Exploring the Health Implications of Nature Park Outdoor Recreation

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Abstract
The benefits of physical and outdoor recreation on human health and well-being cannot be overemphasized. Nature parks are places for people to recreate, connect with nature, have fun, and find mental, physical, and spiritual health and social well-being. The implication of outdoor recreation on human health was investigated in this study using Lekki Conservation Centre (LCC) and Lekki Urban Forestry and Animal Shelter Initiative (LUFASI) in Lagos State, Nigeria. A well-structured questionnaire was administered to 200 respondents at both sites, and data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and Chi-Square. Findings revealed thirteen (13) recreational resources in LCC and ten (10) were identified in LUFASI nature parks (categorized into both natural and non-natural attractions). Furthermore, a higher percentage of the study respondents were female (51%), singles (56%), and 65% were 18–45 years old. In addition, 51.5% have had between 6 and 10 years of outdoor experience, and most visitors travel with their families and friends. Observing nature, wildlife, forest, wildflower, and outdoor court games prompted their visit to outdoor recreation nature parks. Moreover, spending time with family and friends (4.47) was their major motivation for outdoor recreation participation. The most significant health benefit attained by visiting was social well-being (38%), followed by physical well-being (34.5%) and mental well-being (27.5%). Nature encourages more social interaction and brings people together had the highest mean value (4.32) for social health implication, physical health implication was "improved physical wellness" with a mean value of 3.78, and the mental health implication was that "activities in the natural environment improves mood" with the mean value of 3.89. Furthermore, 91% of the visitors to these nature parks were satisfied and pledged their loyalty to revisit and recommend the parks to others. A significant relationship exists between visitors'motivation for nature park outdoor recreation and their age (χ^2=75.530, p=0.014) and education (χ^2=74.064, p=0.019). Hence conservation of more green areas is hereby encouraged to harness the health benefits these sites provide.

Keywords: nature parks, visitors, health benefits, conservation, recreation

Introduction

According to [1], outdoor recreation requires voluntary leisure time participation, occurs outdoors, and involves interaction with resources and the natural environment. Nature parks consist mainly of landscape protection areas or nature conservation areas that are to be developed or managed consistently. National parks are the most well-known site for tourists and visitors from the categories of protected areas [2]

A term that is used, one that overlaps with the definitions of outdoor recreation, is nature-based tourism. Nature-based tourism is the fastest-growing tourism branch, as its demand has been rising steadily [3]. It is an essential segment of the international and domestic tourism industry throughout the world, which has been expanding rapidly over the past decades, and further growth is expected in the future with a continuous growth from an estimated 7% of global tourism in 2007 to as much as 25% by 2020 [4]. Parks play a major role in leisure and recreation for the population of urban areas. According to World Health Statistics 2014, 54% of the world's population lives in urban areas [5]. In the last almost 50 years, there has been an increase in the urban population of 20% with a tendency and forecast to continue the growth of more than 1% per year in the future. Nature parks are designated for a protected landscape using long-term planning and sustainable use; these valuable landscapes are preserved in their present state and promoted for tourism purposes.

The World Tourism Organization of the United Nations (UNWTO) reported that the number of international tourists steadily grew from 25 million in 1950 to 1,235 million in 2016. The UNWTO has predicted it to reach 1.8 billion by 2030 according to the newly released long-term

forecast called Tourism towards 2030 by the UNWTO 2017. The fact that 53% of the total trips in 2016 were for leisure, recreation, and holidays indicates the continuing importance of adequately managing recreational areas, especially wilderness and parks [6]. It points to the necessity of sustainable tourism planning and management, particularly in nature parks. Outdoor recreation offers a wide variety of activities for tourists, such as fitness, viewing, snow and ice-related and adventure activities like hiking, mountain climbing, rock climbing, rafting, boating, swimming, kayaking, wildlife watching, bird watching, sightseeing, camping, skiing, air ballooning.

The natural environment as the key determinant of health is unquestioned. The human relationship with the natural world is deeply intertwined with the human conscious and subconscious mind and is, therefore, not easy to access for analysis. However, researchers and scientists have argued that isolation from the natural world may harm humans' health [7]. When we think of nature parks, we think of places for people to recreate and connect with nature and their history, but they also provide places for people to have fun and find mental, physical, and spiritual health and social well-being [8]. Parks are a great way to encourage physical activity and sustain healthy lifestyles.

