Impact of COVID-19 on Lekki Conservation Centre, Lagos Nigeria

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Abstract
The global economic system has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The tourism industry is one of the most affected sectors due to unprecedented restrictions imposed on human mobility and interaction to curb the spread of the virus. Lekki Conservation Center Lagos, a natural reserve managed by Nigerian Conservation Foundation is one of the tourists’ destinations affected by the pandemic. This article investigates the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on tourism in Lekki Conservation Center Lagos. To achieve this, onsite observation, key informant interviews and in-depth interviews were conducted with employees, and some selected patrons of the destination. It was discovered that the center lost lots of revenue following the lockdown. However, the management was able to take care of its recurrent expenditure such as the payment of their employee’s salaries from their savings and funding received from stakeholders. The influx of tourists to the center after the lockdown was as a result of its open nature and the COVID-19 preventive measures put in place therein. These measures considerably increased the running cost of the center. The study therefore recommends that tourists’ destinations should be given financial incentives and tax holiday by the government to enable them recover quickly from the impact of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, impact, Lekki Conservation Center Lagos, tourism, tourists’ destination

Introduction
COVID-19 started in Wuhan China from where it spread rapidly to other parts of the world. As a result, most nations introduced stringent measures to curb the spread of the pandemic some of which included ban on all travels, shutting of borders and the general restriction on movement. These measures adversely affected global economy leaving many nations in recession. One of the most
affected sectors of the economy is the tourism industry, following the restriction on travels in almost all destinations of the world, businesses of all sizes which depend either directly or indirectly on the visitor economy suspended operations resulting to massive loss of revenue, and there are signs that many of these businesses may likely never reopen (Ioannites and Gyimothy, 2020). There is also an extremely fast drop in employment in hospitality and tourism industry. Maradze et al. (2020) argued that this will leave huge gaps in the overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in countries with a high relative share of tourism in their economy (Maradze et al., 2020). Despite the impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism sector, little or no scholarly attention has been given to the impact of the pandemic on individual tourists’ destinations. For instance, Kumudumali investigated the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the tourism industry globally. He argued that the pandemic has resulted in severe economic problem in every country of the world and has created critical global financial losses (Kumudumali, 2020). In the same vein, Ansah studied the effects of disease outbreaks on hospitality and tourism businesses by using examples from past episodes. He noted that the announcement of any disease outbreak prompts mass cancellations amidst fear and risk factors associated with travel, giving rise to traveller behavioral changes in travel decisions. However, he added that recovery resilience exist after aggressive marketing and promotional campaigns are done via mass communication and publicity campaigns (Ansah, 2020). Also, Oruonye and Ahmed considered the potential impact of COVID-19 on tourism in Nigeria, they noted that the pandemic has adversely affected the tourism sector such as the airlines, hotels and entertainment and has led to huge loss of revenue and unemployment (Oruonye and Ahmed, 2020). This study, therefore examines the impact of COVID-19 on tourism at Lekki Conservation Center Lagos. This study intends to achieve the following objectives to: examine tourism in Lekki Conservation Center after the COVID-19 lockdown, assess the impact of COVID-19 on the center and recommend ways of helping tourists destinations recover quickly from the pandemic.

**Lekki Conservation Center**

Lekki Conservation Center is an ecotourism destination located in Lekki-Epe Lagos. It occupies roughly 78 hectares (193 acres) from kilometer 19 along the Lagos- Epe express way and ends up close to the Atlantic Ocean near Okun Ibeju village, Etiosa Local Government Area in the eastern district of Lagos State (Harrison, 2019). Established in 1990, the center is managed by Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) for forest regeneration, wildlife preservation, environmental education, and ecotourism in Lagos State. It is a demonstration site of what NCF advocates, which is forest regeneration and conservation. The center was built by Chevron Corporation for the Nigerian Conservation Foundation and the company still funds the center annually. Nigerian Conservation Foundation is a Non-Governmental Organization and manages the center as a social enterprise. That is, they are not profit oriented. The center
gets unrestricted funding from members of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation. The membership is open to individuals of all nationalities that love the natural environment. Members contribute between N1000-N150,000 annually to ensure the sustainability of the center. Tourists from within and outside Nigeria visit the center for recreational purpose and admiration of the natural environment.

