



Research article

Tourism amid COVID-19 pandemic: impacts and implications for building resilience in the eco-tourism sector in Ghana's Savannah region

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Eco-tourism
Coronavirus
Hospitality industry
Resilience theory
Crisis management
Pandemic impact

ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus which first emerged in Wuhan, China has affected many sectors of the global economy particularly, the tourism sector. While prior studies have explored how pandemics and crisis in the tourism sector can be managed, only a few have tackled how the tourism industry, especially in developing countries can be restructured to withstand shocks and remain resilient in the face of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic in the future. This article sheds light on the socio-economic and ecological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the eco-tourism sector of Ghana's Savannah region while offering short and long term strategies for building resilience to withstand shocks. Between September and October 2020, data was collected in the tourism enclave of the Savannah region in Ghana using focus group discussions and interviews. Results show that the major socio-economic impact of the pandemic was the loss of livelihoods. Ecological impacts were however mixed – both positive and negative. The study concludes that socio-economic impacts have been severe because they are closely tied to tourism. The study therefore recommends that immediate measures including stimulus packages be offered to local enterprises affected by the pandemic. In the long term, efforts should be made to diversify the local economy and promote domestic tourism in the country.

1. Introduction

Originating in Wuhan China, the novel coronavirus quickly spread to other parts of the world in a short time (Gössling et al., 2020). By March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) a pandemic. The pandemic has left a dilapidating trail in its wake even in so-called developed countries including Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. One year after it was declared a global pandemic, many countries are still struggling with the devastating effects the pandemic has wrecked on many sectors of the economy including the agriculture and food sectors, the tourism and hospitality sector and the aviation sector among others (Gössling et al., 2020). The tourism sector has been particularly hard hit because of the suspension of air travels, lockdowns and social distancing protocols instituted in many countries all over the world resulting in declining tourism activities (Rogerson and Baum, 2020). As early as April 2020, most of the major tourism sites in Africa were shut down due to COVID-19 (Rogerson and Baum, 2020). It has been speculated that

Africa's recovery from the pandemic will be especially challenging due to the continent's high disease burden, poor health infrastructure, and poor social systems which are necessary for combating the pandemic (Ataguba, 2020). A key sector of the African economy that will also take time to recover from the pandemic is the tourism sector.

In Africa, most local communities bordering national parks and other eco-tourism sites have, with time, had the perception that viewing and appreciating wildlife is for foreigners and the few rich indigenes. As if to corroborate this view, many African countries, including Ghana have services and facilities in their tourism industry tailored to suit the interests of foreigners more than locals. In Ghana, for example, the tourism ministry since 1992 has focused on attracting foreign tourists more than domestic ones. Initiatives such as the Pan African Historical Theatre Festival "Panafest", "the year of the Return" and "Beyond the Return" were aimed at attracting foreign tourists, especially from the diaspora to experience Ghana's culture and also to promote Ghanaian tourist sites (Ghana Tourism Authority, 2019). Consequently, most eco-tourist sites in Ghana are patronised mostly by non-Ghanaians. With the onset of the

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COVID-19 pandemic, eco-tourism in Ghana has thus suffered a downward turn as a result of its over-reliance on foreign tourists. This is because of the suspension of air travels, lockdowns and social distancing protocols instituted in many countries all over the world. Indeed, all national parks, most tourist sites and hospitality industries in Ghana were closed down either following government's directives or through the initiative of the managers of the facilities.

While the tourism sector has over the years been plagued by crises including wars, terror attacks, epidemics, and pandemics, the sector has often been resilient in the face of shocks in the long term but not in the short term (Avraham, 2016). In developing countries such as Ghana, where most eco-tourist sites are located in rural communities with very fragile local economies, the socio-economic and ecological effects of the pandemic could be dilapidating. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the current literature on tourism is replete with studies on how disruptions and crisis in the tourism sector may be managed and the various forms that future tourism pathways may take (e.g. Dayour et al., 2020; Brouder, 2020). However, very few insights have been provided into how the tourism industry, especially in developing countries can be restructured to withstand shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic now and in the future. This is the gap that this paper seeks to address and it is based on the proposition that for the tourism industry in Ghana to remain vibrant in the future, even in global shocks, it must look beyond focusing on attracting international tourists, to exploring measures of promoting domestic tourism. In this light, this paper assessed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ecotourism sector in the Savannah region of Ghana, and ways to improve resilience in this sector to withstand shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic now and other crisis in the future. More specifically, this paper attempted to answer the following questions:

1. what has been the socio-economic and ecological effects of the pandemic on eco-tourism in the area, particularly in the Mole National Park and its environs?
2. how can eco-tourism in the area be improved to remain resilient and withstand shocks such as COVID-19 going forward?

2. Conceptual context

2.1. Crisis in the tourism industry

Crises periods are often characterized by unpredictability, uncertainty and an inability to regulate the functioning of a system (Koehl, 2011; Beirman and Van Walbeek, 2011). Crises could be natural, that is, caused by natural phenomena such as earthquakes, hurricanes and pandemics or man-made, caused by terrorist events or industrial accidents. A tourism crisis often occurs in the form of events or circumstances which jeopardises the market potential and attractiveness of a tourism destination or an entire region (Beirman and Van Walbeek, 2011).

Koehl (2011) categorises tourism crises into five types. The first involves events that affect the environment, such as climate change, earthquakes and deforestation. The second involves events that affect the societal and political climate, including terrorist acts, coups and violently contested elections. The third comprises health-related events such as disease epidemics affecting humans or animals, while the fourth involves technological events such as information technology system failures and transportation accidents. Finally, the fifth comprises economic events such as financial crises or major currency fluctuations.