Research has confirmed a link between physical activity that takes place outdoors and positive health outcomes and also an association between an indoor, sedentary lifestyle and negative health consequences [9]. There is also evidence that both being outdoors and viewing natural scenes can reduce stress. The links are sufficiently strong that researchers and practitioners in health-related fields are now beginning to identify parks and recreation as a health service. Outdoor recreation's contribution to health can be considered in the context of wellness. [10] defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. This definition moves from a strictly medical model of health toward the concept of well-being. The Alberta Centre for Well-being found out that the concept of well-being or optimal health involves a delicate balance among physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social health and then lists various dimensions, from fitness, nutrition, and stress management to meditation, education, and relationships. Outdoor recreation touches on all those aspects of health and can enhance physical and emotional well-being [9]. Therefore, this research was conducted to unearth the health significance of outdoor recreation parks on visitors to Lekki Conservation Center and LUFASI, Lagos State, Nigeria.

Methodology

Study Area

Lekki Conservation Center

The Lekki Conservation Center (LCC) is one of the foremost tourist attractions in Lagos, Nigeria. It is a natural reserve that sits majestically on 78 hectares of land (that is equivalent to 1170 plots or 195 acres) in the heart of the Lekki Peninsula. The center has grown into one of Africa's prominent and most-diverse urban Nature Parks due to its high species richness. It is located in the coastal environs covering an approximate land area of 78 hectares, extending from kilometer 19 along the Lagos-Epe Expressway and ends up a very close distance to the Atlantic Ocean near Okun Ibeju Village, Eti-Osa Local Government Area in the eastern district of Lagos State. Lekki conservation center has the coordinate of 6.4415°N, 3.5358°E [11].

LUFASI Nature Park

LUFASI is an acronym for Lekki Urban Forestry and Animal Shelter Initiative: a 20,000-hectare reserve owned by an environmental activist Desmond Majekodunmi. It was created in 2015 and dedicated to preserving natural habitats in urban areas for use as a field laboratory to interact with and learn from nature. In addition, LUFASI attempts to address the issue of limited green spaces in urban areas like Lagos, Nigeria, which can provide recreation and aesthetic satisfaction. It is located in Lekki-Epe Expressway, Lagos, Nigeria, and lies within latitude 6.46464°N and longitude 3.654599°E (Figure 1).

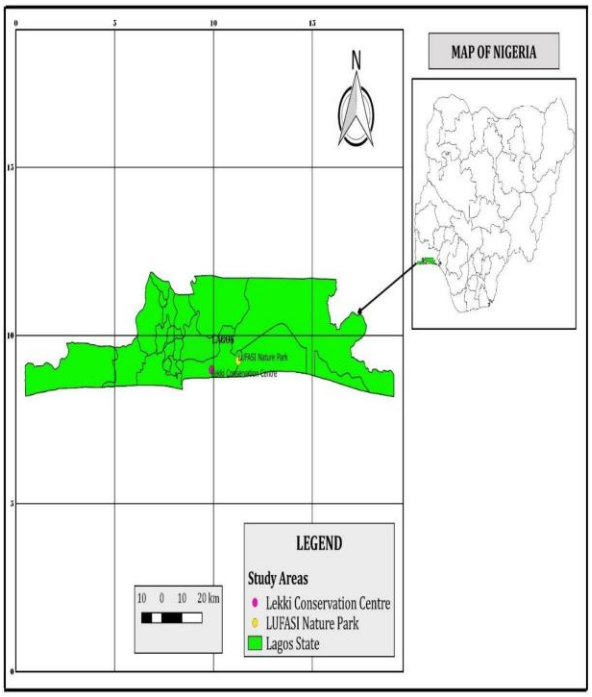

Figure 1: Map of Lagos State showing the location of LCC and LUFACI Nature Parks.

Sampling Procedure

The primary data was obtained through on-site field observation to identify and categorize recreational resources in Lekki Conservation Centre (LCC) and LUFASI Nature Park and the use of a structured questionnaire to ascertain the role of outdoor recreation on the health of the visitors. This study's populations were tourists visiting LCC and LUFASI, and a purposive sampling of two hundred respondents were sample (100 visitors each from LCC and LUFACI). Administration of questionnaire was based on tourist willingness to participate in the study. Data obtained from this study was presented quantitatively. Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21) and results presented descriptively and inferentially through the use of tables and charts and hypotheses were tested using Chi square.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 present the categories of recreational resources in LCC and LUFACI. It was revealed that LCC has thirteen (13) major recreational attractions, which cut across five natural and eight non-natural categories (Plates 1 & 2). In contrast, in LUFACI, ten (10) major recreational attractions were identified in three natural and eight non-natural categories (Plates 3 & 4).

