houses, where they are displayed in reception areas or placed in guest rooms. This approach allows the park to reach visitors who are already in Cross River State and may be interested in including the park in their travel plans. Participants noted that collaboration with hospitality establishments has become an important means of increasing awareness among domestic tourists.

The park also conducts sensitisation visits to government institutions, particularly local government councils across the state. These visits are intended to raise awareness of the park's conservation programmes, strengthen relationships with public institutions, and encourage support for tourism and environmental initiatives. Park personnel explained that government agencies are regarded as important partners because of their influence on tourism development and environmental policy. Reflecting on these activities, one participant stated:

"Most of our marketing is awareness creation. We visit hotels and government offices because those places interact directly with visitors and decision-makers." (Participant 3)

Another participant explained why the park continues to depend largely on personal engagement: "We rely on these face-to-face engagements because digital outreach is still limited on our side." (Participant 1)

Stakeholder engagement remains the cornerstone of the park's marketing efforts. Face-to-face interactions provide opportunities to communicate conservation messages, build partnerships, and establish trust with key stakeholders. However, the continued dependence on traditional promotional methods is influenced not only by management preference but also by practical challenges. Limited digital infrastructure, inadequate technological resources, and insufficient expertise in online marketing are factors restricting the park's adoption of modern promotional approaches. Although institutional sensitisation has helped maintain public awareness of the park, greater investment in digital marketing would broaden its reach, improve destination visibility, and enhance its competitiveness in an increasingly digital tourism marketplace.

Educational Institutions as Strategic Market Segments

The interviews identified educational institutions as one of the park's most important target markets. Participants consistently described schools, colleges, and universities as the largest source of visitors, with many promotional activities aimed at encouraging educational excursions, field studies, and scientific research. Rather than viewing students solely as tourists, park officials see them as a key audience for conservation education and environmental awareness. As a result, the park is promoted as a living laboratory where students can complement classroom learning with practical field experience.

Departments such as Forestry and Wildlife Management, Geography and Regional Planning, Environmental Science, and other natural resource-related disciplines regularly organise field trips to the park. The University of Calabar and the University of Cross River State were frequently mentioned as major contributors to educational visitation because many of their academic programmes require practical fieldwork. These visits enable students to observe wildlife, study rainforest ecosystems, and gain first-hand experience in biodiversity conservation and protected area management. Emphasising the importance of this visitor group, one participant noted:

"Most of our visitors are students. Departments like Forestry and Geography regularly come because the park supports their practical learning." (Participant 10)

Participants also stressed that educational visits extend beyond recreation. They provide opportunities for students to relate classroom theories to real environmental conditions, thereby deepening their understanding of conservation and natural resource management. As one respondent explained:

"Educational trips to the park give students real-world exposure that textbooks alone can't provide." (Participant 7)

Another participant highlighted the long-term value of these partnerships:

"Engaging with universities helps us build long-term relationships with future professionals in our field." (Participant 2)

Educational institutions occupy a central place in the park's marketing strategy. Partnerships with universities and other learning institutions provide a steady flow of visitors while advancing environmental education, scientific research, and conservation awareness. Such collaborations not only support the park's conservation objectives but also reinforce its role as a centre for experiential learning and field-based education.

Participants acknowledged, however, that heavy reliance on educational institutions has its limitations. Student visits are largely determined by academic calendars, institutional budgets, and curriculum requirements, leading to seasonal fluctuations in visitor numbers. Expanding promotional efforts to attract leisure tourists, families, nature enthusiasts, adventure travellers, and international ecotourists would help diversify the park's visitor base and create a more consistent pattern of visitation throughout the year.

Event-Based and Cultural Promotion Opportunities

The interviews also revealed that public events and cultural festivals provide important opportunities for promoting Cross River National Park and increasing awareness of its ecotourism potential. Although participation

in these events is not regular, they are considered valuable platforms for showcasing the park's biodiversity, conservation programmes, and cultural heritage to a wider audience. Through workshops, tourism conferences, exhibitions, and trade fairs, park officials are able to engage with tourism stakeholders, researchers, policymakers, tour operators, and prospective visitors, thereby enhancing the park's visibility and expanding its promotional reach.

