

Adolescents' Interaction with Wildlands in Lekki Conservation Centre, Lagos and the Development of Interest towards Conservation

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Abstract

It is no more news that global society's long lasting existence on earth depends on the maintenance and protection of ecosystems. Yet, despite this realization, human beings have over-exploited or managed in unsustainable ways, the natural resources in many ecosystems. To correct this, nature centres, wildlands and parks have become potent medium for recreation as well as generating knowledge and awareness about the environment, sustainability and conservation. Thus, visitations to nature centres and parks do encourage and provide for appreciating nature while encouraging young people to become actively involved in nature conservation, exercise responsibilities and make decisions. Nature centres offer outdoor programming to generate respects for wildlands and experience phenomena in a natural context. In this study, adolescents aged 13 between 17 years were purposively selected based on expressed fear of forests and wild lands. Knowledge and attitude of these 20 adolescents to conservation issues, sustainability and environmental protection was examined before and after the field experience of the Lekki nature conservancy centre. Visitation to nature centres and wildlands were found to build a sense of conservation knowledge and competence among adolescents. The study equally revealed that direct experiences in the wildlands is capable cause adolescents to reconsider the beliefs they previously acquired through the

media depictions and hearsay about to conservation, sustainability and natural environment issues.

Keywords: Adolescents' interaction, wildlands, Lekki conservation centre, Lagos

Introduction

It is no more news that global society's long lasting existence on earth depends on the maintenance and protection of ecosystems. In the last four decades and half, the world has realized the alarming rate at which the earth is being devastated as well as the unfathomable damage, some of it irreversible. Despite this realization, human beings have over-exploited or managed in non-sustainable ways, the resources in many ecosystems. As such, in order to maintain healthy ecosystems, there is need to strive to achieve a balance between society's ever-increasing need for goods and services and protection of natural environments (University of British Columbia, 2012). In recent times, the issues of environmental protection and conservation with emphasis on the knowledge of the effects and solutions of such problems have increased (Ballantyne et al, 1998; Ballantyne & Packer, 2002; Brody, 2005; Brody et al, 2002; Chawla, 1998; Chenog et al, 2000; Rickinson, 2001, 2006). As a consequence, the depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, among others has been considered to be important in various circles as the foundation for the awareness and effective utilization of the environment. Although, the desire to protect the environment for the sake of future generations (Ballantyne et al, 2001a), is embedded in the ultimate goal of environmental sustainability, so also is the development of environmentally responsible citizens.

Meanwhile, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change IPCC (2007a, 2007b, 2013, 2014) has noted that the causes of these environmental problems, rests in behavioural patterns and value systems. Due to this, there is an urgent need to address such behavioural patterns in order to assure the safety of the future environment as well as the natural resources. Although, Strom (1998) argued that information is growing at such a rapid rate that each new generation is necessarily better informed than its predecessors and that young people's knowledge base is often more up-to-date than that of

their parents (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2001a). However, despite the availability and abundance of information, there appears to be some disconnect between information available to the younger generations and their relationship with the natural world. As a result, according to Sorin, Brooks and Haring (2012) the last several decades have seen an abundance of research examining the growing disconnect between young people and their local natural environments. This divide has been labelled with terms such as 'biophobia' (Wilson, 1984), 'extinction of experience' (Pyle, 1993) and 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv, 2005, 2008).