Table 1: Categorization of Recreational Facilities in Lekki Conservation Centre

Recreational Resources	Category
Picnic site	Non-Natural
Tree House	Natural
Nature Station	Natural
Bird Hide	Natural
Swamp Look-out Station	Natural
96-Seater Gazebos	Non-Natural
6 and 8-seater Family Huts	Non-Natural
Floor Games (Ludo, Snake and Ladder, Draught, Chess, and Street Tennis)	Non-Natural
Koi & Tilapia ponds	Non-Natural
Beach Volleyball courts & Spectators' pavilion	Non-Natural
Jungle gym facilities (Zip Lines, and monkey bars, among others)	Non-Natural
Canopy Walk	Non-Natural
Wildlife Viewing (Flora and Fauna)	Natural

Table 2: Categorization of Recreational Facilities in LUFASI Nature Park

Recreational Resources	Category
Children's Play Park	Non-Natural
Forest Tour	Natural
Animal Sanctuary/ Rehabilitation Centre	Non-Natural
Lake Nora	Natural
Lake Moses	Natural
Football Pitch	Non-Natural
Volley Ball Pitch	Non-Natural
Adult Game Area	Non-Natural
Basketball Pitch	Non-Natural
Picnic Areas	Non-Natural

Table 3: Present the socio demographic characteristics of the respondents, which revealed that 50.5% were female and 49.5% were male, a higher percentage (55.5%) were single, the majority (39%) were 26–25 years, 81% attained tertial education while 53% and 47% were Christian and Muslim, respectively.

Table 3: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Frequency (N=200)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	99	49.5
Female	101	50.5
Marital Status		
Single	111	55.5
Married	89	44.5
Age		
<18	36	18.0
18-25	52	26.0
26-45	78	39.0
46-55	34	17.0
Religion		
Christianity	106	53.0
Islam	94	47.0
Education Level		
Primary	4	2.0
Secondary	34	17.0
Undergraduate	79	39.5
Postgraduate	83	41.5

Figure 2 shows that most of the respondents (51.5%) had between 6 and 10 years of outdoor recreation experience, and the least were 10% of the visitors with 16–20 years of outdoor recreation experience. In addition, most of the respondents (36%) have been to the park between 4 and 5 times, 21% of them have been to the park more than five times, 28% of them have been to the park between 2 and 3 times while 15% of them were first timers (Figure 3).

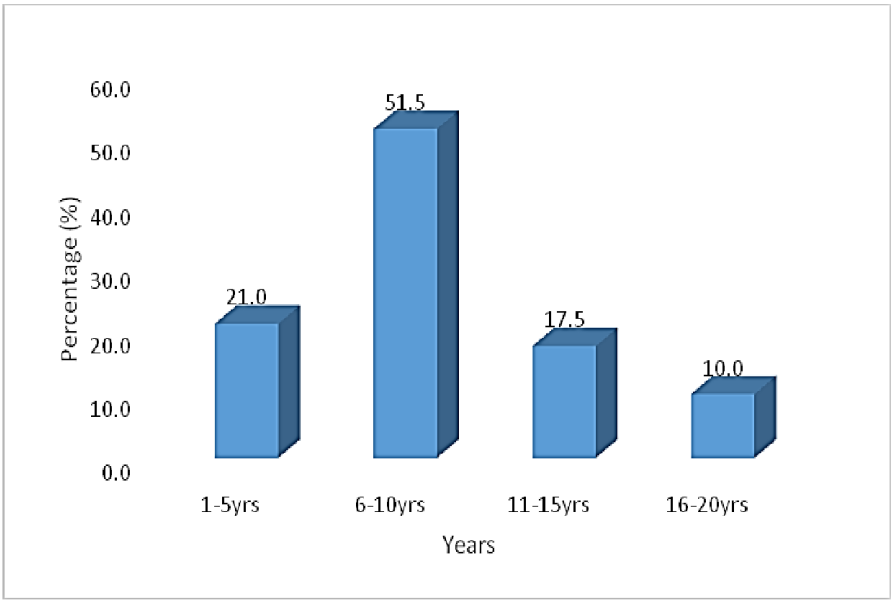

Figure 2: Years of outdoor recreation experience of visitors to Nature parks.