**Brief literature review**

As COVID-19 pandemic rapidly spread worldwide, the government of various countries of the world introduced strict measures such as ban on public gathering and lockdown of all public institutions among others to curb its spread. These measures certainly had devastating economic effects on many countries particularly on localities or even countries relying heavily on tourism (Ioannides and Gyimothy, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). United Nations World Tourism Organization estimates, that global international tourist arrivals could decline 20-30 % in 2020 as compared to 2019. This could translate into a loss of US$300-450 billion (€270- 407 billion) in spending by international visitors (international tourism receipts) (UNWTO, 2020 cited in Niestadt, 2020). Economic growth is predicted to drop considerably in the near to long-term, as profits in the tourism, aviation and extractive sectors, among others, are completely lost (UNESCO, 2020). In addition to these, the harmful effects of the pandemic and the resultant lockdown have given rise to the sudden unemployment of once employed personnel, uncertainty over economic recovery, and global fears of ongoing COVID-19 spread and its future waves. (Tappe and Luhby 2020 cited in Maradze et al., 2020). After the lockdown, most tourism and hospitality businesses started opening gradually. However, they are expected to make considerable changes in their mode of operations in order to guarantee employees’ and customers’ health and safety. It is important to note that, the evolving nature of the present global pandemic will probably bring out delays in recovery attempts as a result of the pervasiveness and impacts on the economies of countries that depend heavily on hospitality and tourism (Anshah, 2021). Contrarily, Ioannites and Gyimothy, opined that, in the past, following a particular crisis, such as the outbreak of epidemics, the tourism industry has usually bounced back, demonstrating the sector’s remarkable resilience (Ioannites and Gyimothy, 2020). Truly, Lekki Conservation Center Lagos is a good example of a tourists’ destination that will bounced back after the pandemic because tourists were observed flooding the center after the lockdown. This can be attributed to the open nature of the park and COVID-19 preventive measures observed in the center.

**Methods**

The authors employed qualitative method in gathering data for this study. Observation, key informant and in-depth interviews were employed in data collection. This study was conducted in Lekki Conservation Center Lagos. The study populations were staff of Lekki Conservation Center and tourists who
visited the center. A total of nineteen (19) informants were interviewed; four (4) staff of the center and fifteen (15) tourists who visited the site at the time of this study. Four key informant interviews were conducted with the project manager of Lekki Conservation Center, two tour-guides and wildlife officer who had worked in the center for more than twenty years and fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with tourists who visited the site on the days of the fieldwork. The fieldwork for this study was between December 2020 and January 2021. December visits, where mainly for observation and interaction with visitors as all employees were busy attending to tourists. It was observed that tourists visited the center in large numbers in December; most of them visited in groups and were easily identified by their branded T-shirts. Purposive sampling and availability sampling were used in selecting the informants for this study. The project manager and staff of Lekki Conservation Center were selected purposively because they have an in-depth knowledge of the site while availability sampling was utilized in choosing the tourists because they are present at the center at the time of the study. The research instruments used in data collection include pen, notebook and tape recorder. The permissions of the informants were obtained before using the recorder. Data collected were transcribed, organized according to the themes and presented in narrative form. Data collected were analyzed descriptively. Secondary material from journals and online resources on Lekki Conservation Center, tourism, COVID 19 and Impact of COVID-19 on tourism industries were used to complement the primary data. The researchers obtained the permission of the informants before interviewing them.

Results and discussions
As already stated, Lekki Conservation Center is an ecotourism site. One of the reasons for tourists visit to the center is to appreciate nature. COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on tourists visits to this site. This section, therefore, presents findings on tourists’ visits to the site after COVID-19 lockdown as well as the impacts of COVID-19 on the site.

Tourists visit to Lekki Conservation Center
Following the gradual reopening of destinations to Tourist, the administration of the Center introduced measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. Tourists are required to book their visit before visiting the center. The booking is done on Nigerian Conservation Foundation website (www.ncfnigeria) bookings are first confirmed at the gate before Tourist are granted access to the center. It is one of the measures adopted by the management of the center to curtail the spread of Corona virus. The details provided during booking include first name and last name, gender, e-mail address, telephone number, date of visit, home address, city state, nationality, time of visit, tour options and number of persons accompanying the tourist. The booking provides the management of the center with the personal details of the tourists. This will enable the management to reach out to tourists who have visited the site in case of
COVID-19 infection, it is also used to limit the number Tourist to the center to ensure social distancing. After booking, the tourist pays the gate fee, the amount paid depends on the tour option chosen. He/she is given a wrist band to indicate payment. The wrist band reduces the misunderstanding between the management and tourists because it cannot be easily misplaced or forged. The tourists wait in the reception for 30 minutes after payment before they are taken to tour round the center. The 30 minutes waiting time is for the tourists to be up to at least twenty before a tour guide comes and takes them round. The tour guide introduces his/herself and briefs the tourists about the center. The center though not a zoo has preserved some animals as part of its fauna. The tour guide submitted that it is easily mistaken for a zoo because of the presence of wild animals. In some cases, some tourists visit this center hoping to see different animals but are usually disappointed if they saw few of them. To address this problem, the tour guides are quick to inform visitors that the center is not a zoo, but a forest reserve where you can only sight the animals by chance.

