



Evaluation of the Challenges of Urban Parks and Gardens Operations in Port Harcourt Metropolis

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Abstract

The study evaluated the challenges of urban parks and gardens operations in Port Harcourt metropolis. Urban parks play a fundamental role in improving the quality of living in urban areas since they can produce many types of benefits for the inhabitants as it helps to supplement the social and psychological convenience of users such that it promotes relaxation and promote an atmosphere of relationship with natural landscape. The aim of this study is to evaluate the challenges of urban parks and gardens operations in Port Harcourt metropolis. The study adopted the cross sectional research design. Primary and secondary data were used and structured questionnaire was used to gather data. The data for this research were examined using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The results were presented in tables. The results showed that there is statistically significant relationship between level of usage and quality of service (22.29, $p > 0.05$) of urban parks and gardens in Port Harcourt metropolis. The most common challenges in the operation of urban parks and garden facilities is insecurity, poor funding and inadequate maintenance, especially the state owned parks and gardens. The study recommends that there is need for re-evaluation of the place of parks and garden in the development of the city and effective usage. Adequate funding and development of recreation is not only good for the economy, it is a long-term investment in the people. This will grossly affect the development, maintenance and utilization of urban parks and garden in the state.

Keywords: Evaluation, Challenges, Urban Parks, Gardens and Port Harcourt Metropolis.

Introduction

As cities continue to grow, so also the need to optimize the use of open spaces becomes inevitably vital. Urban parks and gardens are structurally and physically planned area or

environment, made-up of various facilities such as sit-out, indoor and outdoor relaxation facilities that help to supplement the social and psychological convenience of users. Thus, it promotes relaxation and atmospheric relationship with natural landscape in which green and eco-friendly gadgets are its major focus. Urban parks and gardens are areas of green space specifically designed for public access, combining a variety of landscape and horticultural elements (sometimes including semi-natural habitats) and facilities for the public (including buildings) and in some cases incorporating sports facilities and/or play areas, at the smaller scale may include community gardens. It is quite clear that rapid urbanization is greatly transforming the spatial pattern of urban land use worldwide and is one of the biggest environmental problems facing many cities worldwide (Graham *et al.*, 2004).

The aim of this study was to examine the challenges of urban parks and gardens operations in Port Harcourt metropolis. Nature's goods and services are the ultimate foundations of life and health even though in modern societies this fundamental dependency may be indirectly displaced in space and time and therefore poorly recognized (World Health Organization, 2005). As numerous parks have been established worldwide to protect nature (Fortin & Gagnon, 1999; Mouton, 2009); and to promote healthy living, encourage social interaction; increase productivity; prevent crimes and anti-social behaviors and enhance of the economic base of the society among others (Obi-Ademola, 2008; Simon, 2015).

Management of urban parks gardens facility is a key factor in the development and utilisation parks and gardens, the use of parks and gardens facilities is determined, by a number of discrete and interrelated factors, and management aspect of facilities are not less important as it comes with a lot of challenges such as security, insufficient fun, poor facilities, poor cooperation from stakeholders etc. All these could consciously or unconsciously establish a type of social filter in the spirit of urban parks and utilisation, as the quality of management determines to a large extent the type of use and availability of leisure services and facilities provided by urban parks and gardens. Some importance of urban parks and gardens: Parks and

gardens delineate open space areas, mostly dominated by vegetation or water, generally reserved for public use, urban parks and gardens may be large or have the shape of smaller pocket parks.

The benefits of urban parks and gardens in cosmopolitan cities in the south-south geopolitical region, most especially Port Harcourt metropolis cannot be over emphasized. Parks and gardens helps in improving our physical and psychological health, also makes the environment more beautiful place to live and works, it provide diverse and quantifiable range of advantage that immensely improves the quality life of the people. Health benefits, the nature of green spaces contribute directly to public health by reducing stress and mental disorders (Ward-Thompson, Roe, Aspinall, Mitchell, Clow, & Miller, 2012), increasing the effect of physical activities (Mitchell, 2012), it as provides opportunities for physical activities, increasing satisfaction of living environment and social interactions (Maas, Van Dillen, Verheij&Groenewegen, 2009). Parks and gardens have long been recognized as key contributor to the human health directly or indirectly, the world is presently faced with enormous challenges that consists great danger to both human and the environment, the consequence of global warming has been conspicuous in our environment due to increase temperature rising of sea levels, long destruction of forest, flooding among others.