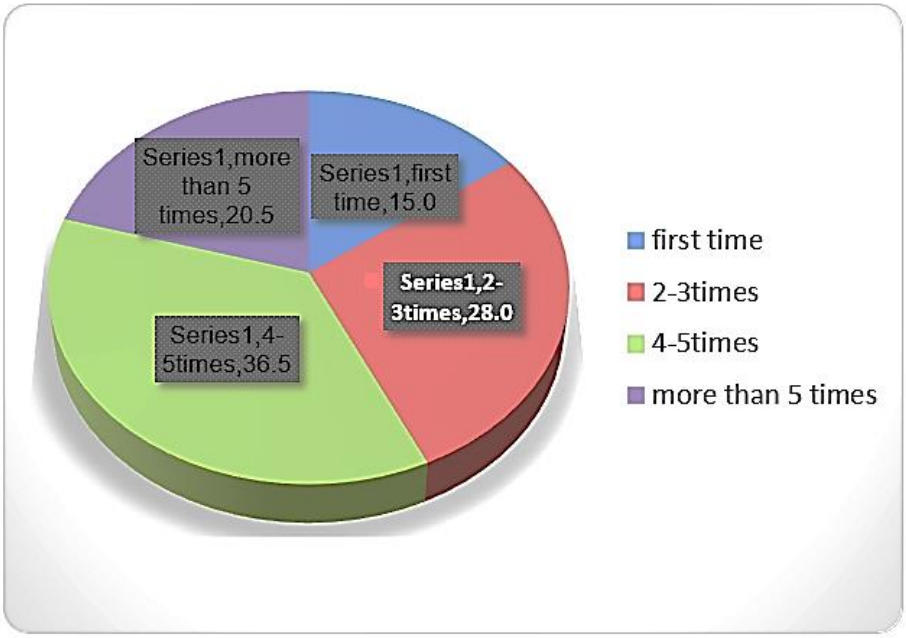

Figure 3: Frequency of visitation to the park.

Visitors' Motivation for Participating

Table 4 reveals the visitors' motivation for participating in outdoor recreation activities at LCC and LUFASI Parks. The mean score ranged from 4.47 to 2.80. "Spend time with family/family" had the highest mean value (4.47), followed by "Enjoy the beauty of natural vegetation" with a mean value of 4.41, "Opportunity to observe and appreciate wildlife (animals and birds) with the mean value of 4.15," "Have a fun day out' with the mean value of 4.11," "Enjoy leisure activity' and 'to exercise as a form of recreation" had mean values of 4.08 respectively while "to socialize" had the lowest mean value (2.80).

Table 4: Visitors' Motivation for Participating in Activities

Variables	SI	VI	I	LI	NI	MEAN	SD
Enjoy leisure activity	63 (31.5%)	90 (45%)	47 (23.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.08	0.739
Have a fun day out	70 (35%)	81 (40.5%)	49 (24.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.11	0.766
Spend time with family/friends	108 (54%)	78 (39%)	14 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.47	0.625
Be in a pleasant outdoor space (appreciation of landscape/environment)	62 (31%)	72 (36%)	66 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.98	0.802
To socialize	12 (6%)	47 (23.5%)	54 (27%)	63 (31.5%)	2 4(12%)	2.80	1.112
Restoration and relief from stress (escape from pressure and stress to relax)	41 (20.5%)	68 (34%)	85 (42.5%)	6 (3%)	0 (0%)	3.72	0.822
Enjoy the beauty of natural vegetation (trees)	115 (57.5%)	51 (25.5%)	34 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.41	0.764
Opportunity to observe and appreciate wildlife (animals and birds)	60 (30%)	110 (55%)	29 (14.5%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	4.15	0.668
To exercise as a form of recreation	62 (31%)	92 (46%)	46 (23%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.08	0.732
Enjoy a variety of attractions and activities offered in the park (have value for money)	22 (11%)	71 (35.5%)	78 (39%)	29 (14.5%)	0 (0%)	3.43	0.871
Play opportunity for children	58 (29%)	88 (44%)	47 (23.5%)	7 (3.5%)	0 (0%)	3.99	0.817
To enjoy the physical, mental, and social well-being benefits that the natural environment provides	61 (30.5%)	100 (50%)	38 (19%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	4.11	0.712
To support the conservation of the natural environment	54 (27%)	83 (41.5%)	50 (25%)	13 (6.5%)	0 (0%)	3.89	0.878

SI=Strongly Important, VI=Very Important, I=Important, LI=Less Important, NI= Not At All Important]

Visitors' Perceived Health Implication for Outdoor Recreation

Table 5 reveals the mean score range of visitors' perception of the health implications of outdoor recreation as 4.32 to 3.07. "Nature encourages more social interaction and brings people together" had the highest mean value of 4.32, which was followed by "Provides opportunity to reduce stress" with a mean value of 4.10, 'Recreation in nature park provides a means to maintain physical activity' with a mean = 4.08, 'Overall improved quality of life can be enhanced' with a mean value of (4.01). In contrast, "Improved rehabilitation from long-term illnesses" had the least mean of 3.07.