Health-related crises in the tourism sector is not a particularly new phenomenon as the threat of pandemics has been on the rise since the early 1900s despite advances in medicine. Some of the major pandemics recorded during this period have included the Spanish Flu (Influenza), the Asian Flu, Hong Kong Flu, HIV/AIDS, Cholera, SARS, Swine Flu, Ebola and the present Covid-19 (Hall et al., 2020). The present global pandemic apart from significantly affecting the tourism sector's ability to function normally has further led to the loss of jobs in

the tourism sector, reduced incomes for businesses in the tourism and hospitality industries as well as loss of tax revenue for governments among others.

2.2. Crisis management

Over the years, various strategies, processes, and frameworks have been formulated to help prevent, and cope with crisis (Koehl, 2011). According to Beirman and Van Walbeek (2011), crisis management generally consists of six stages including, 1. Identifying risks or hazards before they manifest; 2. Assessing the possible impacts of the risks, categorise and then prioritise them, 3. Putting in place plans to reduce the possible impacts of risks, 4. Monitoring the possible effectiveness of the plans, 5. Reviewing plans based on feedback from monitoring and 6. Getting stakeholders involved in monitoring changes in the risk environment.

A widely used framework proposed by Faulkner (2001), also suggested six stages for understanding and managing crisis. According to his framework, crisis management begins at *the pre-event stage*, where contingency plans are put in place to prevent a crisis from occurring based on known information. If the crisis still occurs, then it enters the second stage which is the *prodromal stage* or the onset of the crisis. Here, strategies are put in place to respond to the crisis by initiating a contingency plan. In the third stage which is the *emergency stage*, protective actions are put in place during the crisis to protect people and property. Thereafter, the short-term needs of the affected people are addressed in the *intermediate stage* while clear communication is put in place to address long-term needs. In the *recovery stage*, the more long-term needs including rebuilding infrastructure, facilities, and tourist attractions are addressed in a coordinated and sustained manner. In the final stage – the *resolution stage*, all actions that were taken during the crisis are reviewed and fed into future contingency plans.

Even though Faulkner's framework is more comprehensive in addressing crisis at the destination level, the stages outlined might be difficult to follow in unpredictable crisis as has been the case with the novel COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3. Resilience in tourism

In general terms, resilience has been defined as the ability of a system to absorb disruptions and restructure while retaining its basic functions, structure, identity and feedbacks (Prayag, 2018; Sisneros-Kidd et al., 2019). Resilience is often triggered by change (Hall et al., 2018) which could be sudden or gradual. Compared to crisis management, resilience thinking is said to offer a better perspective to understanding how systems manage to survive in the wake of disturbances (Prayag, 2018). This is because, unlike crisis management thinking, a system from a resilience point of view can self-organize (Carpenter et al., 2001). Indeed, Prayag (2018,3) concludes that future research in tourism should focus on resilience instead of crisis. This is because, "if a system is resilient, it is implicit that it has the ability not only to overcome crises and disasters but to better adapt to change overall".

Resilience research in the context of tourism has often focused on major disasters and crises (Lew, 2014). In the tourism literature, resilience has been explored from various angles including economic resilience (Lew, 2014), social resilience (Sharifi, 2016) and organizational (or enterprise) resilience (Orchiston et al., 2016). While several studies have offered various indicators for measuring the resilience of destinations to disasters (Cutter et al., 2010; Lew, 2014), Sharifi (2016) suggests that such indicators should be multi-dimensional and take into consideration the ability of communities to manage risks.

3. Study context

This study was conducted in the Savannah Region of Ghana and focused on the major tourist attractions in the West Gonja Municipal,

one of the seven administrative districts that make up the region. The Savannah Region was created in 2019 after it was carved out from the then Northern region by Constitutional Instrument number one hundred and fifteen (C.I. 115) with Damongo as the regional capital. It is currently the largest region in Ghana with a landmass of 46,922 sq. Km, constituting about one-fifth (1/5) of the total land area of Ghana (Savannah Regional Co-ordinating Council, 2021). With an estimated population of 581,368 for 2020, most of the indigenes are subsistent farmers who cultivate yams, cassava, maize beans and groundnuts. In addition to farming, some women also engage in food processing – mainly gari and shea butter processing.

Savannah Region abounds in rich eco-tourism potentials. One of the major tourist attraction sites is the Mole National Park (MNP) located near Damongo, the regional capital. This National Park has 4,577 km square of reserved land for forest and wildlife conservation. It is also Ghana's premier and largest national park with wildlife such as elephants, antelopes, buffaloes, warthogs, primates, over 300 species of birds as well as several tree species including shea (*Vitellaria Paradoxa*), rosewood (*Pterocarpus Erinaceus*) and dawadawa (*Parkia Biglobosa*) trees. Other tourist attractions include the Ancient Mosque at Larabanga and the Larabanga Mystic Stone – a mysterious boulder of rock that is believed to have spiritual powers and blessings. Other significant but lesser patronized tourist sites include the Jakpa Palace in Damongo - the palace of the Yagbonwura (The Overlord of Gonjaland) which represents the symbol of the Gonja kingdom, the Salaga Slave Route and the Salaga Slave Camp/Market where the Trans-Saharan Slave Caravans made stop-overs and engaged in slavery transactions as well as the Slave Wells where the slaves took their bath and drank clean water to quench their thirst.