Further research findings also revealed that attitude towards the environment are generally acquired early in life and that environmental sensitivity is one of the predictors of responsible environmental behaviour (Hungerford & Volk, 1990). Dennis and Knapp (1997) observed that participants in continuous nature activities at a young age can promote sensitivity to the environment, and nature. For instance, according to Young (2002), the sustainable use of natural resources " requires an intimate knowledge of biological and physical realities ... it is the younger generation and their acquisition of that knowledge who make subsistence livelihood possible over generations." However, the amount of knowledge an adolescent possesses depends entirely on the way in which he or she is brought up. Thus, knowledge base can be said to be relative to location of residence. As a result, it will not be out of place to say that the knowledge bases of young people's living in rural communities and those living in urban centres are obviously going to be quite different (Pandey, 2003). Especially considering the opportunities available for interactions with nature and wildlife in the villages when compared to urban centres where their physical boundaries have shrunk due to a number of factors (Francis, 1991; Kytta, 2004). Such factors include experiences that are predominately mediated in media, written language and visual images (Chawla, 1994). As noted by (Chipeniuk, 1995), TV, nature and environmental documentaries, as well as other media coverage of environmental and natural disasters are conditioning factors, to think that nature is exotic, awe-inspiring and in far, far away, places they will never experience (White, 2004).

Accordingly, the culture of play-outside is gone and young people's everyday life has shifted to the indoors (Hart, 1999; Moore,

2004). To correct this, nature centres, wildlands and parks have become potent avenues for recreation as well as generating knowledge and awareness about the environment, sustainability and conservation. Thus, visitations to nature centres and parks should be encouraged in order to provide opportunities for appreciating nature while encouraging young people to become more actively involved in nature conservation, exercise responsibilities and make decisions (Cantrelli, 1989). According to Ballantyne et al., (2001a; 2001b) and Ballantyne & Packer (2002) encounters with nature and wildlife can have positive and emotional impact on participants. It is equally believed that these visits form a central component of any comprehensive strategy for fostering environmentally responsible behaviour because they;

are places where people may develop increased concern for nature through contact with natural environments, provide opportunities for interactions with natural systems, which may increase awareness of how nature is threatened by human actions. These are some of the remaining relatively undisturbed natural places that enable people experience an alternative to degraded environments. Such places also provide opportunities for environmental awareness being a location where people spend their leisure time and seek out new experience (Negra and Manning, 1997c).

Besides, its offering outdoor opportunities to generate respect for the wildlands, they also provide opportunity for young ones to observe and experience ecological phenomena in a natural context. Based on this understanding, this study will examine the impact of interaction with nature centres and wildlands on the development of environmentally sustainable attitude and behaviour towards conservation issues among Nigerian adolescents.

Statement of problem

Across the western world, the movement to reconnect the young with nature has grown immensely in the last several decades. Unfortunately, in developing countries like Nigeria, many urban young people are growing in isolation of nature and thus disconnected from nature. The main reason is tied to the newly assumed elitism among

educated Nigerians, who feel that hooking young people on electronic gadgets and toys will ensure young people stay out of trouble and become good citizens. Besides elitism, Sorin et al., (2012), argues there are many other factors contributing to this disconnect including: 'stranger danger', insect-borne diseases, pollution and the harmful effects of the sun (White, 2004 cited in Sorin et al., 2012), homework, organised sports (Ginsburg, 2007), and the domination of sedentary, indoor activities related to the computer, television and other gaming devices (Blizard & Schuster, 2007 cited Sorin, et al., 2012). Cases where Nigerians have been seen to take time to show interest in the wildlands are remote. This may be as a result of difficult socio-economic pressures on the idea of leisure and a function of the value system. Hence, it is not uncommon to see only foreign visitors to the country as the only group of which show interest in wildlands and nature.

Yet nature can provide many important benefits and freedoms for these modern day urban adolescents, because interactions with nature play a great and important role in childhood development. Though, several researchers over the years have investigated the role of nature centres and parks in the building of environmental knowledge from these experiences (Bixler, et al, 1994, Negra and Manning, 1997b). Klassen (2010) notes it is feared by many researchers that if this connection with nature is not encouraged and established, then future generations might not deem the protection of the environment a necessary cause (Sorin et al., 2012). However, studies in this area in Nigeria, are either sparse or non-existent. It is within this context that this study investigated the impact of field trips to natural reserves on urban adolescents. The study is significant to the extent that it is one of the very few studies that have explored the potential of fieldtrip activities in the area of conservation in Nigeria. Thus, this study seeks to examine the influence of visitation to nature centres and wildlands in enhancing knowledge and attitude towards conservation issues among adolescents. This present study addressed the following research questions;

- What are the effects of exposure to nature reserves/wildlands on post basic students?
- What are the impacts of experiences in the wildlands/nature reserves on students' knowledge, attitude and behaviour?