Table 5: Visitors' Perception of Health Implications of Outdoor Recreation in Nature Park

Variables	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN	SD
Physical Health/Well-being							
Recreation in nature parks provides a means to maintain physical activity	56 (28%)	103(51.5%)	41 (20.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.08	0.694
It provides the opportunity to reduce stress	52 (26%)	115 (57.5%)	33 (16.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.10	0.647
Overall improved quality of life can be enhanced	67 (33.5%)	68 (34%)	65 (32.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.01	0.814
Outdoor recreation in green spaces makes one feel less tensed, less fatigued, and more vigorous	54 (27%)	69 (34.5%)	76 (38%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	3.88	0.812
Interaction with nature improves levels of concentration and reduces stress	2 (1%)	61 (30.5%)	117 (58.5%)	20 (10%)	0 (0%)	3.23	0.630
Improved rehabilitation from long-term illnesses	3 (1.5%)	60 (30%)	84 (42%)	53 (26.5%)	0 (0%)	3.07	0.790
Well-being effects, such as improved physical health can be enhanced	50 (25%)	77 (38.5%)	52 (26%)	21 (10.5%)	0 (0%)	3.78	0.941
Mental health/well-being							
The aesthetics of the outside and tranquil environment are beneficial for mental well-being	45 (22.5%)	94 (47%)	49 (24.5%)	12 (6%)	0 (0%)	3.86	0.833
Mental well-being benefits such as improved behavior and decreased agitation are enhanced	49 (24.5%)	85 (42.5%)	57 (28.5%)	9 (4.5%)	0 (0%)	3.87	0.835
Contributes to feelings of personal worth and competence, and helps develop a sense of purpose	45 (22.5%)	76 (38%)	64 (32%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.76	0.888
Activities in the natural environment can improve mood	52 (26%)	81 (40.5%)	59 (29.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.89	0.840
Social Health/Well-being							
Nature encourages more social interaction and brings people together	85 (42.5%)	95 (47.5%)	18 (95)	2 (1.0%)	0 (0%)	4.32	0.677
Interaction with green spaces also reduced negative social behavior, such as aggression and violence	8 (4%)	53 (26.5%)	125 (62.5%)	14 (7%)	0 (0%)	3.28	0.649
The social interaction that nature parks provide is important for alleviating stress	32 (16%)	90 (45%)	72 (36%)	6 (3%)	0 (0%)	3.74	0.758

[SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree]

Figure 4 revealed that most (38%) of the visitors had social well-being as the most significant health benefit attained, whereas 34.5% had it as physical well-being, while 27.5% indicated the most significant health benefit as mental well-being. Moreover, the highest percentage (47%) of the visitors were moderately satisfied; 44% were very satisfied with their recreation experience in the park, while only 9% were not satisfied (Figure 5). Revisit intention was high (Figure 6), as 82.5% of the visitors were willing to make a return visit, while 17.5% were not willing.

