



Ecotourism: A strategic Imperative for Cultural, Nature Sensitivity and Sustainability

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Abstract

The contribution of the travel and tourism sector to the total G.D.P. was nearly 5.8% in 2021. At the same time, there is an equal concern for environmental issues. In this context, ecotourism provides the solution. As India is blessed with vast natural diversity, the country has greater scope for becoming an ecotourism destination. Ecotourism preserves biodiversity, ensures socio-economic development, and develops local communities. The year 2017 was declared as the year of sustainable tourism by United Nations, to support sustainable tourism. It is also component for the 2030 agenda. Although it's a fringe aspect of tourism but has great relevance and requires promotional efforts by the state, central government, and other local bodies. Ecotourism is vital for promoting cultural, natural sensitivity and sustainability. The achievement of sustainable tourism requires coordinated concerted efforts in planning, implementation with the involvement of stakeholders. The research paper explores the drivers of ecotourism and suggests strategies for promoting ecotourism in India.

Keywords: Sustainability, ecotourism, cultural, natural sensitivity.

Introduction

Ecotourism is a fringe aspect of tourism compared to conventional mass tourism. Ecotourism involves visiting fragile and new natural areas aimed at reducing environmental impact. International Ecotourism Society, 1993, defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. The four unique features of ecotourism aimed at reducing environmental footprint include the following: Welfare of the local community, Responsible travel, Conservation of the environment, and Exposure to nature. The activities which promote ecotourism include the following:

- Local cuisines and farming, trekking, cycling
- Nature walks, study and discovery treks
- Adventure sports, animal sighting etc.
- Appreciation of folklore, arts and crafts, village homestay, agro tourism
- Volunteering for community development

Local communities have a great role to play in promoting and guiding tourists in some of the activities, as they are endowed with knowledge and

skills. The much-needed impetus to boost ecotourism in India was provided by the Ministry of Tourism, by the Government of India, in the form of a document of national strategy. It had identified seven strategic pillars, state strategy for ecotourism, capacity building and certification, marketing and promotion, destination and product development, public-private partnerships, and government and institutional framework to promote the development and growth of ecotourism in the country. The first ecotourism destination in India was Thenmala in Kerala.

There are more than 200 definitions according to researchers and organizations, which represent core principles to represent ecotourism (Fennell, 2001). Ecotourism is a strategy to combine environmental protection and development in both discourse and exercise (Gray, 2002). Honey (2002) made a differentiation between nature, wildlife, adventure, and ecotourism by emphasizing that ecotourism is based on a set of principles that benefits host communities and guests, and while the former focus on recreational activities, Björk (2000) differentiated ecotourism from nature, wildlife,

adventure, and culture tourism and linked it with sustainable development. Bhalla *et al.*, (2016) evaluated the role of homestays, a product of ecotourism, in influencing the attitudes and behaviors towards ecotourism in wildlife sanctuaries. Give different criteria for defining Eco tourism were suggested by The Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism in 2002. (Products of Nature or natural products, support to conservation, minimal impact management, spread of environmental knowledge, and contribution to the society

Ecotourism in select states of India

Uttarakhand

Ecotourism has become an essential aspect of Uttarakhand tourism. The state is teeming with some incredible homestays and ecolodges promoting ecotourism. Besides, the place is brimming with biodiversity hotspots such as the Valley of Flowers and Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve. Rishikesh, is a great place for rafting and adventure sports and is also blessed with natural beauty. Eco rafting or ecological river rafting gives the joy of understanding ecological features and scenic rafting amid the green Himalayan landscape. Due to the collective efforts made by the Tourism Development Board of Uttarakhand, Garhwal-Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam, and the state forest department, several village treks have been identified. (E.g. Kumaoni villages). Homestay and adventure tourism are also encouraged. Some festivals include the state Bird Spring festival organized by the forest department, and some of the attractions include Nanda Devi Biosphere and the valley of flowers. The State Bird Spring Festival, organized by the forest department, has experienced a great response from tourists.