After the lockdown was lifted, the centre was opened to the public from October. But it adopted strict measures to ensure the safety of their staff and tourists. Tourists visit to the centre after the lock down and during the second wave of the pandemic can be attributed to the open nature of the space; this reduces the risk of transmission. In other words, the fear of pandemic do not affect tourists visit to the centre after the lockdown. Truly, tourists interviewed during field work submitted that they are not scared of being infected with the virus because they observe the COVID-19 protocols. For instance, an American tourist who visited the centre with her Nigerian husband admitted: *I am from the United State of America. ‘I am not scared of the COVID. I know a lot of people who had it and recovered in few days. I have my face mask and I wash my hands’* (Personal Communication 26 Jan. 2021. Another tourist admitted: “*It is nice coming here, I intend to bring my friends here. I am not afraid of the virus because I am a Muslem. I pray five times daily and I always wash my hands before prayers”* (Personal Communication 26 Jan. 2021). The tourist believes that his prayers and the constant washing of his hands before praying will protect him from being infected. Of course, the constant washing of hands is one of COVID-19 protocols. In other words, the tourists are confident that the COVID-19 protocols are effective for the prevention of COVID-19 infection. The tourists equally admitted that they were not scared of the Corona virus because of the open nature of the center. This is probably why tourists continue to visit the center in large numbers after the lockdown and during the second wave of the pandemic. In all, tourism in Lekki Conservation Center after the lockdown and during the second wave of the pandemic is an adventurous and beautiful experience. Indeed, tourists’ continuous visits to the Centre immediately after the lockdown was lifted contributed to its quick recovery from the adverse economic effect of the lockdown. This is in consonance with Ioannites and Gyimothy, assertion that in the past, following a particular crisis, such as the outbreak of epidemics, the tourism industry has
usually bounced back, demonstrating the sector’s remarkable resilience (Ioannites and Gyimothy, 2020). It is interesting to note that COVID-19 pandemic impacted on Lekki Conservation Centre in many ways.

**Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on Lekki Conservation Centre**

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic had significant impact on the management of the center, the staff and tourists. These include;

**Loss of revenue**

Lekki Conservation Centre recorded humongous loss of resources and revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that accompanied it. This is in line with Ioannites and Gyimothy opinions:

> One of the sectors of the economy most affected by the pandemic is the tourism industry. As a result of the restriction on travels in almost all destinations, businesses of all sizes which depend either directly or indirectly on the visitor economy have suspended operations resulting to massive loss of revenue, and there are signs that many of these businesses may likely never reopen. (Ioannites and Gyimothy, 2020)

The centre was shut down from March to August/September, the management submitted that the average cost of monthly maintenance is roughly 6 million-naira. The centre therefore spent 30,000000-million-naira on maintenance without income during the lockdown. Thus, confirming Maradze et al.’s submission. This would have resulted in relieving some staff of their duties or cutting the salaries of members of staff. However, the management was able to pay full salaries throughout the period without relieving any staff of his/her job because of its saving culture. It fell back on funds provided by their various stakeholders and its savings to take care of its recurrent expenditures. Truly, the need to save for eventualities cannot be overemphasized especially in tourism industry. Due to the centre’s good saving culture, the management of the centre paid their employees full salaries throughout the lockdown without disengaging any of their staff. This is contrary to Tappe and Lubby view that:

> The harmful effects of the pandemic and the resultant lockdown have given rise to the sudden unemployment of once employed personnel, uncertainty over economic recovery, and global fears of ongoing COVID-19 spread and its future waves. (Tappe and Lubby 2020 cited in Maradze et al., 2020)

The attitude of the management of the centre towards its staff during the period of the lockdown gives the employees a sense of belonging and increases their commitment to work.
Reduction in the number of tourists visiting the center
The educational tourists were not welcomed to the center after the lock down. These are primary and secondary school students that usually visit the center for environmental and nature study. Although, these school children were welcome to visit with their parents. The manager submitted that the management took this measure to ensure these children are properly supervised by their parents during visits to make sure they observe the COVID-19 protocol. He argued that it will be difficult for teachers to supervise these children to ensure they observe the COVID-19 protocol during visit. This is because a teacher may be in charge of at least fifteen pupils and may not be able to keep an eye on all of them. This reduced the number of tourists visiting the site and consequently the amount of revenue generated.

Increase in the cost of maintaining the center
With COVID-19 pandemic, management of the center adopted safety measures to guarantee the safety of their staff and tourists during visit and some of these measures cost good money. Such measures include:

Booking appointment on the center’s website before visit: Potential tourists were mandated to visit the Nigerian Conservation Foundation website and schedule their visit. The booking can be done at any time before visit even at the gate of the center. The idea of booking ahead of visit was introduced to enable the management of the center limit the number of tourists visiting at a particular time. Normally, the center accommodates about two thousand (2000) tourists at the same time but because of the COVID 19, it was reduced to one thousand (1000) tourists due to social distancing. Booking visits provided the center with a data base. The personal details of tourists would be used to send out messages to tourists in case of any case of infection of staff or tourists. Fortunately, as at the time of this study, there was no such report.