Urban parks and tourism, urban parks and gardens do not only provide recreational setting to local residents alone, but also visitors from other parts of the states or countries that may use these green spaces, in some cases especially the high profile parks and gardens such as the central park in New York, such parks are major tourist attraction in their own right, also Obudu cattle ranch and resort in Cross River State in the south- south region of Nigeria, urban parks play significant role in attracting visitors from far and near to the cities for leisure and recreation and also enhancing the attractiveness (beauty) of the cities as a complement to other urban attractions (Majumdar, Deng, Zhang, & Pierskalla, 2011). Nations, parks and green areas often becomes one of the cities signature attraction, quality parks and gardens are

prime marketing tool to attract transits, conventions, businesses etc, parks such as Obudu Cattle Ranch and resort in Cross River State of Nigeria has help to shape the cities identity and has given residents pride.

Urban Parks and House Price, different ways of estimating the economic value of nature have been explored over time, especially in an urban setting, to directly assessing the economic value of green spaces is to study the impact of those spaces on housing prices, if for example parks are valued by property buyers, this must surely reflect in the premium they are willing to pay for the house or apartment, study by Brander and Ketoses (2011) on the impart of green space on properties, concluded that open spaces in general mostly parks and gardens raise the value of properties, even smaller green patches can have a positive influence on property values. In Nigeria for example, many high class citizens and foreigners prefer living in green space areas for comfort and beautiful environment, mostly reserved areas such as the Government Reserve Areas (GRA) where rents are relatively expensive and most of the building there are well designed with trees and green spaces for recreation and other leisure activities.

Urban Parks and Biodiversity, in the past decade research on urban biodiversity has become momentous, not only because of the increasing impact of urbanization on natural ecosystems, but also because of the growing recognition of urban areas as hosts for innovative ways to conserve and promote biodiversity (Savard, Clergeau&Mennechez, 2000). This has led to various global environmental conservations such as the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, the 2007 Curitiba Declaration on Cities and Biodiversity, and the Global Partnership on Cities and Biodiversity launched by among others. United Nations Environmental program UNEP (2012) research have shown that urban parks and gardens due to their high level of habitat and diversity and microhabitat heterogeneity can constitute particularly important hotspots for biodiversity in the city and their primary role is recreational (Cornelius and Hermy, 2004). Parks often have higher species richness than

other types of urban green spaces such as urban woodlands, gardens, green foots, plantings along roadsides, residential areas, institutional grounds direct/federal sites, semi natural grassland etc.

Urban air quality and carbon sequestration, air pollution is generally seen or considered as a major concern in the urban areas as one of the main risk factors contributing to the global burden of disease being associated with excess mortality and morbidity in the urban population Cavangh, Zawar-Reza & Wilson (2009). Paolttiet *al.*, (2011) maintains that pollution removal varies among cities depending on the amount of tree cover, with increased tree cover leading to greater total removal. Trees lowers air temperature though transpiration, which affects the photochemistry of Ozone and reduces Ozone production, parks and gardens contributes immensely to reduction of air pollution for the benefit of human and the environment, urban parks and gardens and other vegetation also play significant role in reduction of urban air pollution which helps to cut down health challenges, finding have shown that the vegetation and parks can remove large of mount of air borne pollutant. Hence, more parks and gardens are required in Port Harcourt metropolis and its environs considering the high level of pollution, caused by the activities of oil exploration in communities in Rivers State, thus parks, gardens and other form of vegetation are required to cut down the amount of pollutant for healthy living.

Urban parks and recreational opportunities, play is very important for both old and young mostly the smaller children, playing is learning and it have been proved to be a critical elements in a child's future success, play helps kid develop muscle strength and coordinating language, cognitive thinking and reasoning abilities. Play is a scaffold for development, it is like a vehicle for increasing natural structures, and a means by which all children practice skills they will need in later life play, also teaches children how to interact and cooperate with others there by laying foundation for success in school and the working world . Lack of quality parks and recreational facilities could be one of the factors of high crime, been

experienced in Nigeria where juvenile delinquency and youth crime are on a very high rate. Hence, success through academics and recreational support is very necessary in Port Harcourt to help in building the future leaders of the region. For it is very obvious that the cost of building parks and gardens is lesser than the cost of building prisons and employing more police force, many communities in Nigeria lack spaces and other recreational facilities that could help their youths to stay out of trouble. Green spaces helps to build community as many research has shown that residents or neighbourhoods with greenery and open spaces are more likely to enjoy strong social ties than those who live sounded in barren concrete. Parks and green spaces are vital component in any residential or neighbourhood, spaces dedicated and devoted to satisfying of active or pass recreation must be treated with care because the quality of the open spaces, parks, gardens and other recreational facilities could be a direct reflection of the quality of life enjoyed by the residents and neighbourhood.

