

Ecotourism: A Sustainable Development Connect to Nature and A Strategy for Balancing Economic Growth, Socio-Cultural Development and Conservation

Prof. Dr. Binu Thomas M.Phil, Ph.D, B.Ed

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2424-4398_

binupng2012@gmail.com

ICFAI University
Sikkim, India

Abstract

Ecotourism is an important niche market in the world tourism industry. It is becoming increasingly popular as an alternative to mass tourism. The data were collected using documentation and library techniques, field methods, questionnaires, note-taking, observation, and conducting interviews with people, tourists, and authorities in charge of ecotourism development. The study examines the economic impact of ecotourism in the villages of Sikkim, which are full of rich and pristine biodiversity and other natural resources. Ecotourism provides the tourist with a quality nature experience, generates funds and support for conservation efforts, has a minimal environmental impact, and provides socioeconomic benefits to local host communities. Tourism can contribute significantly to rural development, agricultural transformation, community enrichment and social empowerment. . The main thrust of this study is to examine the impact of ecotourism as sustainable development focused on the potential of the tourist as an agent of sustainable development possibility framed in terms of a tourist “connecting to nature”. With an objective to identify and quantify the impacts of ecotourism on environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, economic development, and enhancement of livelihoods, this study was carried out to focus on the way tourists can live harmoniously with the planet and has been identified as an important strategy for balancing economic growth and conservation. The study is intended to enhance the capacity of ecotourism to generate benefits for both the local communities and destinations (mainly the protected areas), and thus contribute to the sustainable development of the region more generally. The primary problem of the study was to examine the relationships among acculturation, ecotourism, and cultural impacts to understand the ecotourism acculturation mechanism that shapes ecotourism cultural impacts.

Keyword: Connect to nature, ecotourism, sustainable development, economic growth, conservation

Introduction

Tourism has assumed unprecedented importance in recent years and therefore efforts have been made at the national and international levels to promote it at a faster rate. According to a World Tourism Organisation report, tourism has the unique capacity to generate trade and investment directly at the local level, as tourists and entrepreneurs seek new destinations. It can contribute significantly to rural development, agricultural transformation, community enrichment, and social empowerment. But this must be balanced with the tremendous pressure on natural, cultural, and socio-economic environments of popular places of tourist interest. Black (2007) defined eco-tourism as an experience with a focus on the natural and cultural environment, as an ecologically sustainable activity, an activity with a pre-dominant educative and interpretive program and an activity that contributes to the local community groups and projects and to the conservation of the surrounding environment. But tourism may involve greater trade-offs with local livelihoods through more competition for natural resources. Tourism generating regions for rural tourism are highly developed and urbanized – the stresses of urban living and the remoteness of the natural environment has created a desire for escape from the monoculture of city living. Wallace (1992) observes, ecotourism operators have

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begun to form partnerships with protected area managers and local people, with the intention of contributing to the long-term protection of natural resources and local development and in the hope of improving mutual understanding between hosts and visitors. Rural locations offer an idealized release from stress and the opportunity to re-engage with a simpler, quieter way of life that offers rest and relaxation. In the book 'Tourism Management – A Global Perspective', Batra and Chawla (1994) hold the view that "ecotourism is perceived as a viable alternative route by which a measure of economic benefit can be reaped from tourism, with minimal damage to the environment and society and maximum advantage to local people". Demand fuelled by media, over-familiarity and congestion with traditional tourist resorts, and increased interest in alternative attractions – with its voracious appetite for content and the resultant over-exposure of many traditional tourist destinations, the media have sought out new and interesting tourism experiences for their lifestyle productions. Increasing environmental awareness and interest in the relationship between humans and the environment. Green issues have raised the attractiveness of rural experiences as ecologically sustainable tourism. Better-educated travellers have increased interest in outdoor recreation, ecotourism, and special interest tourism - individualism drives a need for unique experiences, and rural tourism, because of its fragmented nature and diversity of offerings, can satisfy this need.