4. Methods

4.1. Selection of cases and participants

The Savannah region was selected for this study as it is considered the tourism hub of northern Ghana because of the presence of some of the major tourist's sites in the country. Additionally, three major hospitality facilities all located within the MNP but catering for different categories of clients were also selected. Zaina lodge, which prides itself as West Africa's first luxury safari lodge primarily targeted clients who wanted utmost luxury. The Mole Motel had a more varied range of accommodation options - chalets for the executives, standard rooms for the middle class and dormitories for the backpackers. Belgha Bar and Hostel mainly targeted backpackers and provided the barest of facilities. Finally, two communities – Larabanga and Mognori were selected from the 33 communities fringing the Park (Figure 1). The two communities were selected because Larabanga has two major tourist attractions on its own that attract tourists – the Larabanga Ancient Mosque and the Mystic Stone. Mognori on the other hand was selected because it benefits directly from eco-tourism as it is the model eco-village where tourists who hope to experience village life are sent. Identifying and purposefully selecting information-rich cases is widely accepted in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

4.2. Description of case communities

4.2.1. Mognori

Located in the south-eastern border of the MNP, Mognori is 15km from the MNP headquarters and about 11km from Larabanga (Kuuder

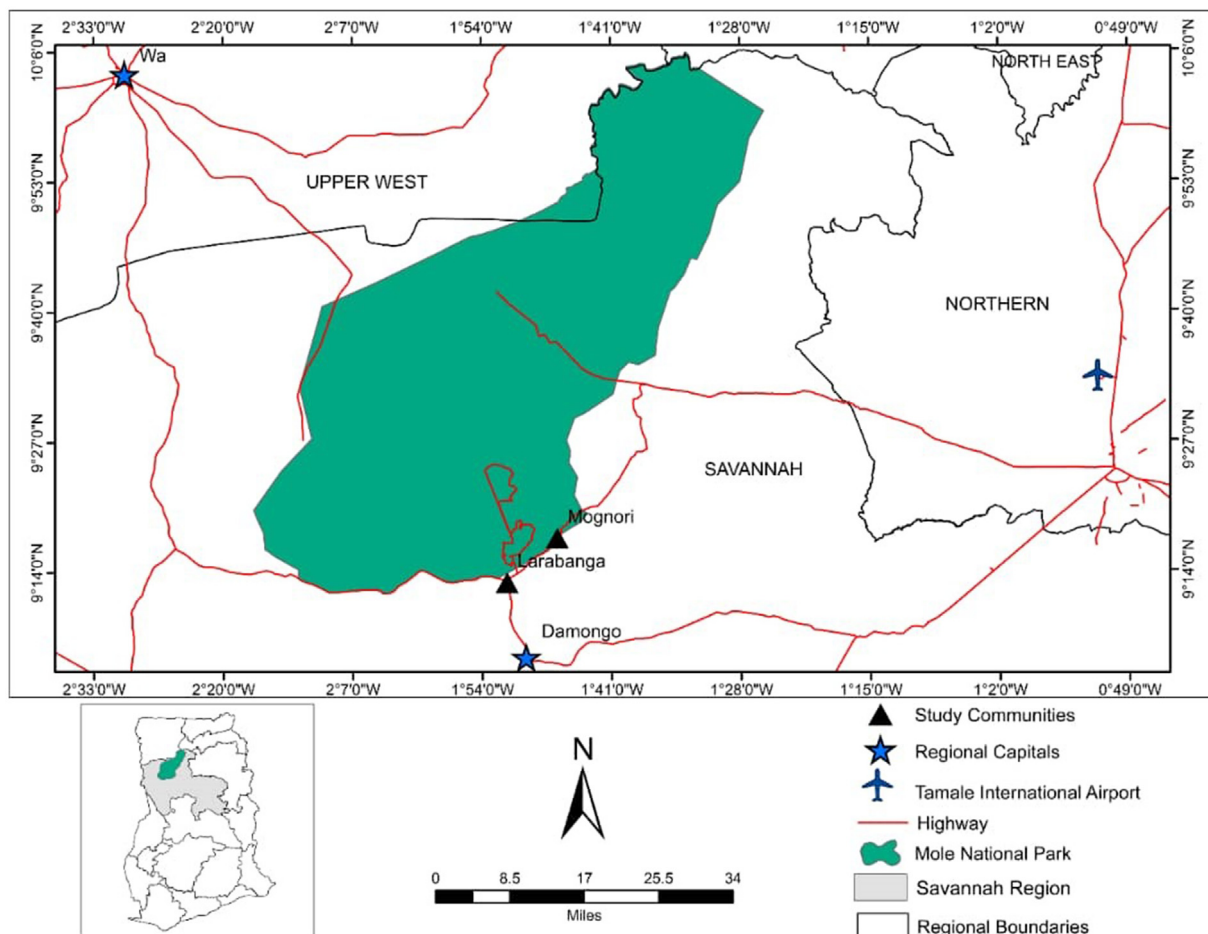


Figure 1. Map showing the Mole National Park and the study communities.

et al., 2019). A predominantly farming community with a population of about 371 residents in 2020, Mognori, was declared and launched as a model ecovillage by the Mole National Park in the year 2003 to offer local people in the community an opportunity to participate in tourism activities as a result of the community's proximity to the park and to benefit economically from such endeavours. As of 2017, the Mognori ecovillage was reported to have hosted 1,571 tourists, raking in GH 23,096 (about 3,986.81 dollars) as revenue (Business and Financial Times Online, 2018).

4.2.2. Larabanga

Larabanga is located about 5 km south of the MNP headquarters. Most of its about 4,000 residents are mainly farmers and hunters (Kuuder et al., 2019). However, because of the existence of other tourist's locations within the town including the famous Larabanga Ancient Mosque and the Mystic Stone, some inhabitants also provide tourism-related services. These include serving as tour guides, the sale of food and snacks, hair-dressing and braiding services as well as dressmaking among others.

The Larabanga Ancient Mosque, one of the major tourist attractions in the community is believed to be the oldest and most revered mosques in Ghana. Built in 1421, the structure of the mosque was influenced by western Sudanese architecture (Apawu, 2012). The mosque has a Koran which is believed to have descended from heaven. Therefore, apart from attracting regular tourists, it also attracts quite a lot of religious pilgrims. The Larabanga mosque is reported to have received 864 tourists in 2017, generating GH¢4,320 (about 745.71 dollars) in revenue to the community (Business and Financial Times Online, 2018).

