

Ecotourism –A Sustainable Way for The Development of Local Community: A Study of Ecotourism in Janjehli, Himachal Pradesh

Mr. Abhishek Sharma^{1*}, Dr. Vinay Chamoli², Dr. Neeraj Aggarwal³

^{1*}Tourism & Hospitality, Department of Management, Maharaja Agrasen University, Baddi, H.P, India

²Tourism & Hospitality, Department of Management, Maharaja Agrasen University, Baddi, H.P, India

³UIHTM, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

Email: ^{1*}Abhisheksharma6187sharma@gmail.com

Abstract

From the last few decades, it has been realized by the global bodies that sustainable development is required in every step of planning, development and operations of global activities. Even the tourism industry is emphasizing on the sustainable practices. Ecotourism as a form of sustainable tourism is identified as a panacea to deal with environmental problems. It also focuses on welfare of the locals through tourism by promoting their culture and local products. The present study is an attempt to understand the importance of ecotourism in the development of local community. The study has taken into consideration the mixed approach for data collection started from secondary data and ends with collecting primary data from the study area. The Janjehli, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh has been taken as study area for the research work. The results of the study indicates that Ecotourism provides platform for the locals to generate revenues and benefits from tourist activities and services taking place in their area. Additionally, it helps to conserve their local ecosystem. However, it is also evident that locals are not getting due credit and benefits from ecotourism that they deserve. Lack of facilities like training program for locals, effective marketing of sites, and a weak PPP model are some of the points to be mentioned from the list of reasons pointed out in the findings of this study. This study is an attempt to provide insight to the government and stakeholders about the scope of betterment for the development of Ecotourism in the area.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Sustainable development, Ecotourism, Local community, Community engagement.

1. Introduction:

The tourism industry contributes significantly towards economic development thereby offering job opportunities in various sectors of tourism like hospitality, transportation, civil aviation and entertainment. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), during pre-pandemic (covid -19) time, tourism contributed 10.4% to Global GDP and accounted for 10.5 % of overall jobs. This contribution during the year – 2023 was 9.1% (WTTC 2023). However, the tourism industry is vulnerable to external factors including environmental, economic and political one. Covid 19 pandemic demonstrated this susceptible nature of tourism industry, causing cancellation in bulk, job losses, and business shut-downs. As the recovery process is still going on, it opens up the door for the sustainable development through tourism.

1.2 Sustainable tourism and local community well-being

Emerged in the late 20th century, sustainable development aims to meet the needs of present population without compromising the needs of future generation. It focuses on maintaining the

balance between economic growth and environmental conservation. Realizing the rapid depletion of natural resources, sustainable development has been promoted globally to ensure gaining long-term benefits for people and environment. In tourism, sustainable practices have gained importance to deal with negative environmental impacts while conserving local culture and gaining economic profits. Brundtland report in 1987 highlighted the concept of sustainable development. In this regard, the sustainable tourism concept were developed by many experts, but the credit of its Introduction goes to Nash and Butler (1990), the concept of sustainable tourism includes different forms namely nature tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism and rural tourism, all of these are working to promote responsible travel and conservation practices. Sustainable tourism development requires an approach that considers holistic development of the area through economic, environmental and social growth sustainably (Buckley, 2009; Cheer et al., 2018; Dahles et al., 2019). Bozdaglar, (2023) in his study asserts that community-based tourism activities can promote sustainable tourism growth and well-being of local communities. Community based tourism moves around the sustainable tourism development, as they try to involve locals in the management and growth of the tourism in a way that provide gains to both local community and the environment (Alzboun et al., 2016; Arintoko et al., 2020).

1.3 Ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh

Ecotourism is highly promoted and recommended by the Government and stakeholders of the tourism industry. It helps to promote responsible travel, environmental conservation and respect for local culture. It tries to maintain the cohesion between humans' activity and environment. The approach of Ecotourism is nature oriented where education and knowledge is delivered through environmental conservation and aims on the overall well-being of the local community (Fennell, 1999; The International Ecotourism Society [TIES], 1998).