Among the events discussed, the annual Calabar Carnival was consistently identified as the park's most significant marketing opportunity. As one of Africa's largest cultural festivals, the carnival attracts thousands of domestic and international visitors each year, making it an ideal platform for destination promotion. The park occasionally exhibits cultural artefacts, traditional displays, and informational materials that highlight the heritage of neighbouring communities alongside the park's conservation and ecotourism attractions.

The value of the carnival was acknowledged as a platform for promoting the park, but participants considered the park's participation to be limited. Although exhibition materials are displayed during some activities, the park is not consistently represented in the official carnival float or other high-profile programmes. As a result, it misses the opportunity to reach the large audiences that attend the event. One participant explained:

"We display our cultural materials during the carnival, but we are not always part of the float, so our exposure is limited." (Participant 5)

Park personnel further observed that financial and logistical constraints often prevent the park from participating fully in tourism exhibitions, cultural festivals, and other promotional events. Limited funding affects the preparation of exhibition materials, transportation, and staff participation, causing the park to miss valuable opportunities to showcase its attractions and engage directly with potential visitors. Reflecting on the benefits of greater involvement, one participant remarked:

"Participating fully in the carnival could significantly boost our visibility and attract more visitors." (Participant 8)

Event-based marketing remains an underutilised component of the park's promotional strategy. While management recognises the value of cultural festivals and tourism events for increasing destination awareness, resource limitations continue to restrict full participation. Interviewees generally agreed that more consistent involvement in the Calabar Carnival, tourism exhibitions, trade fairs, and conservation-related events would strengthen the park's brand, broaden its market reach, and attract a more diverse range of visitors. Such efforts would complement existing marketing activities and contribute to the sustainable development of ecotourism at Cross River National Park.

Marketing Challenges Affecting Tourism Promotion

The interviews identified several challenges that continue to limit the effective implementation of marketing activities at Cross River National Park. Participants consistently identified inadequate funding, limited technological infrastructure, and shortages of skilled personnel as the major obstacles to promoting the park and expanding its visitor base. Although participants acknowledged that park management recognises the importance of marketing for ecotourism development, they explained that these constraints have made it difficult to sustain comprehensive promotional programmes.

Inadequate funding emerged as the most frequently mentioned challenge. Activities such as producing promotional materials, participating in tourism exhibitions, organising awareness campaigns, and adopting digital marketing technologies all require financial resources that are often insufficient. As a result, the park is unable to implement promotional activities on the scale needed to reach broader domestic and international markets. One participant commented:

"Our biggest challenge is inadequate funding because many promotional activities require financial support that is often unavailable." (Participant 13)

It was also noted that limited budgets frequently prevent the park from participating in tourism exhibitions, trade fairs, and other events that could enhance destination visibility. As another participant explained:

"We sometimes miss important tourism exhibitions and promotional events because of funding and logistical difficulties." (Participant 9)

Apart from financial constraints, participants also identified a shortage of personnel with specialised knowledge of tourism marketing, particularly digital communication and online destination promotion. They acknowledged that although digital platforms have become central to tourism marketing worldwide, the park lacks adequately trained staff to manage these platforms effectively.

"We do not have enough trained personnel with expertise in digital marketing and online promotion." (Participant 15)

Technological limitations were also identified as a significant barrier. Participants explained that unreliable internet connectivity and inadequate information technology facilities make it difficult to update online platforms, respond promptly to enquiries, and maintain consistent communication with potential visitors. One participant observed:

"Poor internet connectivity and inadequate technological facilities make it difficult to maintain regular online communication with potential visitors." (Participant 12)

The challenges affecting tourism marketing in Cross River National Park are closely interconnected. Financial limitations restrict investment in technology, staff development, and promotional campaigns, while inadequate technological infrastructure and shortages of skilled personnel further hinder the adoption of modern marketing practices. Consequently, the park continues to depend largely on traditional promotional approaches, limiting its visibility and competitiveness in an increasingly digital tourism marketplace. Addressing these constraints would strengthen the park's marketing capacity, improve visitor outreach, and enhance its position as one of Nigeria's leading ecotourism destinations.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes and Participant Coverage