The Larabanga Mystic stone is said to have been discovered during British colonial times when a road was being constructed near the Larabanga mosque. Oral history has it that, the stone was removed during the process to make way for the road being constructed. However, the stone was found on the same spot the next day. Subsequent removal of the stone yielded no results as it returned to its original site. Officials, therefore, decided to construct the road around the stone (Apawu, 2012).

Apart from international tourists who come to view and learn about the Mystic stone and mosque, many local tourists and tourists from the sub-region including Mali also visit these tourist sites for religious purposes. It is believed that prayers in the mosque and beside the Mystic stone translate into healing, reversal of infertility and bareness problems as well as wealth and prosperity to those who believe in the mystical powers of the stone and mosque.

4.3. Data collection

The study was primarily a qualitative study that employed mainly focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews as well as a review of secondary data to collect data. One FGD each was conducted in Mognori and Larabanga with a cross-section of locals (see Table 1) whose source of livelihood was directly connected to eco-tourism.

The Larabanga FGD was made up of seven individuals including three females and four males. The Mognori FGD was made up of eight locals comprising three women and five men. While all participants in Mognori identified as farmers, two of the women also engaged in shea butter processing. FGDs aimed to obtain information on residents' perceptions of the effect of the pandemic on their socio-economic lives and what they think can be done to better withstand the shock presented by COVID-19. FGDs ensured that a broad range of views were collected from a group of people who shared similar experiences in relation to the research topic (Hennink 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with officials of the Mole National Park, the Mole Motel, Zaina Lodge, Belgha Bar and Hostel, and curators of the Larabanga Mosque and Mystic stone. Interview participants were selected based on the objectives of the study as well as the knowledge and experiences of participants regarding the phenomenon under study (Creswell and Clark, 2017). Questions asked focused on the effect of the pandemic on their activities – both positive and negative, as

Table 1. Cases, data collection methods, participants and the number interviewed.

| Cases | Data collection method | Participants | Number interviewed |
|--------------------------|------------------------|--|--------------------|
| Larabanga community | FGD | Farmer, tour operator, tour guide, restaurant operator, curator of a tourist site, dressmaker, hair-dresser/cold beverages and snacks seller | 7 |
| Mognori community | FGD | Farmers, Women shea processors, CREMA executives | 8 |
| Mole National Park | Interview | Deputy Park Manager | 1 |
| Larabanga Mystic Stone | Interview | Curator | 1 |
| Larabanga Ancient Mosque | Interview | Curator | 1 |
| Mole Motel | Interview | Administrator/Deputy General Manager | 1 |
| Zaina Lodge | Interview | Deputy General Manager | 1 |
| Belgha Bar and Hostel | Interview | Proprietor and Managing Director | 1 |
| Total | | | 21 |

well as strategies to build resilience in the face of the present and future crisis.

4.4. Data analysis

All FGDs and semi-structured interviews were recorded with the prior consent of all participants. FGDs and some interviews were conducted in the native languages with the help of translators. The interviews and discussions were then translated and transcribed into English. Content analysis was then employed for analysing the data and interpreting its meaning (Schreier, 2012). The content analysis involved the process of reading and re-reading the responses from interviews and focus groups several times to deduce similarities and variations in the content (Mazaheri et al., 2013).

The responses were coded to reveal the similarities which were then classified under manageable headings or themes. For instance, responses to the socio-economic and ecological effects of COVID-19 generated several different answers. Therefore, responses that were similar or closely related, e.g. declining incomes, closure of business, loss of jobs or other forms of livelihoods were classified or altogether labelled as 'The closure of businesses and loss of livelihoods'. To show a connection between the data and results, we used quotations from the interviews and focus groups to 'reflect the participants' voices' (Elo et al., 2014,6).

Additionally, content analysis was employed to identify key words and phrases in the responses provided by participants during focus groups and interviews to describe the impacts of the pandemic on eco-tourism using the "Word Cloud" technique. The word cloud is a data visualization technique involving lexical analysis or analyzing a given text (Vrain and Lovett, 2019). Constructing a word cloud consist of using different font sizes to depict the frequency in the use of words or phrases as they occur in the text being analysed (Rivadeneira et al., 2007). The formation of word clouds was used as a complementary technique to thematic analysis.

5. Results and discussion

This section of the paper is in two parts. The first part highlights and discusses the key socio-economic and ecological effects of the pandemic on eco-tourism in the area as articulated by the study participants (Table 2). The second part highlights and discusses some immediate

Table 2. Study participants' responses to socio-economic and ecological effects of the pandemic on eco-tourism in the area.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected tourism in this area as well as your social and economic lives?

| Theme | Direct quotes of participants |
|--|--|
| The collapse of the local economy (n = 16) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larabanga is at a standstill. There's virtually no commercial activity here • Tourism is equal to Larabanga and Larabanga is equal to tourism • Because of the pandemic, there are no tourists here and so the town is quiet |
| The closure of businesses and loss of livelihoods (n = 21) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are struggling to find buyers for our yams and the yams are going bad • We had to lay-off most of our employees • We had to close down the Mole National Park between 23/03/2020 and 07/08/2020 • I have been out of business since the Park closed down |
| Decline in social activities (n = 17) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because of the President's directive of no social gatherings, we couldn't celebrate the Fire and Damba festivals • Marriage and naming ceremonies have been suspended since the pandemic • We are unable to have Islamic community prayers because we have to observe social distancing |
| Decline in tourism activities (n = 21) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indeed, the number of tourists has drastically reduced since the pandemic started • Our major source of income as an eco-village has been from international tourists but since the pandemic, we have not received any guests • Suddenly, individuals and groups started cancelling their [accommodation] bookings with our facility |
| Increase in patrols has reduced illegal activities in Park and enhanced the conservation of the Park's resources (n = 1) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the closure of the Park, more staff were recalled from tour duties to law enforcement which helped reduce illegal activities |

Source: Authors' fieldwork (2020).