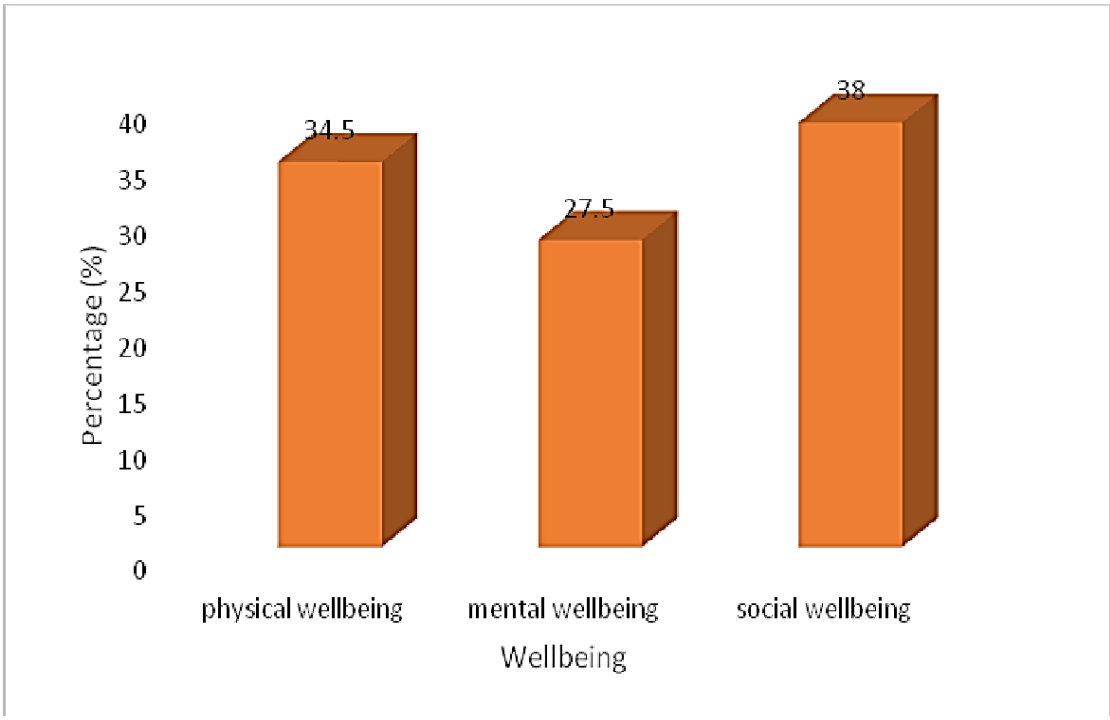

Figure 4: Most significant health benefit attained by visitors.

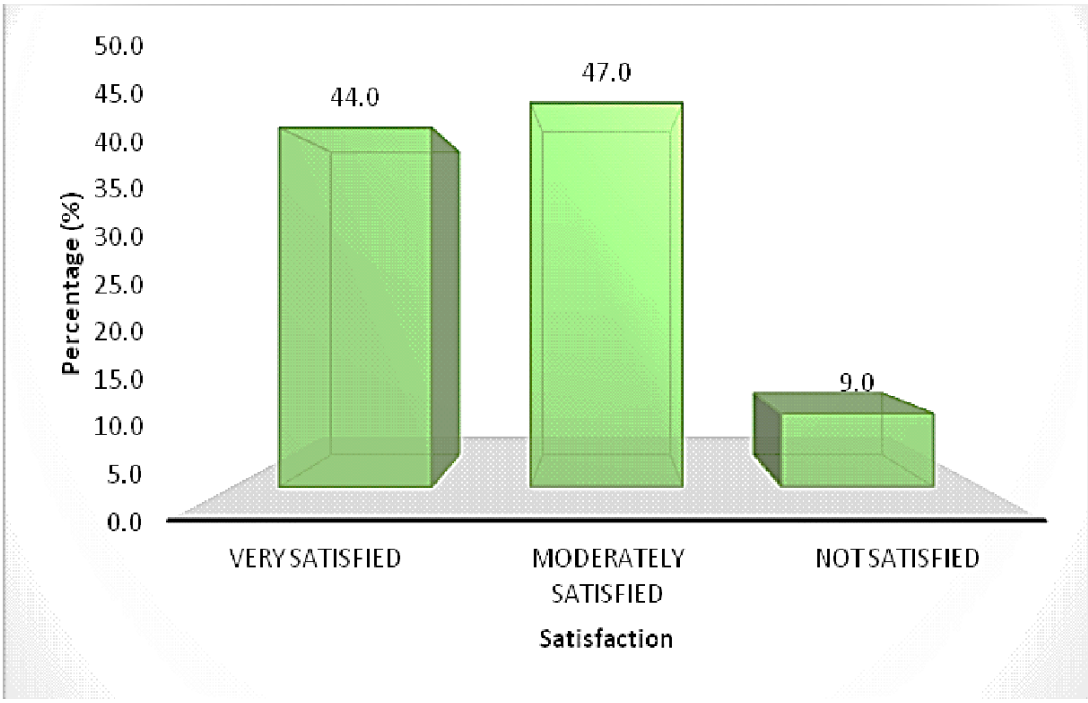

Figure 5: Overall satisfaction of visitors to outdoor recreation in Nature Park.