Himachal Pradesh

The hill state of India is gifted with rich biodiversity and is an attraction to nature lovers across the globe. Ecotourism societies in the state work towards the conservation of natural resources. Some significant attractions for Eco tourists include the Great Himalayan National Park, Pin Valley National Park, and Chandratat.

Kerala

Kerala was the first state to execute planned ecotourism in India and host to some of the wealthiest biodiversity places in the world. Some of the most beautiful places include hill stations and backwaters.

Karnataka

Karnataka in South India is endowed with eco-trails and rainforests of the Western Ghats. The state is also gifted with biological and ecological diversity. Some of the lodges are built right in the heart of the jungle. Some incredible lodges are built right in the heart of the jungle here. Some of the best locations for nature lovers include Nagarhole, Kabini, Hassan, and Chikmagalur.

Orissa

"Development of Eco-tourism" was approved by the Government for a period of five years from the financial year 2016-17 to 2020-21 to realize sustainable development. Currently, the scheme is being operated by the Wildlife Wing of the State. The extraordinary spots outside the protected areas, in several Districts such as Anjar in Keonjhar, Sidhamula in Nayagarh, to name a few have been developed and facilities were provided for nominal camp out, trekking and nature exploration to charm nature buffs. Moreover, employment opportunities are generated by engaging local communities living in the vicinity for preserving services like nature trails, watch towers, interpretation centers.

Responsible tourism and scale:

R.T.S.O.I. (Responsible Society of India is a nonprofit organization set up by the government of India to promote and ensure environmentally responsible and sustainable practices in the tourism Industry. Design of scale and categories for attitude towards "Responsible tourism based on the "On guidelines launched by the Responsible Tourism Society of India and supported by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. All the items to be measured on a 1-5 scale. 1."Not at all important" 2. "Slightly Important," 3. "Important," 4. "Fairly Important and 5."Very Important,"

Travel

1. Selecting a mode of travel which offsets carbon footprint.

At the Destination

1. Carrying refillable or biodegradable toiletries or materials
2. Disposing waste responsibly
3. Eat local food to appreciate local culture
4. Avoid single use plastic and carry steel-based bottles
5. Conserve water and electricity
6. Shop local to support local community
7. Don't disturb or harm animals
8. Respect culture and appreciate culture

9. Take permission for photographs
10. Explore destiny and beyond to appreciate culture, food, places and people
11. Follow guidelines during safari
12. Use established trails for hiking
13. For camping a minimum distance of 100 ft should be maintained from water resources
14. Avoid campfires
15. Abide by local laws
16. Support local community (education, health, and conservation).

These can further be categorized into local community, concern for environment, laws, and local laws. The scale can be administered to tourists (potential and current who are interested in ecotourism). Based on several clusters or segments of tourism can be developed with an aim to design strategy to attract them. Interestingly, some of the points can be carried to mainstream tourism (environmental). Several supporting activities and promotions are needed to be carried out to implementation of the above guidelines. Areas need to be identified by respective tourism department of the state governments.

Strategy and Conclusion:

Luxury ecotourism can also be explored. We recommend each state government encourage small group activity among postgraduate colleges, high schools, technical colleges, professional colleges, and the corporate sector. An app may be developed that educates ecotourism in respective states and acts as a booking and guiding aspect. It requires a vital role of state government, Village panchayat, local bodies, and communities. Although ecotourism is a fringe aspect, the broader aim of sustainable tourism needs to be achieved. Policy, infrastructure, and education are essential to achieve the objectives of ecotourism. Digital media and apps are necessary to promote ecotourism, the effect of ecotourism, and its potential in different states. Luxury ecotourism may further be explored as an area for future research. Sustainable tourism aimed at striving for balance between the

three dimensions namely environmental, socio cultural and economic features of tourism development.

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