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**“AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ECOTOURISM POTENTIAL
OF YANKARI NATIONAL PARK, NIGERIA.”**

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the varied and rich ecotourism potentials of the Yankari National Park. The paper identifies among other things, the rich wildlife resources (which consists of over 50 mammalian species and 350 avifauna species), springs, historical and ethno-historical features, as well as facilities for tourists in the park. The role of Yankari National Park in the development and promotion of ecotourism and, indeed tourism in general, in Nigeria is very significant.

The park hosted over 20,000 tourists from over 100 countries in 2000 alone. If the park is properly managed, it can become a powerful tool for the preservation and conservation of its endowed ethno-historical and natural resources of touristic significance with favourable impacts on the local communities while offering thousands of ecotourists a wide range of recreational activities.

ASSESSMENT OF ECOTOURISM POTENTIALS OF YANKARI NATIONAL PARK NIGERIA.

INTRODUCTION.

The Yankari National Park located in Bauchi State, Nigeria, is perhaps the most popular eco-destination in West Africa sub-region (Olokesusi 1990).

The park is famous for its diverse large mammal populations, birds, springs, ethno-historical and archaeological sites. The park is one of the most important refuges in Nigeria for certain antelope species including Roan Antelope, Western Hartebeest and Waterbuck. Above all, the elephant population of Yankari National Park is recognized as being among the largest in West Africa and is by far the largest district population in Nigeria (Ubaru, 2000).

The park established by decree 36 of 1991, is the most popular tourist attraction among Nigerians. It is one of the few places where ecotourist are guaranteed of seeing diverse and varied wildlife species at most times of the year (Odunlami, 2000)

Its importance as an insight into how large areas of the North African savanna use to be is crucial and increasingly unique. The park is the premier nature tourism destination in Nigeria and plays crucial role in the development and promotion of tourism and ecotourism in particular in Nigeria (Odunlami, 2000)

LOCATION.

Yankari National Park occupies an area of about 2244 sq. km. The Park is centred at 9.50'N and 10.30'E in the south-central area of Bauchi State in Northeastern Nigeria, in the southern portion of the Sudan Savanna Zone. Access to the Park is gained mainly through a paved road branching off the Federal high way leading to Gombe from Bauchi at the small village of Dindima on the bank of Gongola river. The Parks main entrance is at Mainamaji village, about 29km from Dindima. The basin of the Gaji river and its tributaries is the only water shed in the park. Elephants and other animals depend on this water especially in the dry season for survival. The area of the Gaji River Valley used by elephants in the dry season was estimated by Marshal (1985) as about 40 sq. km.

Dry season in Yankari National Park has been known to begin around November and lasts until May with March and April hot. Rains sometimes start in late April (Ubaru, 2000)

GEOLOGY

The park is almost entirely underlain by the Kerri formation of tertiary age composed of sandstone, silt stones, kaolinites and grits. This in turn is underlain by the Gombe formation of Cretaceous age composed of sandstones, silt stones, and ironstones. The valleys of the Gaji, Yashi and Yuli Rivers are filled with Alluvium of recent age. Sandy loams and clayey soils of riverine alluvium occur in the valley of the Gaji Yashi and Yuli Rivers East of the Gaji valley is 5-7km wide band of very poor sandy soils that support a shrub savanna formation (Ubaru 2000)

HISTORY.

Bauchi is said to be derived from the name of a hunter, Baushe a famous hunter in the area. Bauchi was provincial Headquarters of Bauchi province with Divisional Headquarter at Azare, Gombe and Bauchi town.

Yankari National Park in Bauchi State existed as an unpopulated Island of well-developed Savanna woodland, largely surrounded by more open country heavily utilized and modified by farmers and pastoralists. This occupancy is composed of peripheral villages originally founded by hunters. There have been no settlements within the reserve for more than 100 years. However, there are evidence of some earlier human settlements from Mainamaji towards Wikki camp. At Dukkey, a site of about 6.41km from the boundary in the north western part of the reserve, is evidence of a former settlement of any size. There exist at Dukkey elaborate system of water catchment and storage devised by the former inhabitants. The Wikki camp location also may have been a settlement at one time, as indicated by the presence of baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*)

Suggestive evidence of human settlements in the Park also include: Old Iron smelting sites at Ampara, Panguru, Tonglong Gorge and Shaaman Hills, Zambu, Buri and Duguri.

Recommendations made by the Northern Regional Game Preservation Committee in 1953 received approval in principle of the Executive Council, the establishment of a pilot game reserve in the Bauchi Emirate. This approval, coupled with the favourable impression gained when the first minister for Natural Resources during a visit to the game reserves in the Sudan, encouraged the establishment of a Game Preservation Unit within the existing forestry Division in 1956. At that time, Yankari area was being surveyed with a view to creating a forest reserve.

The area was initially constituted in 1957 as a Bauchi Native Authority Forest Reserve, the native Authority gave approval for its management for game preservation.

Yankari was opened to the public in 1962 and then as Nigeria's first functional game reserve. But in 1991 it became a National Park by decree 36 of the National Government 1991 (Falade, 2000; Ubaru, 2000)

POPULATION SURROUNDING THE PARK.

It is equally interesting to mention that Yankari National Park is surrounded by three major districts – Gwana, Fali and Duguri districts. These districts including Yankari are also located in Alkaleri Local Govt. Area with a projected population of 208,202 people occupying a total land area of 7,457.78 sq.km.

ECOTOURISM RESOURCES OF YANKARI NATIONAL PARK.

FAUNA

The prominent ecotourist attraction of Yankari National Park is the diverse and rich wildlife species otherwise known as games (Odunlami, 2000).