Objectives of the study

In this context, the present study has the following objectives:

1. To understand the importance of ecotourism as an alternative livelihood in rural Sikkim.
2. To gauge the impact of ecotourism on village economy.
3. To measure the extent of the impact of ecotourism on village society.
4. To understand the role of ecotourism in the conservation of environment

Methodology

A descriptive research methodology was adopted by the researcher for this study. The present study was conducted in the two villages of Sikkim state. The two villages are selected based on their popularity as tourism spots as indicated by Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation in their information on their website. The sample for the study was selected randomly from the two villages. The primary data was collected from the respondents using questionnaire survey. Group discussions were conducted to collect the primary data about the socio economic condition of the people. Apart from these methods, in depth case studies was also conducted as a supplement to find out the condition of the people living in these villages who are involved in the rural/farming activities. The secondary data for the present study was collected from books, journals, government reports and internet sources. The collected primary data was coded and turned into tables.

Respondents of the Study. A survey was administered to a selected sample from a specific population. The present study on Community members was based on multi-stage sampling technique. Community members were selected randomly and the interview was conducted in two stages. Quantitative research utilises structured or standardised forms of interviews. That means each respondent receives exactly the same questions in an identical format.

Data collection methods. Choice of data collection methods depends on the degree of accuracy needed, the expertise of the researcher, time span, costs, and facilities available to the researcher (Sekaran, 2003). Methods of data collection included questionnaires or interviews. Questionnaires were personally administered. Interviews can be face-to-face, by telephone, computer assisted or through electronic media. Interviews, questionnaires and observations are the most commonly used data collection methods in survey research. Although interviews are more flexible in terms of adapting the questions as the researcher proceeds, questionnaires save time, energy, and costs. Modern technology is playing an important role in data collection as both questionnaires and interviews can now be done electronically.

Results and Discussion

1. General background of Sikkim

Sikkim is one of the newer States of India, as it was an independent country under monarchic rule till 1975, after which it merged with India to become its twenty-second State. Sikkim's geographical features mostly consist of high mountains and deep valleys with exquisite eastern Himalayan flora and fauna which makes it part of the eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot zone. The State's culture reflects this natural beauty and variety of the mountains and is many-faceted – as diverse as the ethnicity found in it.

1.1. Ecotourism in Aritar and Darap

The region of Aritar is situated in the east of Sikkim and is soaked in natural splendor and history. Aritar also presents tourists with a spellbinding view of the Khangchendzonga that contributes to enhance the overall attractiveness of the region. Moreover, the region boasts of lush green forests, vast stretches of paddy fields and placid lakes that are ensconced within the deep forests. As a direct outcome of their involvement in eco-tourism activities, these families are able to afford a good living, ensure that their children receive good education, contribute towards conserving the environment, created increased awareness amongst the public, were able to supplement their income by opening small restaurants, curio shops and other similar establishments, improved awareness amongst the locals with regards to tourism, etc.

1.2. Social Indicators: Basic Amenities

Education is always seen as an important means of attaining social mobility. Education provides individuals with new employment opportunities and also helps in improving their social status. To understand the level of educational awareness and its significance for the future generation, the respondents were asked if they had any school going children. This study revealed that ecotourism had a positive impact on the social aspects as it provided more and high-quality services. The economic benefits of such an activity should accrue to the local population to ensure sustainability. Ecotourism enjoys a significant superiority over general tourism with regard to tourist arrivals and economic, social, and environmental benefits.

2. Ecotourism as a mechanism for sustainable development

Ecotourism is one of the fastest expanding tourism markets which has received much attention in developing countries and economically impoverished regions around the world. As an agent of change, ecotourism has been linked to sustainable development strategies and initiatives in many places. However, ecotourism can induce a variety of both positive and negative environmental, cultural and socioeconomic impacts at a destination. Different studies have highlighted various aspects of ecotourism. Some have focused on the industry aspects, such as the nature and quality of provision and environmental attraction that ecotourists expect while few have studied the relationship between ecotourism and the local people's conventional livelihoods and forms of social organizations and others have analysed the motivation of the eco-tourists. The increasing economic importance of tourism has captured the attention of most countries. However, the global growth of tourism poses a significant threat to cultural and biological diversity. Ecotourism in Sikkim, which has a forest cover of more than 46% of the geographical area with its exquisite flora and fauna apart from scenic values of its landscapes, must therefore impact on the village economy, as villagers provide the support mechanisms for ecotourism. It must also have an impact on the indigenous social elements in so much as there will be a socio-cultural invasion and therefore infusion of an alien culture into the local settings.

