



Exploring Community Engagement in Ecotourism Development in Ghana: Power Dynamics, Benefit Sharing, and Sustainability

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Abstract

Ecotourism is widely promoted as a means of combining biodiversity conservation with local socioeconomic development. However, evidence from the Global South indicates that the benefits of ecotourism are not automatically distributed equitably and that community participation may remain limited to consultation rather than meaningful decision-making. This paper critically reviews community engagement in Ghanaian ecotourism through a political ecology perspective, with particular attention to power dynamics, engagement quality, benefit-sharing equity, and sustainability. The review combines a structured literature synthesis with a bibliometric analysis of 327 publications identified through a documented search and screening process covering 2000-2025. The bibliometric analysis uses Bibliometrix, VOSviewer, Dimensions, and CitNetExplorer to examine publication performance, citation structures, thematic co-occurrence, co-authorship, institutional collaboration, and temporal keyword evolution. The evidence indicates a shift from predominantly descriptive and nature-centred studies toward greater attention to governance, equity, livelihoods, and institutional arrangements. Ghanaian cases, including Kakum National Park, Boabeng-Fiema, and Wechiau, demonstrate substantial variation in community decision-making authority and benefit-sharing arrangements. The paper distinguishes findings supported by the reviewed literature from its own conceptual propositions and develops an integrated, feedback-based framework that links institutional context and power dynamics to engagement quality, benefit-sharing equity, and economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Five directional hypotheses are proposed and operationalized for future empirical

testing. The paper argues that sustainable ecotourism in Ghana depends not only on conservation and tourism revenues but also on meaningful local authority, equitable benefit distribution, procedural inclusion, and institutional arrangements capable of adapting to social and technological change.

Subject Areas

Environmental Sciences

Keywords

Community Engagement, Ecotourism, Political Ecology, Benefit Sharing, Institutional Bricolage, Sustainable Livelihoods, Ghana

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Ecotourism has developed from a relatively specialized conservation activity into an important component of sustainable tourism and rural development. Early formulations positioned ecotourism at the intersection of biodiversity conservation, environmental education, and socioeconomic benefits for host communities [1] [2]. Subsequent critical tourism scholarship has questioned the assumption that conservation, tourism development, and community welfare automatically reinforce one another, emphasizing the possibility of unequal access to resources, decision-making institutions, and tourism revenues [3] [4] instead.

The distinction between minimalist and comprehensive ecotourism is useful for examining this tension. Minimalist approaches emphasize nature-based visitor experiences and relatively narrow environmental objectives, whereas comprehensive approaches incorporate wider stakeholder participation, local empowerment, and broader social and institutional outcomes [5] [6]. This distinction is treated here as an analytical continuum rather than as a categorical claim that all Ghanaian initiatives follow one model.

Ghana provides an important setting for examining this continuum because ecotourism and community-based natural-resource initiatives operate through interactions among state agencies, traditional authorities, communities, private operators, NGOs, and conservation interests. The distribution of authority among these actors affects who participates in decisions, who controls tourism resources, and who receives benefits. Studies of Kakum Conservation Area, for example, report substantial reliance on consultative or passive participation rather than comprehensive community control [7] [8].

The central argument of this paper is that ecotourism sustainability cannot be adequately assessed through visitor numbers, revenues, employment, or conservation outcomes alone. These outcomes must be examined in relation to the political and institutional processes through which tourism resources and benefits

are governed [9] [10].

1.2. Research Problem and Objectives

The principal problem addressed is the gap between the participatory aspirations of ecotourism and the actual distribution of decision-making power and benefits. Community participation may exist formally while remaining limited in substantive terms, and tourism benefits may reach local populations without producing equitable or durable empowerment.

The paper has four objectives: 1) to synthesize literature on community engagement and ecotourism development in Ghana; 2) to examine how power relations and institutional arrangements influence engagement quality and benefit distribution; 3) to map the development of the research field through bibliometric analysis; and 4) to develop an integrated conceptual framework and testable hypotheses for future empirical research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Literature Review Protocol

The study combines a structured critical literature review with bibliometric analysis. The review covers 2000-2025 and focuses on community engagement, community participation, ecotourism, community-based tourism, benefit sharing, empowerment, governance, political ecology, sustainability, and livelihoods in Ghana.