Figure 2. Word cloud expressing the key socio-economic and ecological effects of the pandemic on eco-tourism in the study communities.

measures as well as medium to long term measures that could help improve eco-tourism and make it resilient in the face of the present crisis and future ones. Using the word cloud technique, key words and phrases including, livelihood losses, bad economy, no jobs, no income were the most frequently used phrases by respondents to describe the key socio-economic and ecological effects of the pandemic on eco-tourism in the area. These have been presented in Figure 2.

A close look at Figure 2 shows the emergence of two groups of words that describe the effects of the pandemic on the study area. One group generally focuses on the effect of the pandemic on the economy and the society at large using phrases such as bad economy, business slow and closed business to describe the situation. The other group is more

personal and focuses on the effects of the pandemic on individuals using words such as, no income, no jobs, no naming ceremony, and no marriage ceremony among others. Indeed, Acquaaah et al. (2021) found that travel bans and lockdowns by most African countries (which resulted in temporal closure of businesses, schools and social activities) affected not only the economies of those countries, but the lives of individuals as well.

5.1. The collapse of the local economy

Known as a tourism hub, many economic activities in the study area are tailored to meet the needs of tourists. As a result, the study found that the pandemic with its concomitant ban on social gatherings, travel bans and closure of public places harmed the local economy in the study areas, especially, Larabanga and businesses within the Mole National Park. For instance, most businesses that relied on tourists to thrive such as hotels and restaurants, local tour operators and guides, sellers of tourist souvenirs among others were out of business for most of 2020. A tour operator who also doubles as a tour guide had this to say:

I have been in this business for close to a decade and I have never experienced anything like this. The business has been really slow because of COVID. Suddenly, individuals and groups started cancelling their bookings. Even though the ban has been lifted now, business is still slow. In fact, I haven't even had one single booking since the park reopened for business.

As if to corroborate the sentiments expressed above, a curator of one of the famous tourist sites in Larabanga also bemoaned the lack of economic activity in the community due to the ban on international travels and social activities. He sums it up this way:

In Ghana here, tourism is equal to Larabanga and Larabanga is equal to tourism. If you take away tourism, Larabanga will be naked. So with the COVID, Larabanga is naked because no tourism activity is taking place here.

Even though most rural communities in northern Ghana predominately engage in food crop farming and animal rearing as their primary source of livelihood, many 'tourism-endowed' communities such as Larabanga seem to prioritise those livelihoods that have a direct connection to tourism over their primary livelihood source. It is believed that livelihoods connected to tourism generate more income and at a faster rate. Sisneros-Kidd et al., (2019, 2) attest that, whereas tourism can serve as a source of revenue for many rural communities, the over-dependence on tourism can negatively affect such communities by stifling their capacity to diversify their economy and may also result in 'reduced resilience and increased vulnerability of a community'. Prior studies have also established that crisis or disaster do not only affect the national economy but also threatens informal tourism enterprises as well as the livelihoods of many in the destination (De Sausmarez, 2007). These informal tourism enterprises however tend to perform better after crises when they receive subventions from the government, and support from family (Joerin et al., 2012).

5.2. The closure of businesses and loss of livelihoods

Closely linked to the collapse of the local economy is the closure of business and loss of jobs and livelihoods of most people in the area especially in the more cosmopolitan areas such as Larabanga and those in the hospitality industry. The Zaina Lodge for instance from 23rd March till 14th September 2020 sent home all of their staff except 12 to run the facility following a presidential order for all public places to close down. The Mole Motel had to do the same and consequently laid off about 40 of its staff except for five who were maintained on an allowance over a period of about six months. An official of the Mole Motel had this to say about the effect of the pandemic on jobs:

We work to pay ourselves. So we simply could not afford to keep all the staff here when we were not generating any income. At present, 15 staff have been called back and depending on how business picks up, we will call the remaining 25 who are still home without a salary.

Community members in Larabanga during FGDs also lamented the effect of the pandemic on their livelihoods. A farmer for instance said:

We used to have lots of people from down-south coming to buy our yams. Sometimes we were unable to keep up with the demand. But this year, we are struggling to find buyers for our yams and the yams are going bad. The buyers who are usually from down south were locked down and they could not come up north to buy from us.

Several other participants during FGD in Larabanga narrated how their businesses have been affected by the pandemic and how life had become difficult as a result. The economic effect of the pandemic including lay-offs of employees, shutdown of businesses, low patronage of goods and services, disruptions in supply chains, travel restrictions across borders, and inadequate support from governments has been widely reported (e.g. [Gursoy and Chi, 2020](#); [Acquaah et al., 2021](#)). A survey conducted between May and June 2020 found that about 46% of businesses in Ghana had to reduce salaries for about 26% of their employees as a result of the effect of the pandemic on business ([Ghana Statistical Service \(GSS\), 2020](#)). In their study of the impact of COVID-19 on tourism in Sri Lanka, [Karunaratne et al. \(2021\)](#), also reported the loss of employment opportunities especially among hospitality and tourism workers which resulted in the reduction of the number of workers in these facilities.

5.3. Decline in social activities

As a tourism hub, the Mole National Park and Larabanga were relatively busy places. The Mole Motel and Zaina Lodge frequently hosted guests for meetings and workshops as well as for leisure. Indeed, the Mole Motel from December 2019 to February 2020 recorded a full house and was fully booked till August 2020 as of January 2020 (two months before Ghana recorded its 1st case of COVID-19). Larabanga, a relatively busy place, always bustling with activities including marriage and naming ceremonies, community Islamic prayers (as a result of the Ancient Mosque), the celebration of the Fire and Damba festivals as well as commercial activities have also witnessed a decline in these social activities. A hairdresser who also doubled as a make-up artist lamented how the decline in social activities has affected her business, compelling her to venture into other livelihood ventures to sustain herself and her family.