3. Socio-cultural impacts of Ecotourism

As a small, land-locked State, Sikkim tries to preserve the environment and culture in its natural state. However, the state is going through an irreversible societal transition. It is changing from a rural society based on

subsistence organic farming to a society with a growing services sector that increasingly relies on tourism and the export of hydro-energy for economic growth. The country is also witnessing the first cultural impact since opening up to globalization. Nature-based tourism is undoubtedly one of the most significant areas of research in tourism studies today. Ecotourism is viewed in many parts of the world as the next wave of community and regional development. In order to maintain ecotourism site as a popular destination, it requires a detailed study of individual preference pattern; motivating forces etc. should be carried out. Ecotourism acts as a tool for sustainability. Researcher can make inter-destination comparisons by applying more advanced statistical tools. Ecotourism will require careful planning in the future to avoid further negative impacts on biodiversity. More research is needed to help to formulate policy. This study would help policy makers, planners, educationists and environmentalist to formulate new policies associated with ecotourism. The result of this study will help the administrators to change the approach towards ecotourism. The outcome of the studies can be used for further improvements in this area, since Sikkim has a large potential for developing ecotourism market. Ecotourism leads to community development and improves the life standard of local people. It is evident from the present study that the ecotourism development in these villages plays an important role in the economic development mainly through an improvement in the income and employment of the local people. The number of tourist arrivals (both domestic and foreign tourists) in the ecotourism destinations in Sikkim is increasing day by day. These increasing tourist arrivals raise optimism among tour operators, agents and others involved in tourism industry. The most serious problem in these areas, as revealed from this study, is infrastructural problem. Ecotourism is gaining attention of conservationists and development practitioners worldwide as one of the nature-based industries for sustainable development.

4. Importance of ecotourism as an alternative livelihood in rural Sikkim

Ecotourism in Sikkim started in the year 1995-96 with trainings, awareness, changes in regulations to adapt to the mountainous terrain, and entry of foreign tourists into many of restricted & protected areas. It took a sizeable effort to augment the tourism activities based on nature exposition in the interior areas. Tourism is one of the important services providing industry in Sikkim state. Its rapid growth contributed in the socio-economic development of the region. The increase of tourists resulted in the economic benefit to the regional economy by providing income and employment to the local community people. A key facet of ecotourism is to actively involve local communities with an objective to help them benefit from such conservation initiatives, and facilitate economic growth and education. Though setting up parks and protected areas directly impact local residents, they also stand to gain significantly by the promotion of ecotourism in such areas. Involving local communities within the ambit of ecotourism not only helps local communities to satiate their economic requirements but it also enables them to maintain and enhance the sense of place that is vital to ensure long-term conservation. Aiding local communities to nurture ecotourism is a robust manner that facilitates their growth, since they are increasingly endowed with extensive local knowledge and truly appreciate their natural and cultural heritage.

5. Impact of ecotourism on the village economy

Statistics of rent earned through Ecotourism

In the state of Sikkim, it is a common practice among the locals to give rooms in the house for rent. Since there is a regular inflow of tourists to this region, it gives the locals an opportunity to make earn some money. This also helps in compensating for the income of the family. The average rent of Rs. 22824.82 was earned by 146 respondents (minimum Rs.100 and maximum Rs.2,50,000) is represented in Table 1 and Figure 1

Table 1
Rent earned by the Respondents

	Respondents	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Rent earned by the Respondents	146	100	250000	22824.82

Source: Author (2016)