The bibliometric search was conducted using the Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection databases, with Dimensions used in the broader metadata workflow. The documented search strategy was applied to Title, Abstract, and Keywords using the following Boolean query: (“community engag*” OR “community particip*” OR “community involv*” OR “stakeholder particip*”) AND (ecotourism OR “nature-based tourism” OR “community-based tourism” OR “sustainable tourism”) AND (Ghana) AND (“power*” OR “benefit shar*” OR “equit*” OR “governance” OR sustainab* OR “livelihood*”).

Eligibility was restricted to English-language journal articles and review papers published between 2000 and 2025. The search yielded 412 records. Records were merged across databases, and duplicates were removed. Screening then proceeded in two stages: title/abstract screening followed by full-text assessment for relevance to the core relationship among community engagement, power, benefits, and sustainability in a Ghanaian ecotourism context. The final analytical corpus contained 327 publications.

The substantive synthesis was organized around four analytical themes: community engagement and empowerment; political ecology and power; benefit-sharing and local economic retention; and sustainability outcomes. Literature was used to establish empirical or conceptual findings, while the integrated framework and hypotheses are explicitly presented as propositions developed by the author from the synthesis.

2.2. Bibliometric Analysis

The bibliometric procedure followed established guidance for transparent bibliometric research [11] [12]. Metadata were exported in CSV and BibTeX formats. Cleaning included standardization of keyword variants, author-name disambiguation, institutional-name harmonization, and reference-format consistency. For example, variants of benefit sharing were standardized, and CBNRM was harmonized with community-based natural resource management.

Bibliometrix in R was used for performance analysis and descriptive statistics, including annual publication growth, author and journal productivity, institutional rankings, and citation indicators. VOSviewer was used for science mapping, including author-keyword co-occurrence, co-authorship networks, institutional and country collaboration, and overlay visualization of temporal keyword change. Cit-NetExplorer was used to examine citation networks and identify influential intellectual lineages. Dimensions supported metadata and science-mapping workflows.

The indicators were selected to address four research questions: publication performance and influential contributors; intellectual structure through citation and co-citation relationships; thematic structure through keyword clusters and temporal evolution; and research gaps and future directions. The bibliometric findings are interpreted descriptively and are not treated as causal evidence.

2.3. Measurement Strategy for Future Empirical Research

The proposed framework is designed for subsequent mixed-method empirical testing. Power dynamics can be measured through decision-making authority, control over tourism resources, representation in governing bodies, and perceived influence over major tourism decisions. Engagement quality can be measured through an index based on information access, consultation frequency, influence over decisions, collaborative involvement, delegated authority, and perceived responsiveness.

Benefit-sharing equity can be operationalized through both distributive and procedural indicators.

Distributive indicators include the proportion of tourism revenue retained locally, access to employment and enterprise opportunities, local procurement, and household tourism income. Procedural indicators include participation in decisions about benefit allocation, transparency of accounts, and perceived fairness.

Economic sustainability can be assessed through tourism income, employment stability, local procurement, enterprise survival, and local economic retention. Social sustainability can be assessed through perceived empowerment, social cohesion, inclusion of women and youth, trust, and tourism-related conflict.

Environmental sustainability can be assessed using conservation participation, compliance with conservation rules, perceived resource condition, and available biodiversity or resource-pressure indicators. Digital access can be measured through infrastructure access, digital literacy, mobile-money use, online marketing, and online booking or sales. Gender, age, lineage, and other relevant social characteristics can be incorporated as interaction or stratification variables.

3. Literature Review and Critical Synthesis

3.1. Ecotourism and the Minimalist-Comprehensive Debate

Ecotourism was initially framed as a mechanism for linking environmental conservation with socioeconomic development [1] [2]. Critical scholarship has subsequently emphasized the political and distributional consequences of tourism development [3] [4]. Weaver's minimalist-comprehensive distinction provides a useful analytical lens [5].

The Ghanaian evidence should be stated cautiously. Rather than claiming that Ghanaian ecotourism as a whole is minimalist, the reviewed evidence suggests that some initiatives retain minimalist characteristics when conservation and visitor attraction are prioritized, while community decision-making remains limited. In Kakum, empirical research has documented community expectations, experiences, and participation constraints, including concerns about the extent of local influence over tourism decisions [7] [8] [13]. These findings provide Ghana-specific support for the proposition that some ecotourism arrangements remain closer to the minimalist end of the continuum.

The original claim that the sector is driven by foreign-exchange objectives is therefore reformulated. Foreign-exchange generation and visitor attraction are legitimate national tourism objectives, but the literature does not justify treating them as the sole or universal drivers of Ghanaian ecotourism. The analytical concern is whether these objectives are pursued without corresponding institutional mechanisms for community agency and equitable benefit distribution.