Method and Data Collection

The study was conducted in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria, which covers two local government areas, namely Harcourt City Council and Obio/Akpor Local Government. The study adopted a cross sectional research design. The population of this study was drawn from visitors and staff of urban parks and gardens in Port Harcourt metropolis. Purposive sampling technique was used for this study, twenty five (25) functioning urban parks and gardens was selected for this study. Hence twenty four (24) participants were drawn from each of the twenty five parks and gardens in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The research made use of both primary and secondary sources of data. Structured questionnaire were designed to elicit information on the challenges of urban parks and gardens operation in Port Harcourt metropolis. The questionnaires were designed to assess the challenges faced in managing parks and gardens recreational facilities in Port Harcourt in metropolis. The data for this research were examined using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Results and Discussion

The management and staff of the various recreational centers were surveyed on their view of the challenges faced by their establishment in the operations of urban parks and gardens in Port Harcourt Metropolis. They were asked to comment on the following: Adequacy of present facilities to cater to their patrons, estimate of total number of patrons admitted on a regular basis, availability of trained personnel to support recreation establishment, adequacy of current revenue regime to sustain the establishment.

Addressing the adequacy of the current facility at the recreational centre to cater to their patrons, forty-six respondents provided statement about their facilities. About 70% of these affirmed that their current facilities have adequate equipment and amenities to cater for their patrons. The remain are of the opinion that there is need to improve the number of amenities and equipment to adequately cater for their patrons.

A cross tabulation was carried out to examine the interaction between the response on adequacy of facilities and the estimate of patrons they admit on a regular basis. Table 4.9 shows that there are just about 9% who estimated that their patrons are likely to be less than 100 per day. From this group only 2% of the total respondents affirmed that they do have facilities to cater for this number. However, the remaining estimated that they usually have more than 100 patrons per day on a regular basis. Among this group 64% of the total respondents affirmed that they have adequate equipment to handle such number at their recreational centres. About 26% estimated that they cater to more than 100 patrons per day on a regular basis and they do not have the facilities to handle such number.

Table 1: Distribution of responses on availability of trained personnel

| Availability of trained personnel | Frequency |
|--|------------------|
| Adequate | 76 |
| Not Adequate | 24 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Author’s analysis

Responding to question on the availability of trained personnel for their operations out of the forty-six respondents (management and staff), thirty-five affirmed that they can recruit trained personnel for their operations (Table 1), while the remaining are of the opinion that recruitment of trained personnel is challenging. When their responses for this was compared to their response about the estimate of patrons they admit on a regular basis, the cross tabulation (Table 2) revealed how their response is distributed across the perceived size of their operations. This comparism allowed for understanding of how number of patrons (size of operations) relate to perception of recruitment of trained personnel.

Table 2: Cross tabulation of responses on availability of trained personnel for operation and estimate of regular patrons admitted

| Availability of trained personnel | Estimate of regularly admitted Patrons | | Total |
|--|---|-------------------------|--------------|
| | Less than 100 | Greater than 100 | |
| Yes | 2 | 31 | 33 |
| No | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| Total | 4 | 38 | 42 |

Source: Author’s analysis

About 79% of the respondents irrespective of their estimate of the size of their operations i.e. admitting below 100 (5%) and those admitting above 100 (74%) affirmed that they can recruit trained staff for their operations. About 5% of the respondents opined that they are not able to recruit trained personnel and their operations is small (admitting less than 100 patrons

on a regular basis). On the other side i.e. more than 100 patrons affirmed difficulty in recruitment of trained personnel, around 17% of the respondents can be found with this response combination.

Respondents were asked to comment about the ability of their establishment to generate revenue enough revenue to keep them afloat i.e. adequacy of current revenue regime to sustain the establishment. The majority (60%) agreed that their current revenue is adequate to sustain the running of their recreational facilities operations, while the remaining of the opinion that this is not possible (Table 3).

Table 3: Distribution of response about adequacy of current revenue regime in sustaining the establishment

| Adequacy of current revenue regime in sustaining the establishment | Frequency |
|--|------------|
| Adequate | 60 |
| Not Adequate | 40 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Author’s analysis

This gave an indication that most people in the business of recreational centre believe that their current operations despite the challenges are economically sustainable. While they may be in the majority, this is also a substantial number among the operators who believed that their operation is not economically sustainable. This may not be different across many businesses in Nigeria due to the current economic condition of the country, many businesses and establishments are struggling to keep afloat, this is further compounded by the security challenges in Port Harcourt.