The park has more than 50 species of mammals, prominent among which are Elephant, *Loxodonta africana*, Baboon, *Papio anubis*, Patas Monkey, *Erythrocebus patas*, Tantalus Monkey, *Cercopithecus tantalus*, Roan antelope, *Hippotragus equinus*, Western Hartebeest, *Alcephalus buselaphus*, Lion, *Panthera leo*, Buffalo, *Syncerus Caffer*, Waterbuck, *Kobus defassa*, Bush-buck, *Tragelaphus scriptus* and Hippopotamus, *hippotamus amphibius*. Also, more than 350 avifauna species have been recovered in the park. Of these, 130 are resident, 50 are palearctic migrants and the rest are intra-African migrants that move locally within Nigeria. Some of the avifauna species commonly found in the park includes saddle bill stork, *Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*, white backed vulture, *gyps bengalensis*, Guinea fowl, *Numida meleagris*, Grey hornbill, *Tocous nasulus*, cattle Egret, *Ardeola ibis* (Olokesusi, 1990)

THE WIKKI WARM SPRING

The Yankari National Park is endowed with fire springs. Four of these are warm. These are Dimmil, Gwan, Nawulgo and wikki warm springs while the fifth; Tungan Naliki is the only cool spring.

The Wikki warm spring, after which the only camp is named, is about 13.0 metre and 1.9 metres deep. "Wikki" means "where are you" in the language of Duguri people who were the predominant inhabitants of the park before it was established. The spring is the largest in the park. It flows at the rate of 21,000,000 litres per day (NITHOONS, 1997). The resultant stream flows in to the Gaji River. Wikki warm spring has a constant temperature of 31.10 °C through the year during both the day and night. The spring has been developed for recreation and is been used for sunbathing, swimming and canoeing It is perhaps the most popular attraction of the park.

DUKKEY WELLS

These are wells found at a former settlement site, located about 11km south east of the Maimamaji main entrance gate. The wells are 139, all of which have interconnecting shafts sunk and are between 3-5 metres deep. This settlement and the wells were once used as resting place by the trans atlantic slave traders of the early times.

The wells represent an elaborate water storage system devised by the early man. A disturbance in one of the 139 wells creates ripples in the remaining wells. (NITHOOURS, 1997)

MARSHAL CAVES

These 59 caves found in the park were named after P.J. Marshall, a research fellow who discovered them in 1980. The caves are located some 7km north east of Wikki camp. They are dug into sandstone escarpments, are 0.5 to 1m in diameter and the inner chambers are 1-5-4-2 in diameter and 0.9 to 1.5 high. These caves are the first to be reported in Nigeria (YNP, 2000)

They are varied in size but common in design. The caves consist of a circular entrance hole in the rock that opens into an inside round, round chamber. While the walls are vertical at the bottom from which they curve to the roof at the top while the floor is flat and level with the bottom of the entrance hole (NITHOOURS 1990)

HILLS

A number of hills of tourist interest can also be found in the park.

KALBAN HILL

Kalban hill is located north-east of the Wikki. Kalban in Duguni language means "flat place" This can be understand because the hill has a flat top that enables tourists the opportunity to have a complete view of the park.

KANYO HILL

The kanyo hill is located east of Marshal caves in the park. It provides a good view of the park and serve as a very beautiful picnic ground.

PALIYARAM HILL

The hill is situated some 10km from Wikki. It is a popular camp for poachers. Some of their poaching tools are often found on the hill. There is also a big cave of 10m deep beside the hill about which little is known.

ROCK PAINTINGS

There are rock paintings / engravings in the Marshall caves and at Tunga. Dutse. The Marshall cave rock paintings are in zig-zag form and in straight lines. While those of Tunga Dutse are more elaborate than those in Marshall caves.

They covered an area of about 4m in length on the sandstone rock embankment in Dwall River. The writings are legible. However, their age and meanings have not been determined (NITHOTOURS, 1997, YNP 2000)

THE TOLONG GORGE

The tolong Gorge and its associated hills, buttes and escarpments located in the west of the park is the most scenic feature of the park. The top of the escarpments overlook the expansive basin of the Yuli River and the hilly escarpment on the opposite side (YNP 2000)

OLD IRON SMELTING SITES

The Yankari National Park is also richly endowed with unique features of significant historical importance. The shau shau iron smelting works has about 60 standing shaft furnaces, which are believed to be the largest historical industrial complex of its time in the West Africa Sub-region (Odunlami, 2000)

MUSEUM

The Yankari National Park operates a museum of wildlife trophy at the Wikki camp. The museum is stocked with trophies of wildlife parts such as skins, tusks, bones, horns and full mounts of some wildlife game species of the park, an art known as taxidermy. The museum not only serves as attractions but also as wildlife conservation education centre (Odunlami, 2000). Also, the relics of animals, hunting gears and traps retrieved from poachers are displayed there.

TOURISTS FACILITIES

The Yankari National Park has many facilities to compliment and enhance visitors experience in the park in addition to the park's tourists resources.

CONFERENCE FACILITIES

There is a reception complex, which houses a conference hall with capacity for 100 people. The hall has its own coffee room and toilet facilities, as well as souvenir and provision shops (Odunlami, 2000)

CATERING AND ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES

The services of the park is supported with standard restaurants which serve both continental and African means for delight. Similarly, visitor accommodation is provided but in traditional styled, modestly furnished and air conditioned chalets. The chalets consist of different accommodation units and categories. Apart from the 110 furnished chalets, there is also student aim low-income hostel accommodation. There is also a bar as well as discotheque, portable water, electricity and satellite television sets.

SPORTS.

Sporting facilities at the park includes: lawn tennis, badminton, squash, table tennis, dart and card games (Marguba, 2000)

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