A subgroup of sustainable tourism, ecotourism emphasizes local community involvement, responsible tourism behavior and practices and environmental conservation. It promotes appreciation for nature and local culture while minimizing ecological footprint. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustain the well-being of local people and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015). Research studies indicate that ecotourism not only supports environmental conservation efforts but also provides economic benefits to local communities (Hvenegaard, 1994; Sindiga, 1995). McMin (1997) highlights that ecotourist show more interest in local culture and conservation than mass tourists, making ecotourism an effective instrument for sustainable development. To make ecotourism a successful venture, it is must to empower the local communities through their involvement in ecotourism activities (Scheyvens, R. 1999). In Himachal Pradesh, state government has launched several initiatives to promote ecotourism, such as the ecotourism policy (2001 – 2024), the "Home Stay Scheme" (2008), "Model Eco-village Scheme" (2016-17) and "Nai Raahein Nai Manzilein" (2018-19). These programs integrate sustainability with tourism development, ensuring the conservation of natural and cultural resources while boosting local economies. Himachal Pradesh has been preserving its natural assets to enhance ecotourism. The governmental bodies like HPECOSOC (Himachal Pradesh Ecotourism Society), Forest department and HPTDC (Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation) are responsible for the development, promotion and management of ecotourism sites and provide information to tourists.

Study area

The study explores one of the villages – "Baila" or "Bayla" known as ecovillage that comes in Janjehli valley, situated in the Mandi district of the state. The focus of the study is to evaluate

the benefits derived by local community from ecotourism for their development. The area can be accessed through road having the distance of 139 Kms from Shimla, 166 Kms from Manali to Janjehli, and 481 Kms from Delhi. The population of the village as per the Panchayat records is 251 residents, out of which 120 are males (47.8% of the total population) while 131 are females (52.2% of the total population). For the present study, the sample of 67 respondents have taken that includes respondents having different occupational background mostly related to ecotourism activities.

Objective of the study

- To study the role of the Ecotourism on the development of local community.

2. Material and Methods

The study adopts the mixed approach employing secondary data from the government records, research papers, articles and tourism organizations websites to understand the status of development of local community through ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh, particularly in Janjehli (Bayla village), district Mandi. Primary data was collected through circulating questionnaire in the study area targeting active stakeholders (transporters, homestays, ecotourism property owners etc.) of ecotourism activities.

the study is based on the 09 categories of benefits obtained by locals from the ecotourism in their area. The list of benefits and the choices of respondents for each benefit is shown in the table mentioned below:

Table 1 – Benefits frequencies.

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Benefits	BO1 - Better Road facilities	48	14.5%	71.6%
	B02 - Better banking facilities	29	8.8%	43.3%
	B03 - Cleanliness	41	12.4%	61.2%
	B04 - Enhanced living standards	35	10.6%	52.2%
	B05 - Better facilities	30	9.1%	44.8%
	B06 - Job and income opportunities	51	15.5%	76.1%
	B07 - Promotion of local art and craft	42	12.7%	62.7%
	B08 - Conservation of local ecosystem	35	10.6%	52.2%
	B09 - Beautification of local area	19	5.8%	28.4%
Total		330	100.0%	492.5%
a. Group				

The above data is evaluated using SPSS software.

The responses are divided based on the benefits perceived by the locals. The above table indicates that the most popular benefits derived by the locals are “Job and income opportunities” (51 respondents, 76.1% of respondents) was the most frequently used response. It is an indication of strong emphasis on economic prospects. Second most chosen benefit as a

response is Better Road facilities” (48 responses, 71.6%) showing the improvement in the infrastructural development. “Promotion of local art and craft” (42 responses, 62.7%), suggest that cultural aspects are valued by locals. Cleanliness (41 responses, 61.2%), “Enhanced living standard” (35 responses, 52.2%) and “Conservation of local ecosystem” (35 responses, 52.2%) pointed out that people feel a significant link between environmental sustainability and quality of life. Rest of the benefits – Better banking facilities (29 responses, 43.3%), Better facilities of water and electricity (30 responses, 44.8%) and Beautification of local area” (19 responses, 28.4%) were the least chosen that indicates that environmental conservation efforts are less than economic and infrastructural benefits.

The collection of data has taken place from the local people including males and females as indicated in the table 2.

Table 2 – Gender – Benefits Crosstabulation

Gender	B01	B02	B03	B04	B05	B06	B07	B08	B09	Total
Male count	25	16	23	20	18	26	22	20	12	38
Female count	23	13	18	15	12	25	20	15	7	29
Total count	48	29	41	35	30	51	42	35	19	67

Gender – Benefits Crosstabulation using SPSS.