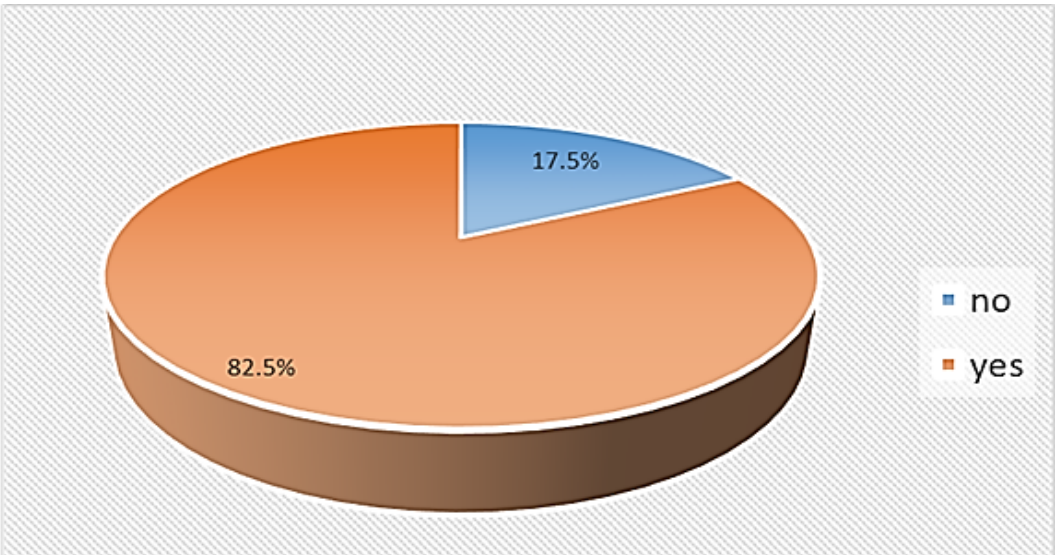

Figure 6: Visitors revisiting the park.

Table 6 presents a chi-square test of association to assess the relationship between tourist motivation to participate in outdoor recreation and sociodemographic characteristics. Since the significant values are less than 0.05, a significant relationship thus exists between tourist motivation and their age (χ^2=75.530, p=0.014), as well as their education (χ^2=74.064, p=0.019). Socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, marital status, and religion (p>0.05) were statistically insignificant.

Table 6: Relationship between the Sociodemographic Characteristics and the Respondents' Motivation

Variables	Chi-square value (χ^2)	Sig. value	Decision
Gender	16.064	0.519	Not significant
Age	75.530	0.014	Significant
Marital status	23.006	0.149	Not significant
Religion	10.597	0.877	Not significant
Education	74.064	0.019	Significant

P<0.05

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, the diversity of tourism resources is the main attraction in LCC and LUFACI Nature Parks. The non-natural resources are embedded within the natural settings of the park for tourists to explore, which are outdoor games, children's playgrounds, and picnic sites, among others. The natural vegetation (forest tours), wildlife, and waterbodies are excellent natural scenery being utilized by tourists during their leisure time, offering various activities, such as wildlife watching, bird watching, sightseeing, camping, fitness, viewing, adventure activities like hiking, climbing, rafting, boating, swimming, kayaking as well as court games like basketball, beach volleyball, badminton. This supports [12] assertion that being outdoors, engaging in active recreation, and visiting natural attractions provide opportunities for people to learn about natural systems and develop attachments to places that contribute to positive emotions, including awe, happiness, joy, and contentment and have been associated with significant stress reduction [13].

In addition, findings from the study reveal that 50.5% of the respondents were female and 49.5% were male, showing a higher number of female visitors; this is consistent with a study by Lin and Chuang (2021), who reported that most of the female participant in recreation. The visitors were singles and aged between 26 and 45 years, which shows they are energetic enough to participate in outdoor recreation. The prime ages of these visitors, who were primarily singles, suggest that they are economically viable to spend money on leisure and recreation as opined by [14]. The visitors were mostly Christians and had tertiary education. This high education enabled them to be knowledgeable about benefits of outdoor recreation and made their responses valid enough to be useful for this study.

The visitors were motivated to visit the sites to spend time with their families and friends and enjoy the beauty of natural vegetation and wildlife. They were also motivated to have a fun day out and enjoy leisure activities through exercising, as supported by [15], who discovered that the motivations of individuals participating in recreation belonged to enjoying the natural environment and escaping from daily life, pursuing a healthy life, pursuing a new type of travel, and pursuing intimacy. Furthermore, they had come to the sites to enjoy the physical, mental and social benefits of the natural environment. This is in line with a study by [16], which revealed learning and sociality, relaxation, independence, achievement, and personal development as motivations for participants in nature activities.

Visitors' perceived opinion on the health implication of nature park recreation was that nature encourages more social interaction and brings people together, which supports [17] that recreation can create social cohesion and increase productivity. They also stated that outdoor recreation reduces stress and provides a means to maintain physical activity. Outdoor recreation can thus improve the quality of life of visitors. This is in line with the assertion that physical health benefits also hold considerable interest and that nature experiences can lead to positive emotions [18]. Accordingly, [19] stated that visiting natural settings and being outdoors are widely recognized as important for improving human health and well-being, enhancing social connections, connecting people with their natural and cultural heritage, generating revenues for use in conservation, contributing to local economies, fostering local or indigenous identity, and developing a conservation consciousness.

The findings from this research also show that outdoor recreation helps to attain social well-being. Social well-being is derived when visitors relate with families, friends, and people at recreational sites; as supported by [15], recreationists desire intimacy with family and friends and have a conversation with family and friends while walking, which can be categorized as socializing.