3.2. Community Engagement and Empowerment

Arnstein's ladder conceptualizes participation from manipulation and tokenism to partnership, delegated power, and citizen control [14]. Tosun identifies operational, structural, and cultural constraints to community participation in developing-country tourism [15]. Scheyvens further emphasizes that empowerment has economic, psychological, social, and political dimensions [16].

Ghanaian evidence indicates that formal participation does not necessarily equal empowerment. Research around Kakum has documented consultative and passive forms of participation and concerns regarding decisions made by external institutions [7] [8]. This distinction supports the treatment of engagement quality as a measurable construct rather than a binary variable.

3.3. Political Ecology and Power Dynamics

Political ecology directs attention to the relationship among environmental change, resource access, institutions, and competing interests [9]. In tourism, power operates across state, customary, private, community, and international levels [10]. Ghanaian ecotourism, therefore, involves negotiations among state agencies, traditional authorities, local communities, private capital, and NGOs.

Land tenure and institutional authority affect who can access tourism resources and who can represent community interests [17] [18]. Traditional authorities can

facilitate tourism governance, but can also function as gatekeepers where representation is narrow. The community should therefore not be treated as a homogeneous actor. Gender, age, lineage, wealth, and social position may influence access to opportunities and decision-making.

3.4. Benefit-Sharing and Sustainability

Benefit sharing is both an economic and a political process. The amount of revenue reaching communities matters, but so does who participates in decisions about how benefits are generated and allocated. The Ghanaian cases reviewed in the original study demonstrate variation among state-led, community-oriented, and NGO-facilitated arrangements.

Kakum is characterized by stronger state and institutional influence and more limited community decision-making. Boabeng-Fiema provides an example of stronger community and traditional-authority involvement, while Wechiau illustrates an NGO-facilitated model in which community development funds and local institutions play important roles (Table 1). These differences show why tourism revenue alone cannot serve as a sufficient sustainability indicator.

Table 1. Comparative governance and benefit-sharing models in Ghanaian ecotourism.

Site (Context)	Dominant Power Axis	Engagement Model	Benefit-Sharing Mechanism	Core Sustainability Challenge
Kakum NP (State-Led)	State-Corporate Alliance	Consultative/Passive	Centralized 40% revenue share via District Assembly; opaque and delayed.	Economic leakage; elite capture by external operators and local elites.
BoabengFiema (Community)	Traditional Authority	Self-Mobilization/Citizen Control	Direct revenue retention managed internally by the community.	Social exclusion (lineage/gender); limited scalability and capital.
Wechiau (NGO-Facilitated)	NGO-Mediated Trust	Functional/Interactive	Trust fund model channeling revenue into community development projects.	Donor dependency; vulnerability to collapse post-project exit.

Source: Synthesized from Akyeampong (2011) [7]; Cobbinah *et al.* (2015, 2017) [8] [19]; Mensah (2018) [20].

Sustainability is treated as multidimensional. Economic sustainability concerns income, employment quality, local procurement, and retention of tourism value. Social sustainability concerns inclusion, cohesion, empowerment, and perceived fairness. Environmental sustainability concerns conservation behaviour, resource condition, and community support for resource protection.

4. Bibliometric Findings and Research Gaps

4.1. Publication and Thematic Trends

The 327-publication corpus indicates a maturing research field. The documented analysis identifies three broad phases: a nascent period from 2000-2010, characterized by fewer than 5 publications per year and foundational case studies; a growth

phase from 2011-2019, with approximately 15 - 25 publications annually; and an acceleration phase after 2020, with output exceeding 35 publications annually. The final phase represents roughly half of the corpus and reflects increased scholarly attention to sustainability, governance, and critical approaches.

The field is distributed across interdisciplinary journals, with Sustainability, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Management Perspectives, World Development, and Tourism Management identified among the leading outlets. The University of Ghana and KNUST emerge as important institutional hubs, while international collaboration remains significant (Figure 1).