- Are the experiences based on their knowledge and attitude strong enough to cause change towards environmental issues?

Methodology

This study was designed to examine the influence of visitation to nature centres and wildlands in enhancing knowledge and attitude towards conservation issues among Nigerian adolescents. The first objective in this study was to assess the effects of exposure to wildlands/nature reserves. The second objective was to determine whether the impact of experiences in the wildlands/nature reserves subsequently affect their knowledge, attitude and behaviour enough to cause a change. This research pursues an understanding of conservation issues that precipitates a “movement of mind” (Senge, 1990, p. 13) or a transformative response to sustainability. To answer the key research questions, data were obtained using a qualitative research approach and collected through two sessions of face-to-face interviews with research participants during the two visitations to the nature centre. The visitations occurred between three months apart (between February and April of 2014). This is to allow the two participants to assimilate their experiences in-between the first and second visits. The study also adopted a qualitative approach in reporting the findings. As it were, qualitative methods have been found to capture experiences in a more accurate and friendly manner (Benson, 2009).

In this study, the focus was the narratives of research participants, this work has avoided appropriating their voices, misrepresenting them or imposing theories on what they said and did (Dei, 2010). Qualitative research methodology relies on the words of participants to reveal the subjective tensions, struggles, contradictions and ambiguities regarding the issues at hand. The importance of “voice” in qualitative research cannot be overemphasized. Voices convey personal feelings, thoughts, desires and politics. Voices allow readers to bring their own interpretations to the data (Dei, 2010). By showcasing the actual voices of the participants, the discussion moves beyond an abstract and theoretical observation of phenomena. This study is based on individual interviews with each of the adolescents. During the interviews, I explored the adolescents’ understanding of key conservation issues, wildlife, and sustainability as well as the analysis of

this research, the results of this study are presented in terms that overlap of the three contexts: personal, sociocultural and physical (Brody et al., 2002). As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state, professional etiquette informing research with human subjects asserts that no one deserves to be harmed or embarrassed as a result of research practices. Hence the protection of participants' anonymity is viewed as a central and guiding principle in ethical research practice to safeguard against unwanted exposure and the disclosure of private knowledge.

Study area

To obtain the desired results, the adolescents were taken on a trip to the Lekki Conservation Centre, which is set in a sub-urban environment. The nature conservancy centre is located on the Lekki Peninsula, in the Lagos area, on 78 hectares of land area in Nigeria's foremost conservation site owned by the Nigerian Conservation Foundation. Established in 1990, the centre is the foremost environmental conservation, and biodiversity centre in Nigeria (Nigerian Conservation Foundation NCF, 2015). The vision of the foundation is anchored on harmonious mutual co-existence between humans and nature, while preserving the full range of Nigeria's biodiversity, which includes species, ecosystems and genetic biodiversity; promote the sustainable use of natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations; as well as advocate actions that minimise pollution and wasteful utilisation of renewable resources (NCF, 2015).

The Conservation Centre is an oasis of natural resources located on the Lekki Peninsula, sandwiched between the Atlantic Ocean and Lagos lagoon. The centre lies within an area once noted for Buffaloes (though now locally extinct). Lekki Peninsula is a wetland and a home to migrating birds and also is a coastal swamp forest, which is a refuge to many other species of wildlife, especially those displaced as a consequence of urbanization. The swamp forest consists of trees and plants of great medicinal value, colourful birds, butterflies and animals such as snakes, Mona monkeys, monitor lizards, crocodiles, squirrels, giant rats, grass cutters and forest duikers. To get a full glimpse of the wildlife at the Centre, the participating adolescents took a walk on the

illustrative Nature trail along the boardwalk (NCF, nd.) during the two trips to the conservation centre.