The crosstabulation of gender- benefits represents how respondents categorized by gender perceive various benefits. Both males and females participated in assessing different benefits. The most significant benefits pointed out by respondents were “B06 - Job and income opportunities” & “B01 – Better Road facilities”. The lower rated benefits were B09 – Beautification of local area” and “B08 – Conservation of local ecosystems”. It is a matter of concern as these benefits should be at the top benefits obtained by the locals. The benefits derived by the locals based on age criteria is shown below in table 3.

Table 3 – Age – Benefits crosstabulation

Age	B01	B02	B03	B04	B05	B06	B07	B08	B09	Total
Up to 20 years	10	5	9	9	4	10	11	9	3	14
21 – 35 years	23	11	15	17	12	22	19	17	9	29
36 – 50 years	11	9	13	8	12	14	9	6	6	18
Above 50 years	4	4	4	1	2	5	3	3	1	6
Total count	48	29	41	35	30	51	42	35	19	67

Age – benefits Crosstabulation evaluated through SPSS.

The tabular data indicates that again B06 and B01 are the top benefits perceived by the locals and B09 is the least in getting positive responses from the respondents. It is interesting to note that age group – Up to 20 years showed high interest in “Promotion of Local art and craft” (11 responses). Age group – 21 – 35 years respondents have shown strongest preference for “Job and income opportunities” (22 responses) and “Better Road facilities” (23 responses). Age group- 36 – 50 years gave reasonable responses across all benefits. The respondents belonging to age group – above 50 years have lowest response rate overall in the survey.

Table 4 – Education Qualification -Benefits crosstabulation.

Education Qual.	B01	B02	B03	B04	B05	B06	B07	B08	B09	Total
Up to 10 th count	13	6	12	11	9	15	9	11	7	18
12 th count	28	19	23	18	18	29	23	18	14	39
Graduation & above count	7	4	6	6	3	7	10	6	1	10
Total count	48	29	41	35	30	51	42	35	19	67

The data in the above table shows the perception of locals with different educational qualification about the benefits getting from ecotourism activities in their area. Most recognized benefits are: “B01 – Better road facilities (28 responses), “ B02 – “Better banking facilities” (19 responses), “B03 – Cleanliness” (23 responses), “B04 – Enhanced living standards”, “B05 – Better facilities of water and electricity” (18 responses), “B06 – Job and income opportunities” (29 responses), “B07 – Promotion of local art and craft” (10 responses), “B08 – Conservation of local ecosystem” (18 responses) and “B09 – Beautification of the local area (14 responses). Most of the respondents show greater emphasis on Job opportunities, better road facilities and respect for cultural values.

In addition to benefits obtained by locals from the ecotourism, there is a need to study and understand the challenges faced by locals in the smooth operation of the ecotourism in their areas. The table 5 shows the responses of the locals on the various challenges that they feel create obstruction in the sustainable implementation of ecotourism in their area.

Table 5 - Challenges Frequencies

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		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Challenges ^a	C01- Lack of awareness among the local community	42	11.9%	62.7%
	C02 - Lack of an effective marketing of ecotourism destination	34	9.6%	50.7%
	C03 - Lack of skilled man-power for the smooth functioning of ecotourism in the area	48	13.6%	71.6%
	C04 - Active participation of locals in the ecotourism activities.	34	9.6%	50.7%
	C05 - Major benefits of ecotourism are not enjoyed by the locals	38	10.7%	56.7%
	C06 - Government is not able to implement ecotourism policy effectively	37	10.5%	55.2%
	C07 - Lack of active participation of private sector	43	12.1%	64.2%

	in the development of ecotourism activities.			
	C08 - Improper system for waste and garbage management in the area	41	11.6%	61.2%
	C09 - Potential damage to the local environment.	37	10.5%	55.2%
Total		354	100.0%	528.4%
a. Group				