I was doing well as a hairdresser and a make-up artist. At least, every Saturday and Sunday, I was always booked for a naming or a marriage ceremony. And during the weekdays, people came to me to braid their hair, including the tourists. However, with the ban on social activities, no one organises any marriage or naming ceremonies. Indeed, people rarely go out these days so there is no need to do their hair or make-up so my business has virtually collapsed. I now sell soft drinks and other beverages to survive.

Interestingly, people in Mognori did not experience any decline in social activities and their daily routines and social lives remained almost the same. A community member remarked;

The disease (COVID-19) is not here. It is only in the big cities. We have not experienced any changes in our social lives. We still go to the mosque every day, and perform our marriages and naming ceremonies. The only change is that the children do not go to school again since the schools have been closed down.

The fact that Mognori did not record a decline in social activities could be attributed to the fact that the police that enforced the ban on

social gatherings were absent in most very rural communities such as Mognori. Therefore people were able to flout the rules without being punished. Additionally, the rural-urban dichotomic effect of the pandemic appeared to be greater on the somewhat cosmopolitan community of Larabanga than the typically rural Mognori. This could be attributed to the fact that most of the livelihood types in Larabanga were often tourism-related compared to Mognori where almost all the indigenes were engaged in crop farming. It has however been reported that urban areas are often more resilient than rural areas in the wake of disasters ([Cutter et al., 2010](#)). For instance, [Cutter et al. \(2016\)](#) found that economic capital mainly drives resilience in urban areas, while community capital drives resilience in rural areas. Similarly, other authors found that knowledge, skill, attitude, assets and social capital were critical indicators of resilience ([Bastaminia et al., 2017](#)). While the drivers of resilience are different, [Cutter et al. \(2016\)](#) suggest that strategies for improving resilience must be tailored to the local context and not an adoption of a one-case-fits-all approach for all urban areas or all rural ones.

5.4. Decline in tourism activities

As an international tourism destination, the MNP has suffered a decline in tourist numbers, particularly, international tourists. The MNP visitor records show that between November 2019 and February 2020 (four months prior to the closure of the park due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the facility recorded a total of 6,096 tourists. These comprised 4,381 Ghanaian locals and 1,715 international tourists. It was however revealed through interviews with Park officials that a majority of the Ghanaian tourists were school children who often came in groups for excursions. However, a comparison between international tourist numbers prior to the closure of the park and after its reopening in August 2020 revealed a sharp decline in tourist numbers (see [Table 3](#)).

The decline in international tourists could be attributed to the closure of most international borders. A park official had this to say about the decline in tourist numbers.

We just reopened the facility and people are still a bit sceptical about visiting the place. The number of foreign clients from overseas has been low since we reopened. This is because the international borders have not been fully opened. We hope the numbers will pick up with time.

A similar trend was reported by the Mole Motel, Zaina Lodge and Belgha Bar and Hostel. As lodging and eatery facilities, majority of their clients were often non-Ghanaians with Ghanaian clients checking in now and then. All three facilities reported that they were fully booked from January till December 2020. An official of Mole Motel had this to say:

We had a fantastic year in 2019 and the first quarter of 2020 was superb! We recorded an average daily occupancy rate of 71%, compared to the previous years' (2018) rate of 60%. The year ahead looked promising until COVID struck. Clients started calling in and sending emails requesting to cancel their bookings. We lost a lot of potential revenue as a result. The

Table 3. Number of international tourist visits to the Mole National Park (MNP), four months prior to park closure and four months after park reopening due to COVID-19 pandemic.

| Number of international tourist visits, MNP, November 2019–November 2020 | | | |
|--|--------------|----------------------------------|------------|
| Four months prior to park closure | | Four months after park reopening | |
| November 2019 | 476 | August 2020 | 19 |
| December 2019 | 451 | September 2020 | 44 |
| January 2020 | 539 | October 2020 | 106 |
| February 2020 | 249 | November 2020 | 114 |
| Total | 1,715 | Total | 283 |

Source: Mole National Park visitor records.

pandemic has had a huge impact not only on the declining numbers of our clients but huge financial impacts as well.

Indeed, the decline in tourism numbers had a toll on the financial situation of all facilities, especially the hospitality facilities. According to a recent UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, the decline in international travel alone resulted in the loss of about USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues, which far exceeds losses suffered during the 2009 global economic crisis by more than 11 times (UNWTO, 2021). Developing countries have been speculated to suffer the steepest GDP losses as most of the revenues from tourism come from international tourists. Tourism hotspots including Jamaica, Thailand, Kenya, Egypt and Malaysia could lose between 3% to 11% of their GDP (UNWTO, 2020). Therefore, the focus on international tourists by most tourist sites and hospitality facilities in developing countries has inevitably exacerbated the effect of COVID-19 in these areas (UNWTO, 2020). Indeed, it has been established that domestic tourism, when compared to international tourism is less vulnerable to global crises (Mbaiwa et al., 2007).

5.5. Increase in patrols around the park, provided an opportunity to devote more time and resources to protecting the resources of the park and avert illegal activities in the park

According to the MNP officials, there appeared to be an increase in illegal activities within the park at the time when the park was closed to the public. This was evident by the increased number of poachers who were arrested during that period. Park officials attributed this to the return of most community members to the area because of a lockdown that was enforced in Accra and Kumasi, the two largest cities in Ghana where most indigenes migrate to take up menial jobs. However, park authorities were able to avert this quickly by increasing the number of patrol teams as well as the number of patrols a day within the park. Indeed, during interviews with park officials, they intimated that the core duty of the MNP and for that matter, the Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission was to conserve the forest and wildlife resources within the park. Tourism, was thus, just a by-product of this core duty. Over the years, however, the park has been unable to fully carry out this duty as more and more of the staff have had to be assigned to tour duties with the increasing number of tourists. With the closure of the park between March 23, 2020, and August 7, 2020, however, park authorities were able to recall the staff from tour guide duties to join their colleagues in the Law Enforcement Unit to beef up patrols within the park. The increase in the number of patrol teams coupled with the number of patrols a day, according to park officials has helped in averting illegal activities such as illegal hunting, and rosewood harvesting within the park, which hitherto, were regular occurrences.