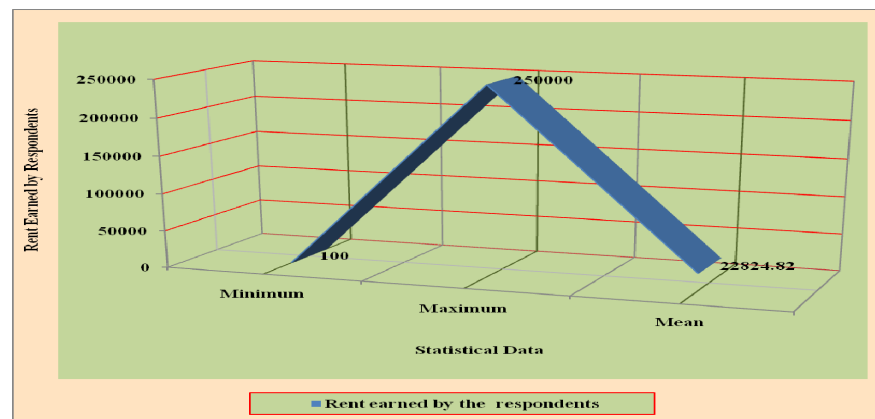


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6. Impact of ecotourism on village society

The impact of the improvement in the general wellbeing of the people and their increased purchasing power as can be inferred from an increased human development index, is also a factor that has not been considered within the scope of this study. Sikkim is one of the fastest growing States of India and the poverty level has been lowered in recent years. The literacy level of the villagers who engage in ecotourism is also critical to introducing modernization in ecotourism services. Being a rapidly evolving enterprise, which caters to elite ecotourists who live mostly in developed urban locales, the introduction of digital services and modern amenities on a regular basis is also important. The study revealed that the existing tourism providers were mostly not those with college degrees but school pass-outs. Some of them were not aware of the benefits of having websites. Though they were sending their children to schools and wanted them to do well in life, they themselves were not very informed of latest developments. Ecotourism leads to community development and improves the living standard of local people.

The findings of the study revealed that ecotourism has steered economic growth within the local community and has boosted the local economy. Ecotourism also has had a sizable impact on the local communities from a social perspective. Ecotourism has facilitated an enhancement of social contact between tourists and the local communities which resulted in mutual appreciation, understanding, tolerance, awareness, learning, family bonding, mutual respect, and liking. On one hand, people from the local communities get to know about the outside world without even having to travel out of their villages, and on the other hand, tourists to the region are presented with an opportunity to learn about local traditions and customs. Ecotourism also impacts local communities when the revenue generated from ecotourism is utilized to enhance the social infrastructure like schools, healthcare institutions, libraries, cyber cafes, etc. Further, the richness of the natural environment and the ethnicity of the region are what attract tourists to a region and it enables the conservation of local customs, art forms, and handicrafts which faced the danger of gradual extinction. Tourists to the region spend money on food, accommodation, entertainment, transportation, and shopping. This kind of expenditure has been instrumental in generating direct employment opportunities for people from the local communities in hotels, transport, and travel agencies. However, the indirect economic impact that has been witnessed in the form of the multiplier effect is significantly higher. For instance, the commercial activities of local suppliers of vegetables, meat, eggs, etc. to hotels and restaurants during peak tourist seasons have increased. The existing natural environment in the said two areas and its cultural diversity presents a favorable condition for the progress of ecotourism.

7. Role of ecotourism in the conservation of the environment

Ecotourism has the potential to decrease the dependence of the local community on their natural habitat for their day-to-day sustenance. Ecotourism offers them an alternative source of livelihood and engages them as active stakeholders in the overall process of development. Tourists in the region create a much-needed market for non-timber forest products like honey and local artistic endeavors like handicrafts and embroidery products. In fact, ecotourism can also be utilized as a highly potent tool for communication, which will help to convince the local community about the advantages of preserving the forests and natural habitat. The economic benefit of such an activity should accrue to the local population to ensure sustainability. Ecotourism enjoys a significant superiority over general tourism with regard to tourist arrivals and economic, social, and environmental benefits. It has been clearly established that ecotourism relates to accountable travel to pristine areas with natural richness and an activity that helps the local community to conserve the environment while also improving their overall socio-economic condition. Through the practice of ecotourism, it is possible to not only preserve the natural environment, but it also enables the sustenance of indigenous communities and cultures. Though ecotourism draws parallels with nature-based tourism and sustainable tourism, it is not the same. Actually, sustainable tourism would relate to a more controlled type of tourism that does not drain out the existing resources and does not hamper the scope for future travellers to enjoy the same resources. Contrarily, tourism that is nature based would relate to a reasonable wider perspective that would involve a travel-based activity with a specific focus on nature which may or may not be sustainable in the long run. Though ecotourism may exhibit some of the characteristics of sustainable and nature-based tourism, the larger focus of ecotourism is on community development and environmental conservation. Moreover, the restricting factor of scale sizably distinguishes it from the other two types of tourism. The key principles that render any travel activity as sustainable ecotourism would include; minimizing the adverse effect of tourism on culture and nature, disseminating awareness about environment and culture, presenting an affirmative experience for tourists and service providers, raising income that enables conservation initiatives, guaranteeing the socio-economic development of the local community and accent on the infrastructure that has been established in agreement with the local environment. Hence, ecotourism initiatives on the basis of these principles cannot emerge as mass tourism initiatives, although ecotourism can be effectively managed if it is planned and executed in a manner that is being done in other nations that have initiated ecotourism.