Theme	Description	Participants (n = 15)	Example Participant Codes
Institutional sensitisation as a core marketing strategy	Marketing through brochures, visits to hotels and government institutions, face-to-face stakeholder engagement, and public awareness campaigns.	15	P1, P3, P5, P9
Educational institutions as strategic market segments	Promotion through schools, colleges and universities, field excursions, research visits and environmental education programmes	13	P2, P7, P10, P14
Event-based and cultural promotion opportunities	Promotion through the Calabar Carnival, tourism exhibitions, trade fairs and other public events.	11	P5, P8, P12
Marketing challenges affecting tourism promotion	Inadequate funding, limited technological infrastructure and insufficient staff capacity affecting marketing activities.	15	P9, P12, P13, P15

Source: Researcher's analysis of interview data (2026).

The thematic distribution presented in Table 1 indicates that marketing practice at Cross River National Park remains strongly anchored in interpersonal communication and institutional relationships. This orientation reflects the resource conditions within which tourism promotion is undertaken in many developing destinations, where conventional promotional approaches continue to be used because of financial and institutional limitations (Okocha et al., 2021; Odigbo et al., 2016). Within the park, direct engagement also provides an avenue for integrating tourism promotion with conservation awareness.

The prominence of educational institutions has particular implications for protected-area tourism. Educational visits provide a relatively established audience through which tourism experiences can be connected with environmental learning and conservation education. Ballantyne et al. (2011) demonstrate that wildlife tourism experiences can contribute to environmental learning, while Eagles et al. (2002) identify education as an important function of tourism in protected areas. The park's established relationships with educational institutions can therefore support both visitation and conservation objectives. Nevertheless, expanding promotional attention to other visitor segments would provide opportunities for broader market development and reduce reliance on educational visitation.

Event-based promotion similarly offers a means of extending the park's visibility beyond its existing institutional networks. Festivals and tourism exhibitions create opportunities for destination exposure and interaction with tourism stakeholders (Kotler et al., 2017). The limited participation reported by participants, however, suggests that financial and logistical constraints restrict the extent to which the park can utilise such platforms. More consistent engagement with relevant tourism events could consequently strengthen destination visibility and stakeholder networks.

The influence of institutional capacity is evident across these marketing activities. Constraints relating to funding, technological infrastructure and specialised personnel affect the park's ability to sustain promotional activities and adopt newer communication channels. This observation is consistent with Lindsey et al. (2021), who identified financial and institutional constraints as significant challenges to effective protected-area management in Africa. Marketing development should therefore be considered within the broader institutional conditions that determine the resources and capabilities available for implementation.

The limited use of digital platforms is particularly significant given the increasing role of online information in destination choice. Chamboko-Mpotaringa and Tichaawa (2021) emphasise the growing relevance of digital marketing tools in tourism, while Buhalis et al. (2023) highlight the transformation of tourism communication

through digital technologies. For Cross River National Park, a stronger digital presence could complement existing interpersonal approaches and extend destination information to audiences beyond the park's immediate stakeholder networks.

The findings also have relevance to Social Marketing Theory, particularly its emphasis on communication directed towards behaviours that generate social benefits (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Andreasen, 1994). In a protected-area context, this extends marketing beyond visitor attraction to include conservation awareness and responsible engagement with natural resources. However, the evidence suggests that promotional practice remains predominantly awareness-oriented, with limited indication of systematic audience analysis or evaluation of communication outcomes. Integrating established interpersonal approaches with more deliberate digital communication and audience targeting could therefore strengthen the park's capacity to engage diverse visitor groups while advancing its conservation mandate.

Conclusion

This study explored the marketing strategies employed by Cross River National Park, Nigeria, from the perspectives of park personnel. The findings indicate that the park relies predominantly on traditional marketing approaches, including institutional sensitisation, educational outreach, brochure distribution, and participation in selected cultural events. Although the park maintains an official website, participants reported that digital marketing is used only to a limited extent.