The data in the above table indicates the various challenges faced by locals in the proper promotion and development of ecotourism in their area. The study suggest that most prominent challenges identified from the responses of locals are: Lack of skilled manpower for the smooth functioning of ecotourism” (48 responses, 71.6%) emphasizing that there is a shortage of trained professional and need to be addressed, Lack of active participation of the private sector in ecotourism development” (43 responses, 64.2%), “Lack of awareness among the local community” (42 responses, 62.7%) highlights the need for education, awareness camps and outreach. The challenges considered as average are: “Improper waste and garbage management” (41 responses, 61.2%), Major benefits of ecotourism are not enjoyed by the locals” (38 responses, 56.7%) indicating economic inequality, “Government is not able to implement ecotourism policy effectively” (37 responses, 55.2%) suggests issues related to policy reinforcement, “Potential damage to the local environment” (37 responses, 55.2%) points out the sustainability concerns. The least reported challenges are: “Lack of effective marketing of ecotourism destinations” (34 responses, 50.7%) and “Active participation of locals in ecotourism activities” (34 responses, 50.7%) were chosen as least but still indicate significant value.

From the present study, it is found that Ecotourism is an essential requirement for the unexplored or less explored areas of the Himachal Pradesh as it serves two purposes – first is, it emphasizes on the conservation of local environment, second is that it promotes local culture and well-being of local people by involving them in the Ecotourism activities and third is that it involves local community in decision making process so that they can get major benefit from the Ecotourism. Most of the Ecotourism properties are established in and around the forest areas of the state that showcase the nature in its true sense.

3. Findings and Discussion

The present research work highlights several findings and main findings are listed below:

1. **High Potential for Ecotourism** – Himachal Pradesh especially Janjehli, has significant potential for Ecotourism development.
2. **Improvement in Infrastructure** – Ecotourism infrastructure is in its initial stages and requires improvement in accommodation, transportation and other services.
3. **Local community involvement** – Active participation of locals in ecotourism activities including decision making is crucial for its success. Local communities are the brand ambassadors of their area and they can effectively represent their cultural traits, art, craft, music, festivals and rituals to the tourists in an authentic and sustainable manner.
4. **Economic gains for Locals** – The majority of financial benefits should be directed toward the local population as they are key stakeholders.

5. Active participation of private sector – The increase in active participation of private sector is needed to boost ecotourism development.

6. Better facilities – Signage, local guides, public transport and tourism information centers are required to offer better ecotourism facilities.

7. Limited Tourism activities – Activities like adventure sports, camping, forest safaris, trekking and cultural night with locals are less or inactive that hinders tourist footfall and their engagement.

8. Lack of Branding and Promotion – Ecotourism destinations failed to attract tourists in adequate number due to less marketing and branding efforts.

9. Skilled based Training for Locals – active participation of local youth in tourism management of their area needs training to effectively promote and operate ecotourism activities.

10. Join hands in for PPP model – There is a need for government and private sector to join hands to run joint ventures that are directed towards the planning, development, promotion, operation and protection of ecotourism sites.

Discussion: The present research aligns with the studies based on development of local communities through ecotourism. Community-based Ecotourism is a tool of empowerment for locals through decision-making autonomy, enhancing self-dependency and equipping locals with skills in tourism (**Scheyvens, 1999**). Promotion of local traditions, culture, cuisines, art and craft through ecotourism assist locals in preserving indigenous knowledge and preventing cultural dilution (**Stronza, 2007**). Ecotourism provides economic growth to local youth by generating jobs opportunity and help in alleviating poverty (**Honey, 2008**). The study promotes the active participation of local people in ecotourism activities and capacity building of locals through education and training for entrepreneurship in tourism which aligns with the studies of (**Blackstock, (2005); Moscardo, (2008)**) that emphasize on community involvement and capacity building of locals through training and skill development in the field of ecotourism.

4. Conclusion

Ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh must be planned and developed ensuring the sustainability, local community involvement, environmental conservation and positive tourist experiences in a responsible manner. The study shows that there is a need for coordinated efforts among local communities, government and private sector to identify, protect, promote and operate ecotourism sites. Locals' engagement in every phase of planning and decision making is vital, as they are the crucial stakeholders and custodians of natural assets of their areas. HPECOSOC promotes ecotourism, but its limited accommodation options (focusing only on Forest rest house, government run properties) need expansion to include private properties by giving priorities to locally owned. The study is limited to just one village namely 'Bayla', Janjehli. There are numerous sites in Himachal Pradesh that has the vast potential of becoming host for ecotourism activities. Future researchers will have the opportunities to study other ecotourism destinations identified by the state government to conduct research on various aspects of Ecotourism and sustainable tourism.

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