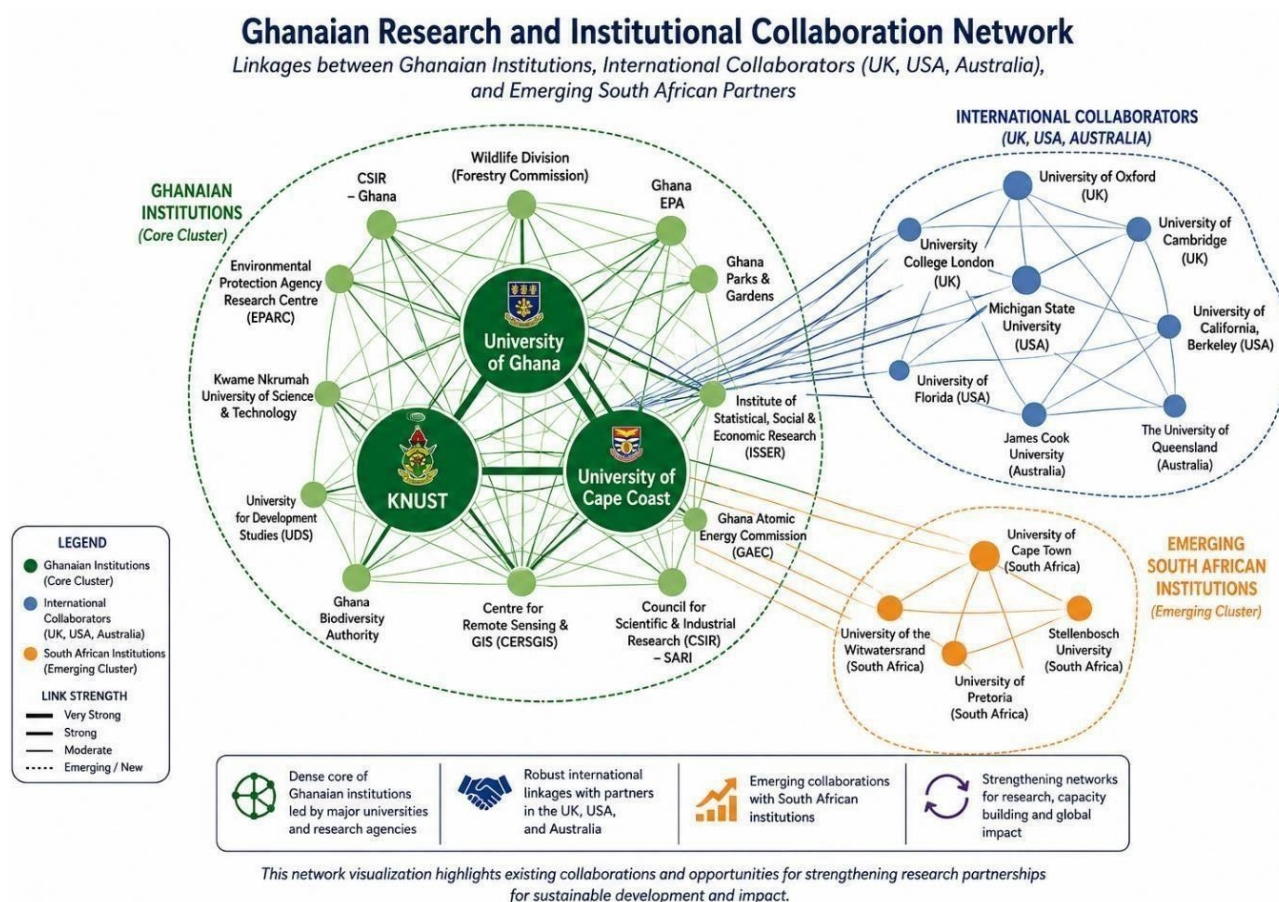


Figure 1. Ghanaian research and institutional collaboration network (author's illustration).

The thematic direction of the field has also changed. Earlier work was more strongly descriptive and case-based, whereas recent research increasingly addresses governance, equity, livelihoods, and institutional arrangements. Keyword-overlay analysis indicates a movement toward more critical themes and a broader sustainability orientation.

4.2. Intra-Community Heterogeneity

The literature frequently treats communities as homogeneous units. Future studies should disaggregate outcomes by gender, age, lineage, migrant status, wealth,

and other locally relevant dimensions. This is necessary because tourism benefits and decision-making authority may be distributed unevenly within the same community.

4.3. Temporal Dynamics

Cross-sectional research provides limited evidence about how participation and benefit-sharing arrangements evolve. Longitudinal research is needed to examine institutional change and responses to economic, environmental, and tourism-market shocks.

4.4. Digital Disruption

Digital technologies such as mobile money, online booking, social media, and digital marketing may improve market access for local entrepreneurs while also creating new exclusion for people with limited infrastructure or digital literacy. The digital effect should therefore be tested as a conditional relationship rather than assumed to be uniformly positive.

5. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

5.1. Integrated Conceptual Framework

The framework proposes a feedback relationship: Institutional Context and Power Dynamics influence Community Engagement Quality; engagement quality influences Benefit-Sharing Equity; benefit-sharing equity contributes to Economic, Social, and Environmental Sustainability; and sustainability outcomes feed back into subsequent power relations and institutional arrangements. Gender, age, lineage, and digital access are treated as conditioning variables (**Figure 2**).

The framework distinguishes evidence from propositions. The reviewed literature establishes that participation, power, benefit distribution, and sustainability are recurrent issues. The specific causal ordering and feedback relationships proposed here are theoretical propositions requiring empirical validation.

5.2. Operationalization of Constructs

Table 2 operationalizes the framework's constructs into measurable dimensions, indicators, and possible measurement approaches for future empirical testing.

5.3. Hypotheses

H1: Greater community decision-making authority is positively associated with higher community engagement quality and perceived fairness of benefit distribution.

H2: Higher distributive and procedural benefit-sharing equity is positively associated with social sustainability and negatively associated with intra-community conflict.

H3: Greater institutional flexibility in combining customary, state, and donor governance arrangements is positively associated with community decision-making authority and engagement quality.

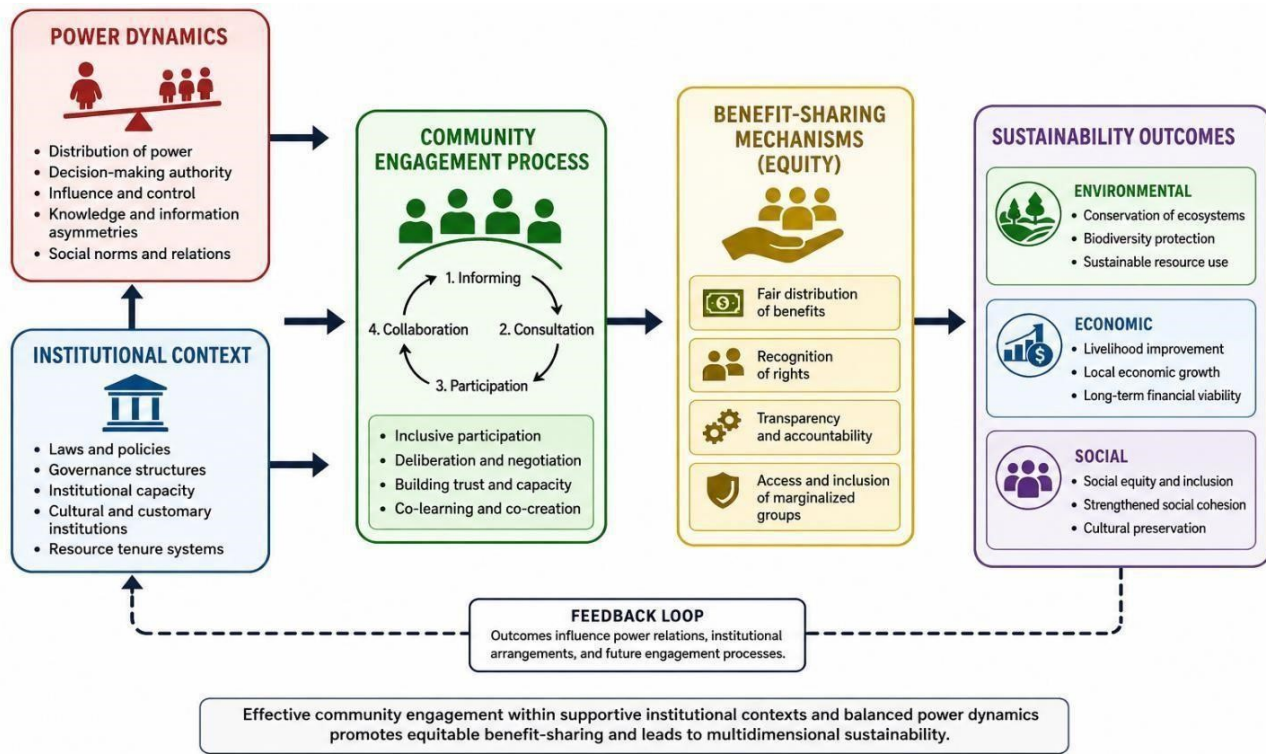


Figure 2. Integrated conceptual framework linking institutional context and power dynamics to engagement quality, benefit-sharing equity, and sustainability outcomes, with a feedback loop (author's illustration).