The participants

A total of 20 adolescents comprising of 10 boys and 10 girls were involved in the study. The adolescents' age ranges between 13 and 17 years. According to the World Health organization (WHO, (2015). Adolescence is a time of tremendous growth and potential, it is also a time of considerable risk during which social contexts exert powerful influences. The purposive sampling approach was used to select participants most suitable for the study. The decision to use these samples arose out of the desire to obtain well-matched samples of males and females that have equivalent background. The choice of adolescents is premised on the fact that adolescence stage of development represents one of the critical transitions in a life span and is characterized by a tremendous pace in growth and change (WHO, 2015). In addition, the choice of the age-group is premised on the convenience of the researcher to work with the age-group.

In addition, the adolescents at this level can be said to still be within the adventure age. The students were taken through a visit to the environmental nature centre owned by the Nigeria Conservation Foundation (NCF). The researcher with the aid of four research assistants encouraged the students to ask questions and to be free so as to motivate their learning process, while a Park Ranger was on hand to assist with answers to certain questions from the participants. To get the responses of the sampled adolescents, the research assistants were tasked to observe and note any form of reaction or fears, comments and learning among the samples as well as take note of their observations. Interview was then used to triangulate the observation.

Results

To ascertain whether or not any remarkable change occurred during both trips, the students were made to express their opinions about wildlands before the nature boardwalk. Most of the students 35% expressed a general apathy towards wildlands. No less than 50% never thought they will have any reason to come near wildlands, how much

more experiencing it. About 15% of the students were indifferent about wildlands. Generally, the students expressed a high fear level. At the end of the nature – walk, research assistants presented the summary of observations based on three research questions.

Research question 1

A change in perception and interest was reported. Additionally, a reduced fear level was observed among the participants. Furthermore, it was observed that some of the sampled students (60%) would like to visit the nature centre soon. About 20% feel one experience is enough, while 10% would still rather not want any such experience. A further probe of the adolescents revealed a sense of phobia and dislike for wildlands and wild animals such as snakes, lions and tigers among another 10%. Furthermore, 55% of the sampled students answered in the affirmative with respect to overcoming fear, 28% still nurse some fears while 22% were indifferent.

Research question 2

A significant change was observed in the students' knowledge, attitude and behaviour. For instance, 58% of the sampled students expressed strong interest in learning about wildlands and the animals. Another 30% hold the opinion that nature possesses so much for them to learn from, while 12% believe nature deserves extra care from humans in order to protect its fragility. Worth noting is the interest generated by the trips that has manifested in a few of the adolescents who are of the view that nature conservation and environmental issues should be popularized across the society, so that everyone will be acquainted with the enormity of the problems conservation and need to ensure sustainability of the nature resources for the coming generations. The response of these participants confirms that constant interaction with the wildlands should increase levels concern and care for the natural environment and its resources. As well, such interactions are capable of promoting the understanding of the many environmental issues and principles, and the strengthening of commitment to biodiversity values which in all ramifications should enhance capacity to work for the achievement of conservation goals, sustainability and environmental protection.

Research question 3

Based on the interview conducted to triangulate the findings, about 75% of the sampled students are strongly interested in working for the protection of nature and wild animals. Out of the 75% who demonstrated a strong interest in nature and conservation career, about 45% prefer making a career in the science of environment protection and management. Interestingly, despite the fears observed in some of the sampled students, they all agree that experiences of this sort in the wildlands are capable of causing strong and positive changes towards environment and conservation issues among adolescents.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the study indicated that repeated visitation to nature reserves through field trips would promote knowledge about conservation issues and environmental protection among adolescents. It revealed that visits to nature reserve through field trips helps to build a sense of conservation knowledge and competence in the early adolescents. Interviews with students indicated that direct experiences in the wildlands cause them to reconsider many of the beliefs they have acquired through media depictions and hearsay. This finding agrees with Wendling and Wuench (1985) who found out that all the participants reported learning “a lot” after the field trips to the wildlands. In addition, the finding of this study also agrees with Seagart and Hart (1979) who found out first-hand experiences lead to better knowledge and by implication a stronger sense of awareness and concern for nature.