Opinion of the visitors on their attainment of physical, mental, and social well-being, as well as their motivation to enjoy the beauty of natural vegetation, is in line with the study by [20], which revealed that participants in outdoor recreational activities could be divided into four broad motivation categories: social interaction, physical health and fitness, relaxation and recovery, and natural interaction. Mental well-being stated by the visitors as a health benefit derived from participating in outdoor recreation is also related to [21] report that the main purpose of camping tourists participating in camping activities is to achieve "physical and mental release" "healthy physical fitness," "learning new knowledge," "interpersonal interaction" and "self-challenge." Furthermore, the visitors were satisfied with their recreation experience and health benefits at the sites and pledged their loyalty by revisiting and recommending the parks to other people. This could be because they were satisfied, as supported by [22], that satisfaction has been shown to positively impact tourists' post-purchase behavior, such as recommendations. This study is also in tandem with [23] that satisfaction influences revisit intention.

Furthermore, there is a significant relationship between the sociodemographic characteristics of visitor's age, education, and motivation to participate in outdoor recreation, depicting that age and education of the visitors both influence their motivation to participate in outdoor recreation. Age and education are thus essential factors for recreation sites to consider in planning recreational activities for visitors, as supported by [24]in their survey regarding socio-psychological motives and education motives in international sports tourism, which revealed significant variations.

Conclusion

The enormous health benefits of recreation in nature parks cannot be over-emphasized. This study has been able to show the various recreational resources, facilities, and their categorization in the study areas. The Lekki Conservation Centre (LCC) has more natural features than LUFASI Nature Park (LUFASI). Thirteen (13) recreational resources were identified in LCC, and ten (10) were identified in LUFASI. Findings reveal that the tourists participate in outdoor recreation in the parks by interacting with nature and observing the wildlife. Their motive for participating was to spend time

with family and friends and enjoy the natural vegetation's beauty. On the health implication of outdoor recreation, visitors opined that recreation in nature enhances physical and mental well-being. Most importantly, nature encourages more social interaction and brings people together. It was agreed that outdoor recreation park provides significant benefits and improves their health, especially in social well-being. The study recommends the conservation of more green areas to harness the health benefits that these sites provide.

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APPENDIX

Plate 1: Tree house in Lekki Conservation Center

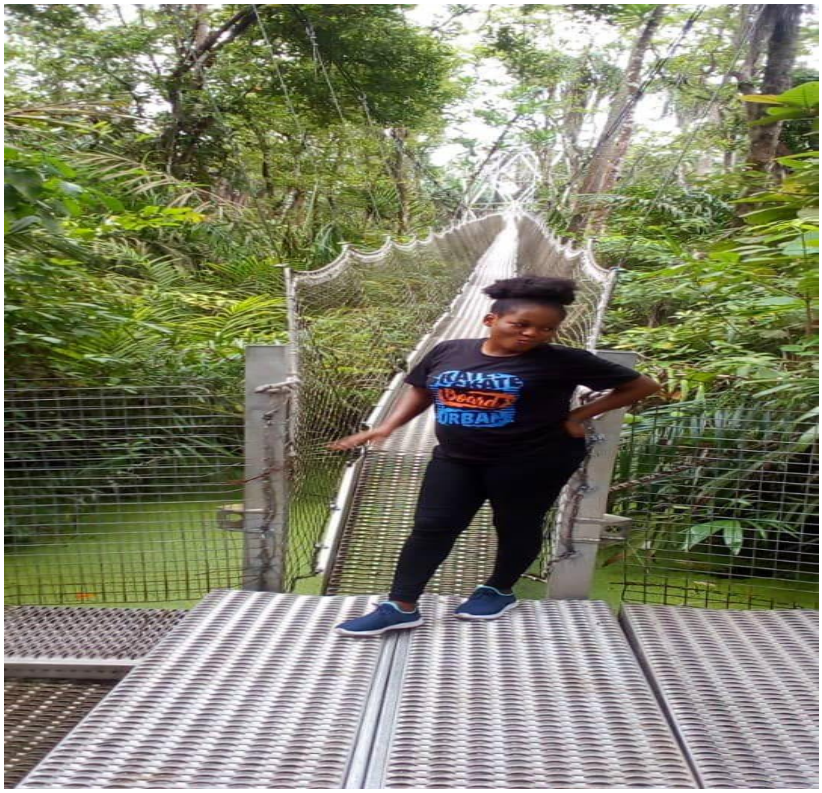

Plate 2: Canopy walkway in Lekki Conservation Center

Plate 3: Lake Nora in LUFASI Nature Park

Plate 4: Children Playground in LUFASI Nature Park