Table 4: Challenges indicated and proportion of respondents identifying such challenges

| Challenges Indicated | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Security | 77.6 |
| Insufficient Fund | 28.6 |
| Poor Facilities | 14.3 |
| Poor Cooperation from Stakeholders | 8.2 |

Source: Author's analysis

To further understand the challenges their operations is currently facing, the respondents were asked list those challenges. Four major problems were identified and distribution of responses in relation to these were summarized in Table 4. Out of the forty-nine respondents, about 78% consider security as one of the most important challenge facing their operations. Fourteen respondents consider fund as a major challenge. While poor facilities were indicated as challenges only 14% of the respondents indicated that this is a major challenge. Some of the respondents (8%) also indicated lack of cooperation from patrons and the wider framework of stakeholders as a major challenge for their operation. These stakeholders include government agents, security agents, community representative, unruly patrons etc.

The respondents were further questioned to provide potential solutions that could improve recreational services in the City. The responses were summarised in Table 5

Table 5: Distribution of response on the ways to improve recreational services in the City

| Ways to Improve | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Improved Security | 69.4 |
| Publicity/Awareness | 4.1 |
| Facilities/Infrastructure Development | 22.4 |
| Human Resources Improvement. | 6.1 |

Source: Author's analysis

The issue of security was reiterated again in their response, with most respondents highlighting that improvement security situation will bring about improvement in patronage and potential investment in the sector. Most are of the opinion that they are sceptical in investing since patrons are lukewarm about recreational activities due to security situations. Despite some of them investing in the employment of security operatives at their establishments, they feel that most patron are still afraid of the journey from their origin to come to the destination (recreational centres). Four other measures were identified (Table 3). Across all the public facilities (government owned recreational centres) the improvement in facilities and infrastructure within the recreation centres was identified as a way of enhancing patronage and recreational services. Essentially, they are of the opinion that some to the facilities need upgrade and/or replacement, while there are still operational, replacement of upgrade could bring about a welcome improvement services delivery. Funding was another issue that was highlighted with 16% expressing the opinion that improvement in funding and sponsorship will bring commensurate improvement in services delivery for the patrons. Improvement in public awareness and improvement of human resources condition (increase staffing and remuneration) were also identified as some way by which the sector can be improved.

Identified Problems and Challenges for Management From the cross-section of the operators, recruitment of trained staff and revenue generation were not deemed to be hindrances for their operations. However, Security was a topical issue among the operators, with an overwhelming majority highlighting it as a major hindrance in their operation. This agrees with many other works which shows that security is an issue which when not address can have a negative impact on tourism and recreation and this is true for any country in the world

(George, 2003; Popescu, 2011; Prashyanusorn, Kaviya, & Yupapin, 2010). Effectively, security challenge has become one of the barriers limiting access and participation in recreational activities. The issues of facilities maintenance, upgrade and development of the necessary infrastructure were also highlighted as major challenges facing the recreational facilities. This was further buttressed by the lack of funding and sponsorship mentioned by some of the operators. These issues boiled down to the perception of the management of the facilities especially the government owned facilities of the importance and relevance of such facilities. Without adequate understanding of the relevance of recreation, the appropriate funding required is not likely to be earmarked and when it is, there is a high probability that it would not be spent judiciously. Essentially, despite knowledge and understanding of the importance of recreation changing attitude and behaviour towards recreation at the operators and management level is a challenge.

Conclusions

The most common theme in relation to problems and challenges of operation of these facilities is security. With most operators, reiterating the negative impact the security climate of the City on their operations. Clearly, the security challenge becomes is one of the barriers limiting access and participation in recreational activities. Furthermore, funding and infrastructure development around the facilities were also highlighted as factors militating against participation and many of the government owned facilities was a reoccurring theme.

Recommendations

There is need for re-evaluation of the place of parks and garden in the development of the city. While the government owned facilities were part of the plans for the city, the surrounding land use has changed considerably making them look like a sore thumb within the city. All the privately owned are not planned into the city, therefore their location usually contradicts the surrounding land use. Effective and proper planning and incorporation of recreation into such plan will address this issue.

Also, adequate funding and development of recreation is not only good for the economy, it is also a long-term investment in the people. This will grossly affect the development, maintenance and utilization of urban parks and garden in the state.

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