It can therefore be said that the pandemic's impact on the ecology and conservation in the Mole National Park has been mixed. Indeed globally, the pandemic's impact has been mixed. For instance, while lockdowns in China have resulted in improvements in air quality due to a reduction in road traffic and industrial activities (Le et al., 2020), it has also adversely affected livelihoods as well as increasing wildlife poaching (The Guardian, 2020).

5.6. Improving eco-tourism to remain resilient and withstand shocks going forward

Given the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on eco-tourism, the study highlights some immediate measures as well as medium to long term measures that could help improve eco-tourism and make it resilient in the face of the present crisis and future ones. Table 4 presents study participants' responses to strategies for improving eco-tourism in the area while Figure 3 summarises the key measures as articulated by the study participants using the word cloud technique.

Table 4. Study participants' responses to strategies for improving eco-tourism in the area to make it resilient to withstand shocks such as COVID-19.

| Theme | Direct quotes of participants |
|--|---|
| Provision of stimulus and severance packages (n = 20) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For some of us, we have lost our jobs due to the pandemic. The government has to support us The government and NGOs need to support small business people like us to revive our tour guide business Our facility has been running on a tight budget. Government has to step in to help us |
| Strict adherence and enforcement of COVID-19 safety protocols (n = 15) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have temporarily suspended buffet dining and other activities that promote group gathering. We ensure the strict adherence of the safety protocols by both our staff and our clients. |
| Diversify livelihood opportunities (n = 18) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apart from farming and tourism, there are little opportunities for making a living We need support in the areas of agricultural mechanisation, production and agro-processing Maybe if we had a CREMA, then we could be supported by NGOs like they do for the people of Mognori |
| Promotion of domestic tourism (n = 19) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Until now, I didn't realise how depended our facility was on clients from abroad I think it is time to promote domestic tourism among our own people |

Source: Authors' fieldwork (2020).



Figure 3. Word cloud expressing the measures that could help improve eco-tourism and make it resilient in the study communities.

Similar to Figure 2, two solution groups have emerged in Figure 3. The first group of words proposes the promotion of domestic tourism as well as government and NGO support. While the second group of words focuses on the individual and advocates for individual skill training including, livelihood diversification as well as taking personal responsibility including hand washing and the wearing of nose masks. These strategies correlate with similar strategies being undertaken in Sri Lanka to build resilience in the wake of the pandemic (Karunarathne et al., 2021).

Provision of stimulus and severance packages Given the impact of the pandemic on small and medium scale enterprises (SMSEs), the hospitality industry, and tourism as a whole, there is an urgent need for government to provide stimulus and severance packages to individuals and SMSEs that lost their jobs as well as provide reliefs such as tax breaks for SMSEs and the hospitality industries. During FGDs, only two individuals in Larabanga admitted that they had heard about the government's efforts to offer some support to SMSEs. However, only one person had indeed applied but was yet to receive any support. A male participant during focus groups had this to say:

For some of us, we have lost our jobs due to the pandemic. The government has to support us. I heard that they were registering people for government support but I don't know the modalities or where this registration is taking place. I am not sure a small business owner like me living in a small town will benefit from such an exercise since I do not know any 'big man' or live in a big city.

Some countries around the world including the United States of America (USA) have provided various reliefs and stimulus packages to their citizenry and companies to help reduce the impact of the pandemic on them. To date, the USA has provided the most comprehensive packages in terms of relief to its citizens. About \$2 trillion cash reliefs have been disbursed to various sectors of the economy including the tourism sector through the CARES Act (Dube et al., 2020). In Africa, countries such as Ghana, Egypt, South Africa and Kenya have also rolled out severance packages for their citizens and companies (Acquaah et al., 2021). However, Acquaah et al. (2021) attest that these packages have either been too little to make any significant impact or were targeted at big businesses instead of SMEs, which are the foundations on which African economies are built. In Ghana, for instance, a syndicated loan facility worth GHS3 billion (about US \$600 million) was disbursed through commercial banks to large businesses mostly in the pharmaceutical, hospitality, and manufacturing sectors to support them, whereas, for the over 200,000 formal small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), only GHS1 billion (about US\$200 million) was made available to them (Ghana National Chamber of Commerce & Industry (GNCCI), 2020). While no African country has offered income subsidies for affected workers, some countries such as Nigeria and South Africa have offered state loans or credit guarantees to companies (Ozili, 2020).

Strict adherence and enforcement of COVID-19 safety protocols Another immediate measure that needs to be taken by all in tourism enclaves such as the Savannah region is the strict adherence and enforcement of the basic COVID-19 safety protocols that include frequent handwashing with soap under running water, social distancing, and the wearing of nose masks. For the hospitality industry especially, there needs to be a restructuring of its operations especially with sitting arrangements in restaurants, lodging arrangements in dormitories and other shared spaces such as reception areas, swimming pools and gym facilities among others. Such restructuring measures could include the temporal cancellation of services such as buffet dining, the use of swimming pools, and dormitory lodging facilities. Rather, the use of contactless menu boards, cashless payment systems, routine sanitization of tables, the promotion of take-outs in restaurants and the screening of dinners among others should be encouraged. An official of one of the hospitality facilities outline some restructuring that has already taken place.