Conclusions

From the above study it can be significantly concluded that ecotourism initiatives have made a tremendous impact in the lives of people in Sikkim viz., Aritar and Darap. Not only has ecotourism opened new avenues for people from these regions who had no big source of income earlier, it has also supplemented the income of people who were involved in traditional occupations like farming, cattle rearing etc. Ecotourism has helped many respondents to earn a decent livelihood. One noticeable feature is that many people who did not own cultivable land before are now owners of their own land for cultivation. They could produce and offer home-grown food to their valued guests living in their homestays. A key facet of ecotourism is to actively involve local communities with an aim to help them benefit from such conservation initiatives, facilitate economic growth and education. Though setting up parks and protected areas directly impact local residents, they also stand to gain significantly by the promotion of ecotourism in such areas. Involving local communities within the ambit of ecotourism not only helps local communities to satiate their economic requirements but it also enables them to maintain and enhance the sense of place that is vital to ensure long-term conservation. Aiding local communities to nurture ecotourism is a robust manner that facilitates their growth, since they are increasingly endowed with extensive local knowledge and truly appreciate their natural and cultural heritage. The economic benefit of such an activity should accrue to the local population to ensure sustainability. Ecotourism enjoys a significant superiority over general tourism with regard to tourist arrivals and economic, social, and environmental benefits. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that ecotourism development and protection of environment can be made possible with the careful planning and execution of projects by the government departments, tourist officials along with the co-operation of the public. In future, ecotourism will continue to grow in several parts of the world as a profitable way of life. The strategic placement of the village offers

significant opportunities for tourism, especially for ecotourism. Tourists in the village are presented with diverse opportunities that help them to relax and enjoy village life. As a result, the economy of the region was consistently low, and the people faced extreme poverty. The introduction of ecotourism facilitated the villagers with a range of opportunities to enhance their livelihood via direct and indirect sources. Ecotourism was instrumental in significantly modifying the lifestyles of the local community. The aesthetic value of Sikkim is growing day by day and the financial status of the state is accelerating through ecotourism. The study elaborates the potential influence of ecotourism in the villages of Aritar and Darap. A number of factors were evaluated to analyze the influence of ecotourism in these areas. After careful analysis the study infers that ecotourism has substantial influence on people living in the two districts. Even the lifestyle of people living in these regions have changed and people transform their living trend by comforting their lives with modern appliances such as refrigerators, television with cable connection, educating and securing their children's future, etc. Being a rapidly evolving enterprise which caters to elite ecotourists who live mostly in developed urban locales, the introduction of digital services and modern amenities on a regular basis is also important. The study revealed that the existing tourism providers were mostly not those with college degrees but school pass outs. Some of them were not aware of the benefits of having web sites. Though they were sending their children to schools and wanted them to do well in life they themselves were not very informed of latest developments. Recently government took many measures to improve ecotourism development and the tourists are satisfied with the facilities provided to them at the destination. The analysis revealed that age, education and gender of tourists occupy important place in determining the satisfaction level of tourists. The educational level and age of tourists are the major factors in choosing tourist sites. It was imperative that all members of the local community were benefitted by it irrespective of the social fabric consistently to render the initiative viable from a socio-economic perspective and feasible in the long-term. With regards to the two key areas; Aritar and Darap, it was noticed that women and younger people were more engaged in ecotourism activities as they functioned as cooks, guides, drivers and managers within home stay facilities. The findings of the study revealed that the ecotourism has steered economic growth within the local community and has boosted the local economy. Ecotourism also has had a sizable impact on the local communities from a social perspective. Ecotourism has facilitated an enhancement of social contact amongst tourists and the local communities, which resulted in mutual appreciation, understanding, tolerance, awareness, learning, family bonding, mutual respect and liking. On one hand, people from the local communities get to know about the outside world without even having to travel out of their villages and on the other hand, tourists to the region are presented with an opportunity to learn about local traditions and customs. Ecotourism also impacts local communities when the revenue generated from ecotourism is utilized to enhance the social infrastructure like schools, healthcare institutions, libraries, cyber cafes etc. Further, the richness of the natural environment and the ethnicity of the region are what attract tourists to a region and it enables the conservation of local customs, art forms and handicrafts which faced the danger of gradual extinction. Tourists to the region spend money on food, accommodation, entertainment, transportation and shopping. This kind of expenditure has been instrumental in generating direct employment opportunities for people from the local communities in hotels, transport and travel agencies. Residents' personal cultural exposure and interaction with tourists had positive direct and indirect effects on the residents' perceived positive cultural impact. Ecotourism promotes these cultural traditions rather than altering native customs to fit specific international norms. Some consider ecotourism to be a means to end cultural ignorance, stereotyping, and fear in the world through its ability to educate travelers.