The finding on attitudinal change on the other hand, was in agreement with Euler (1980) who observed attitude change in urban students after field trips. Several studies have investigated how childhood experiences with the outdoors have led to careers in conservation and landscape. Extensive research and conceptual work by Hart (1997) illustrate the merit of natural areas as capable of promoting experiential experiences while serving as play environments. Repeated positive exposures to wildlands areas through field trips should eventually lower the novelty of wildlands areas and build a sense of environmental competence (Bixler *et al.*, 1994). Crompton and Stellar

(1981) in their research concluded that the length of exposure to the natural environment might be the single most important variable in program success. (Bixler, Carlisle, Hammitt and Floyd (1994) also affirms that direct experiences in wildlands must cause students to reconsider many of the beliefs they acquired through media depictions and hearsay. Furthermore, this study agrees with the assertion of Bixler et al, (1994) that students need to have frequent and direct experiences in wildlands environments. More importantly, this finding resonates with the previous work of Negra and Manning (1997a) and Bixler, Carlisle et al, (1994) which points to the merit of field trips in adolescents' attitude to conservation and sustainability issues includes providing the adolescents with exploratory experiences which on the long run equally help to remove fears associated with the wildlands acquired over time.

Further, the high point of this particular study in Nigeria is that, it clearly substantiated the logic that interest in nature and wildlands including participation in conservation, along with positive environmental ethics and or consciousness, develop out of adolescents regular interaction with the natural world. (Bixler et al., 1994; Bixler et al., 2002; Bunting & Cousins, 1985; Chawla, 1988; Chipeniuk, 1994; Chipeniuk, 1995; Hart, 1997; Kals & Ittner, 2003; Kellert, 2002; Phenice & Griffore, 2003; Pyle, 1993; Schultz et al, 2004; Sobel, 1993, 2002; Wilson, 1993).

In conclusion, this study has been able to show that trips to the nature reserves and wildlands can enhance adolescents' knowledge and encourage positive attitudinal shift to conservation issues. According to Pandey (2002) cultivating the spirit of innovation in children can bring true development, as such, the idea that children can bring about a revolution in conservation is consistently being ignored by modern society (Paul and Serpell, 1993; Rivas and Owens, 1999). The message in the adolescents' reactions suggests that a serious interest need be shown by taking a second look at the age-group considering their ease of malleability because of their curiosity. In line with the expectation of environmental sustainability, it is suggested that cultivating environmental knowledge and awareness beyond the formal school setting greatly provide understanding for the younger generation to engage in environmentally sustainable behaviours.

In line with this suggestion is the emphasis that the future lies in our younger generation's hands, according to Fien et al, (2001), by encouraging an awareness of the factors causing the degradation of our planet, we can help them develop a philosophy of conservation based on individual responsibility. In his biophilia hypothesis, Wilson (1984) predicts that humans have an innate desire to know and be with nature and life forms. This in turn provides a basic philosophical grounding for the conservation of species and ecosystems. However, a lack of exposure can also exacerbate biophobia, where natural attraction to nature are not given opportunities to develop during their early years. Bio-phobia is aversion to nature. Biophobia ranges from discomfort and fear in natural places to contempt for whatever is not man-made managed or air-conditioned (Bixler et al., 1994; Cohen, 1992; Cohen and Horm-Wingerg, 1993; Orr, 1993, 1994, 1996; White, 2004). Biophobia also manifests when regarding nature as nothing more than a disposable resource (Dutcher et al, 2007). Finally, there is one certainty in this regard and that is, biophobia will not be addressed if we assume that adolescents have an innate desire to be conservation change agents, as well as nurture the spirit of innovation to become conservationists in the future.

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