In our facility, we have temporary suspended buffet dining and other activities that promote group gathering. We also ensure the strict adherence of the safety protocols by both our staff and our clients.

This restructuring is necessary to ensure the safety of customers and workers alike as well as build customers confidence in patronising their services (Gössling et al., 2020; Gursoy and Chi, 2020). Resilience research shows us that crisis transform or cause changes in the tourism system (Hall et al., 2018). As a result, businesses and society, in general, may have to alter how they conduct tourism and hospitality if they wish to survive and thrive post-COVID-19. In Lebanon for example, Yacoub and ElHajjar (2021) found that hotel operations had witnessed a new normal characterised by more in-room dining rather than buffet dining, and the wearing of face masks becoming the norm. They also found that, many hotels had taken steps to minimize expenditure by ensuring that staff took their annual holidays, while room and food costs were adjusted according to market demands.

Diversify livelihood opportunities around the Mole National Park Regarding long term measures, there is the need to diversify livelihood opportunities around the MNP. These could include ones that have little ties to tourism considering that tourism constitutes a large part of the

local economy of the area. In this regard, direct government support and non-governmental organization (NGO) support is necessary especially in the areas of agricultural mechanisation, production and agro-processing. Currently, some development partners including A. Rocha Ghana working through the Community Resource Management Areas (CRE-MAs) – a form of community-based natural resources management, provide women engaged in shea and cassava processing with training, logistical and marketing support (Soliku and Schraml, 2020). While 51.5% of communities currently enjoy these supports which have helped provide alternative sources of income to some locals, this needs to be scaled up to cover all thirty-three communities surrounding the park. Indeed, over-dependence on tourism as a single livelihood option can be risky especially in the event of shock and stress such as the pandemic (Mbaiwa and Stronza, 2010), hence the need for livelihood diversification.

Promotion of domestic tourism The ban on air travels and lockdowns in most countries in the west and its attendant decline in tourist numbers brought to the fore, the over-dependence on international tourists. The effect of this phenomenon was particularly evident in the hospitality industry and the other sectors that were closely related to tourism, for instance, tour operators and guides. Several weeks after the re-opening of the MNP on August 7, 2020, some of the hospitality facilities in the MNP were yet to receive a single guest. An official of a hospitality facility reflected on the need to promote domestic tourism:

Until now, I didn't realise how depended our facility was on clients from abroad. Even though the travel restrictions have been eased, can you believe we are yet to receive guests? This situation has opened our eyes on the need to promote tourism among our own people.

Novelli et al. (2012) have lamented on the state of developing countries over-reliance on international tourists and its susceptibility to shocks in the event of crisis. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, some scholars have speculated that the development of a localized form of travel and domestic tourism is likely to be the new order in the tourism industry (Peters et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Indeed, Dahles and Susilowati (2015) in their study of 'business resilience in times of growth and crisis' found that whereas the domestic tourism segment in Yogyakarta, Indonesia was more resilient in crisis, the international tourism segment was less resilient in similar circumstances. This finding underscores the need to shift focus from international tourists or at best, ensure a healthy balance between international tourism and domestic tourism. Indeed, the UNWTO Panel of Experts, speculate that as and when tourism restarts, not only will there be a high demand for more nature-based tourism activities, but also an increasing interest in domestic tourism (UNWTO, 2021). To this end, a vigorous campaign on promoting domestic tourism is necessary. This can be pursued through educational campaigns and promotional campaigns using both traditional (e.g. TV, radio) and modern (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook etc.) media targeted at the ordinary Ghanaian. Karunarathne et al. (2021) report that, the Sri Lankan government has already put in place a promotional plan aimed at developing local tourism as a way of rejuvenating the country's tourism sector. Similarly, hotels in Lebanon according to Yacoub and ElHajjar (2021) are beginning to redirect their focus on the local market by developing special packages aimed at attracting locals to their facilities instead of mainly focusing on foreigners.

6. Conclusions

Based on the findings, this study concludes that the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism enclave of the Savannah region were quite severe due to the close link most livelihood sources had to eco-tourism. The over-reliance on eco-tourism in the area, therefore, exacerbated the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on the people. While these impacts were more pronounced in the somewhat

cosmopolitan community of Larabanga, they were less pronounced in the typically rural Mognori where the livelihood activities focused on agriculture and agro-processing. Ecological impacts were however mixed – both positive and negative. While there appeared to be an increase in illegal activities within the park at the time when the park was closed to the public, the diversion of staff from tour duties to law enforcement duties quickly averted this. Therefore, the time and resources devoted to protecting the resources of the park increased, thereby reducing illegal activities in the park. To build resilience in the eco-tourism sector in Ghana's Savannah region amid the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, the study recommends that immediate measures such as severance packages be given to local SMSEs by the government. Additionally, the management of hospitality facilities needs to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols in their facilities and restructure their services in the wake of the prevailing circumstances. In the long term, the study recommends diversifying the local economy and promoting domestic tourism in the country. This will require a combination of government and non-governmental support to local people and enterprises in the form of skill training as well as financial support to develop alternative livelihood sources. Public education, advertisement and promotions will also be required to boost interest in domestic tourism.

Findings from this study have implications beyond this case study. The findings imply that over-reliance on tourism and tourism-related activities by communities around tourist locations can have serious consequences for the local economy and the livelihoods of the people in times of crisis. The global effect of COVID-19 on tourism has been devastating. While the road to recovery is likely to be slow for stakeholders in the tourism sector, the recovery will be much slower in developing countries. However, with the right strategies and support, stakeholders in the tourism sector will be able to survive and thrive amid this crisis.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Ophelia Soliku, Bona Kyiire, Ali Mahama: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Chrysantus Kubio: Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the research participants for their cooperation and participation as well as the two anonymous reviewers.

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