Recommendations

In the light of the results found in this study, the following are some of the other recommendations, which may be given for the improvement of ecotourism. Motivate the local community to increase their involvement in sustainable tourism activities.

1. Provide training programs to local people and communities.
2. More education and guidance must be provided for the stakeholders involved in ecotourism in order to secure better participation of local communities in ecotourism.
3. Improve livelihood options of local communities through ecotourism activities.

4. Participation of women self-help groups in the conservation programs will help in ecotourism development.
5. Local handicraft, cuisine, folksongs/music to be encouraged and local economic earning activities should be promoted. Creation of local committees is required for this.
6. The central and state governments should allocate necessary funds from time to time for the purpose to improve roadways, transportation, ensure clean and hygienic environment and provision of safety and security conditions at tourist spots.
7. Every year, give separate budget for ecotourism development programs.
8. Protection and conservation of total bio diversity and implement animal welfare programs for wildlife protection. A separate protected area tourism plan is required.
9. Public participation is essential in protecting the fauna and flora from wildfires.
10. To maintain sustainability of the place, the physical, economic and socio- cultural dimensions of the carrying capacity should be kept in consideration.
11. Strictly reducing the number of visitors admitted to certain sites on the basis of carrying capacity of the place.
12. Human resources play a crucial role in the success of a service industry like tourism. The quality and quantity of human resources is equally important.
13. Proper facilities for training and development of staff should be provided by tourism industry.
14. Construct more ecotourism facilities by using eco-friendly techniques like solar energy, capture and utilization of rain water, recycling of garbage, natural cross ventilation
15. A high level self-sufficiency in food generation through orchards, ecological farms, aquaculture.
16. Conduct scientific studies on the impact of ecotourism on income and employment. State must enact tourism friendly legislations.
17. Tourism is a service industry and multiplicity of taxes exists in this sector. The quantum of taxes also varies from place to place. This makes tourism product expensive.
18. Tourism contributes a lot the Indian economy. To attract more skilled persons into this sector, tourism based knowledge is necessary. So it is recommended to include more tourism and ecotourism based courses in curriculum.
19. Tourism clubs should be organized in School/ colleges to create awareness about ecotourism among the youth. Environmental Education Centre and an Interpretation Centers should be set up in Sikkim. Steering interest amongst youth towards ecotourism through school activities. Promote and develop - educational programs to awareness about nature conservation
20. Plantation tourism is given necessary support as it can complement the effort in the ecotourism activities being taken up in the National Parks and Sanctuaries.
21. There is also need to involve private sector in tourism development. Public private partnership can do a lot in this area.
22. Besides the above, proper utilization of existing resources available in Sikkim facilitates effective functioning of ecotourism projects.

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