The findings further suggest that inadequate funding, weak technological infrastructure, and limited staff capacity constrain the implementation of marketing activities. These institutional constraints restrict the park's ability to adopt contemporary digital marketing practices and to broaden its promotional reach.

The study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on tourism marketing in Nigerian protected areas by providing qualitative evidence on how park personnel perceive current marketing practices and the factors shaping their implementation. The findings have practical implications for protected area managers and policymakers by highlighting the need to strengthen institutional capacity, improve digital communication infrastructure, and allocate adequate resources for destination marketing. Such measures may enhance the visibility of protected areas and support more effective communication with potential visitors.

As a qualitative case study based on the perspectives of park personnel, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable to other protected areas. Future research could incorporate the views of visitors, neighbouring communities, tour operators, and other stakeholders, while employing mixed-methods approaches to examine the relationship between marketing strategies and measurable tourism outcomes, including visitor awareness, satisfaction, and visitation patterns.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen digital marketing capacity. The park should develop a structured digital marketing strategy that includes regular updates to its website and active use of social media platforms to complement existing promotional activities.
2. Broaden promotional audiences. While educational institutions remain an important audience, the park should also target domestic tourists, ecotourists, researchers, and international visitors through appropriate marketing channels.
3. Increase participation in tourism events. Greater participation in the Calabar Carnival, tourism exhibitions, and travel fairs would provide additional opportunities to promote the park and engage with potential visitors.
4. Provide adequate funding for marketing activities. Increased financial support would improve the production of promotional materials, participation in marketing events, and adoption of digital communication tools.
5. Strengthen community participation. Local communities should continue to be involved in tourism promotion and awareness programmes to support conservation and encourage positive relationships between the park and neighbouring communities.
6. Develop strategic partnerships. Collaboration with tourism agencies, tour operators, universities, conservation organisations, and media organisations would strengthen the park's promotional activities and extend its marketing reach.
7. Monitor marketing activities. The park should establish mechanisms for documenting and reviewing its marketing activities to support evidence-informed planning and decision-making.
8. Build staff capacity. Regular training in digital marketing, destination branding, communication, and content development would strengthen the ability of park personnel to implement contemporary marketing approaches.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Study Title: Marketing Strategies in Cross River National Park, Nigeria: Perspectives of Park Personnel

Section A: Background Information

- Department/Unit:
- Ecotourism Department
- Current Position:
- Years of Service in Cross River National Park:

- Less than 5 years
- 5–10 years
- 11–15 years
- 16–20 years
- More than 20 years

4. What are your main responsibilities in tourism promotion, visitor management, or ecotourism activities within the park?

Section B: Interview Questions

5. What marketing strategies are currently used to promote Cross River National Park as an ecotourism destination?
6. Which of these strategies do you consider to be the most effective, and why?
7. How does the park engage with schools, universities, local communities, government agencies, or tourism stakeholders in promoting its tourism activities?
8. To what extent does the park use digital marketing tools such as social media, websites, or other online platforms for promotion?
9. What challenges limit the effectiveness of the park's marketing efforts?
10. In your opinion, how do these marketing strategies influence public awareness and visitation to the park?
11. What improvements would you recommend to strengthen the park's marketing and promotional activities?
12. Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding tourism marketing in Cross River National Park?

Thank you for your participation. The information you have provided will be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic research purposes. Your responses will remain anonymous, and you may withdraw from the interview at any stage without any consequences.

Appendix B

Profile of Interview Participants

Participant Code	Position	Years of Service
P1	Head, Ecotourism Department	22
P2	Senior Ecotourism Officer	19
P3	Ecotourism Officer	17
P4	Senior Ecotourism Officer	15
P5	Ecotourism Officer	14
P6	Visitor Services Officer	13
P7	Ecotourism Officer	12
P8	Ecotourism Officer	11
P9	Park Interpreter	10
P10	Ecotourism Officer	9
P11	Ecotourism Officer	8
P12	Visitor Services Officer	7
P13	Tourism Information Officer	6
P14	Assistant Ecotourism Officer	5
P15	Assistant Ecotourism Officer	4

Source: Fieldwork (2026).