Table 2. Operationalization of framework constructs for empirical testing.

Construct	Dimensions	Indicators	Possible Measurement
Power Dynamics	Decision authority; resource control; representation	Influence over tourism decisions; control of tourism resources; representation in governing bodies	Likert scale; institutional records; interviews
Engagement Quality	Information; consultation; collaboration; partnership; delegated authority	Participation frequency; perceived influence; voting/decision rights; Responsiveness	Participation index; survey scale
Benefit-Sharing Equity	Distributive and procedural justice	Local revenue share; employment; local procurement; transparency; perceived fairness	Administrative data; survey scale
Economic Sustainability	Income; employment; local retention	Tourism income; employment stability; enterprise survival; local procurement	Household/business survey; records
Social Sustainability	Inclusion; cohesion; empowerment	Empowerment; trust; conflict; inclusion of women/youth	Survey scales; interviews
Environmental Sustainability	Conservation; resource condition	Conservation participation; compliance; resource pressure; biodiversity indicators	Survey; ecological/administrative data
Digital Access	Infrastructure; literacy; use	Internet/mobile access; digital literacy; mobile money; online sales	Digital-access index

H4: Greater access to and use of digital tourism technologies are positively associated with local entrepreneurial participation and tourism-market access, with weaker positive effects among groups with limited digital literacy or infrastructure access.

H5: The positive relationship between community engagement quality and perceived empowerment is stronger among groups with greater access to tourism decision-making opportunities and varies significantly by gender, age, and lineage.

6. Discussion

6.1. Power as a Central Mechanism

The evidence indicates that community engagement should be evaluated according to the distribution of authority rather than simply the existence of participation activities. Information meetings and consultations are analytically different from participation in which residents can alter decisions or exercise delegated authority [14].

This distinction helps explain why initiatives described as community-based can produce different outcomes. Institutional configurations determine who controls resources, who represents the community, and how tourism benefits are distributed, often through institutional bricolage that combines customary, state, and donor-derived rules [21].

6.2. Benefit Sharing as Economic and Political

Benefit sharing should be treated as a political process because distributional outcomes depend on institutional rules and bargaining power. Procedural fairness may be especially important for legitimacy because communities are more likely to support tourism when they have meaningful influence over decisions concerning tourism income and development priorities.

6.3. Sustainability as a Feedback Process

The proposed framework treats sustainability as dynamic. Greater local benefit sharing may strengthen support for conservation and institutional legitimacy, whereas persistent exclusion may weaken trust and support. This feedback perspective is consistent with political ecology because environmental governance is continually reshaped by social relations and institutional negotiations [9] [10].

6.4. Implications for Future Empirical Research

A mixed-method design is recommended. Quantitative surveys can test the proposed relationships using validated scales and administrative indicators, while qualitative interviews can investigate how formal institutions interact with customary norms and local power structures. Comparative research across Kakum, Boabeng-Fiema, Wechiau, and Mole would allow systematic examination of alternative governance arrangements [22]. Longitudinal designs would further permit testing of the feedback mechanism.

7. Conclusions

This paper critically reviewed community engagement in Ghanaian ecotourism through a political ecology perspective, emphasizing power dynamics, engagement quality, benefit-sharing equity, and sustainability. The bibliometric analysis of 327 publications from 2000 to 2025 indicates a maturing field that has increasingly moved from descriptive case studies toward governance, equity, livelihoods, and institutional questions.

The Ghanaian evidence demonstrates that participation is not synonymous with empowerment. Community involvement may remain consultative when decision-making authority is concentrated in state, traditional, private, or external organizations. Likewise, tourism benefits can reach communities without being distributed equitably or generating durable local control.

The paper's main conceptual contribution is an integrated framework that connects institutional context and power dynamics to engagement quality, benefit-sharing equity, and economic, social, and environmental sustainability, with feedback effects and conditioning roles of digital access and intra-community characteristics. The five directional hypotheses translate this framework into observable relationships that can be tested through future empirical research.

Sustainable ecotourism in Ghana should therefore be evaluated not only by visitor numbers, revenues, employment, or conservation indicators, but also by who makes decisions, who controls resources, who receives benefits, and whose interests are represented. Ecotourism is more likely to contribute to sustainable community development when participation extends beyond consultation and toward meaningful authority, and when benefit-sharing arrangements are both distributively and procedurally equitable.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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