Compulsory use of Nose and Mouth Covering: The use of nose and mouth covering was made compulsory for both staff and tourists visiting the center. Tourists without their face masks were not allowed to enter Lekki Conservation Center. Consequently, the management always provides sanitizers, nose/mouth covering for their staff.

Observing Social Distancing: Tourists were mandated to observe social distancing during visit to the center to forestall the spread of Coronavirus. However, enforcing this rule was a bit difficult for the staff because tourists from the same home did not like the idea of observing social distancing.

Weekly disinfection of the center: The management of Lekki Conservation Center disinfect sitting areas and surfaces that tourist touched during visits. Disinfecting the site costs a lot of money. At the time of this study, the center publicized its closure from 11 -15 January through its various social media plat
forms (WhatsApp Update, the NCF web site, Instagram). This is to give them the opportunity to thoroughly disinfect the center as well as afford the staff the opportunity to rest after the Christmas/ New Year surge.

**Use of infrared thermometers for temperature checks:** A security man stationed at the gate of the center checks the temperature of each tourist visiting before granting him/her access. Any tourists with body temperature above 37°C will be denied access to the center.

**Use of sanitizers, wash hand basins and soaps:** The center provided sanitizers, wash hand basins, liquid soap, and water at the entrance and at strategic places in the center. This was to ensure that tourists wash/sanitize their hands on entering the center and as frequent as recommended.

During the festivities such as Christmas and Sallah (the Moslem festiva), more security staff were employed to attend to the increased number of tourists as well as help enforce COVID-19 protocols. This is because some tourists believed there is no COVID-19 in Nigeria, some dislike using their masks and some from the same home find it difficult to observe the social distancing. Consequently, the project manager of Lekki Conservation Center admitted that the cost of maintaining the destination has increased due to the strict adherence to all the above listed measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 prevention guidelines have affected the way the entire tourism industry operates, though most tourist attractions like Lekki Conservation Center and other supporting industries like the airports, restaurants, hotels, and parks among others are gradually recuperating from the effect of COVID-19 lockdown, most of these sectors are still faced with low patronage due to the fear of the pandemic, tour operators are left with the responsibility of ensuring the health and safety of their employees and consumers so as to improve the confidence of tourist and the motivation to visit.

**Lessons learnt from COVID-19 experience**

COVID-19 lockdown and the guidelines set to curb its spread significantly increased the cost of maintenance of Lekki Conservation Centre but for the intervention of stakeholders and savings the pandemic would have led to downsizing of work force and possible degradation of the center. Findings from the operation of the centre during the pandemic suggests a clear relationship between public/environmental health and tourism which has never been more evident like in this pandemic situation. It is obvious that the sustainability of tourist destinations is significantly dependant on the health capacity of the destination and its workers, tourists, and the host communities. One of the most essential expectations of the tourist is the assurance of the safety of their lives and properties while on tour. Necessity they say is the mother of invention. COVID-19 pandemic made the management of the center more resourceful. For instance, the introduction of booking before visit to the
Lekki Conservation Center has provided a good data base for the center. This gave rise to the idea of introducing online payment to reduce the risk of dealing with cash. Also, the COVID-19 experience has made the management of the center realized more the importance of savings. The center was able to handle its recurrent expenditure and pay its staff during the lock down because it has a good saving culture and upholds the idea of saving for the rainy day. The leadership of an organization determines how well it manages a crisis situation. An organization with a leader that empathizes with his team fares better during crisis situations. The center was able to survive the pandemic without laying off some of its staff or cutting salaries partly because of its leadership style.

Conclusion
Lekki conservation Center is a unique ecotourism site in Lagos State which attracts tourists from within an outside Nigeria. It is strategically located and secured. There was a reduction in the center’s revenue in 2020 because of the lockdown. The stake holders funding, savings culture of the management helped the center to cater for its recurrent expenditure throughout the lockdown. The open nature of the environment and adherence to the COVID-19 protocols accounted for the influx of tourists when the center reopened after the lockdown and during the second wave of the pandemic when some tourists’ centers were downsizing, and some were out of business. However, the running cost of the center increased due to the COVID-19 protocols adopted to guarantee the safety of its staff and tourists. The pandemic made the management more creative in devising ways of managing the center during this perilous time. COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected Lekki conservation especially during the total lockdown. Moving forward there is need for government to provide incentives to tourism industry such as granting them tax holidays to help them recover quickly from COVID-19 losses. There is also need to adhere to standard infectious preventive procedures like hand washing, disinfection, and crowd control in tourism destinations to avoid spread of infections to advance a healthy environment for employees and tourists even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

References


