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**COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM AND
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN HIMACHAL
PRADESH: A SWOT ANALYSIS**

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism has emerged as a significant livelihood option for the local people, thereby generating a source of revenue for them without harming the environment. It acts as a tool for local socio-economic advancement, which is based on the ecological principle and sustainable development theory. Its agenda relates to various dimensions of sustainable development: local economic growth and social equity alongside environmental conservation. Ecotourism aims to involve the local community for utilizing the resources of natural environment for a living by duly heeding the conservation of ecology, biodiversity and culture of the area, which certainly provide them economic incentives. However, without proper planning and prudent management, ecotourism may lead to environmental degradation. The present paper aims at critically analyzing the ecotourism initiatives in the province of Himachal Pradesh from the perspective of its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, besides deliberating on the possible perils to its delicate ecosystem. The objective of this research is to identify and describe the potential problems and opportunities that may occur in the implementation of community-based ecotourism. It intends to probe into the crucial problems of the indigenous people's ownership rights over land and natural resources by identifying ecotourism with the strong ethical dimensions and survival spirit of the local community in a fast changing world.

KEYWORDS: *ecotourism, sustainable development, tourism and sustainable economy, community-based ecotourism, ecology and environment, Himachal Pradesh.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has played an important role in Indian economy as one of the most important industry sectors in the country. India's glorious traditions and rich cultural heritage and variegated natural environment draw a large number of tourists from all over the world. Recently, ecotourism in India has emerged as a major option for promoting and strengthening the economy of the country at the regional level by generating a source of revenue for the local people without harming the environment. Ecotourism is, however, based on the ethical principles of ecological preservation and sustainable development. It aims to involve the local community for utilizing the resources of the natural environment for a living by duly heeding the conservation of ecology, biodiversity and culture of the area, which certainly provide them economic incentives. The studies emphasize various aspects of eco-tourism. Some concentrate on the industry aspects such as the nature and quality of provision and environmental attraction that eco-tourists expect (Khan, 2003), while others consider the connection between eco-tourism and the local people's conventional modes of livelihood and forms of social organizations (Medina, 2003). Nonetheless, eco-tourism is more than a catchphrase for nature loving travel and recreation as it entertains visitors in a way that is minimally intrusive or destructive to the environment and sustains the indigenous cultures. Therefore, besides considering environmental and cultural factors, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote environmental conservation through proper waste management/recycling, energy efficiency and water reuse, besides creating economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of eco-tourism. The concept of eco-tourism was initially proposed by the Mexican expert and special consultant of IUCN, H. Ceballos Lascurain, in 1983. He holds that eco-tourism is especially featured by sightseeing without harming the natural spectacles. The concept was agreeably and insistently discussed and widened by other experts from the viewpoints of socio-cultural, economic, natural and geological implications (Bhattacharya, Chowdhury and Sarkar, 2011).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As the implementation of community-based ecotourism has certain social and cultural limitations, the present study aims to explore the opportunities and significant problems that relate to local community-based ecotourism and its connection with sustainable development. The objectives of this study are as hereunder:

- To study the concept of eco-tourism and sustainable tourism.

- To analyze the socio-cultural, environmental and economic impacts of ecotourism.
- To identify and describe the potential problems and opportunities that may occur in the implementation of community-based ecotourism by using the SWOT analysis.
- To suggest the viable steps to be taken to promote and facilitate ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study provides the SWOT analysis of the significant issues pertaining to ecotourism and sustainable development in Himachal Pradesh. The data for this study is based on secondary sources as well as personal observations of the researchers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ecotourism is a part of sustainable tourism and any form of nature tourism, which is planned, implemented and managed in a sustainable way (Wood, 2002). There is a strong relationship between ecotourism and sustainable development results, because: (1) it contributes to the conservation of biodiversity; (2) it sustains the well being of local people; (3) it includes an interpretation / learning experience; (4) it involves a responsible action on the part of tourists and tourism industry; (5) it is delivered primarily to small groups by small-scale businesses; (6) it requires the lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources; (7) it stresses local participation, ownership and business opportunities, particularly for rural people. Nag (2013) has analyzed that the state of Himachal Pradesh has a vast potential to be developed as an ecotourism destination. But there are some difficulties or bottlenecks in ecotourism. If these bottlenecks are taken care of, then this hilly province can certainly be developed as an attractive destination for ecotourism.

Verma and Chauhan (2016) have raised some pertinent issues related to the "Problems and Prospects of Sustainable Tourism in Himachal Pradesh." They have discussed that sustainable practices, applications and implementations are on the topmost priority for the survival of ecotourism in various tourist destinations for a longer period of time. Causal tourism practices have already damaged/harmed many tourist sites, which have their main potential in forms of natural beauty, natural resources, and pleasant climatic/environmental conditions. Nevertheless, ecotourism is a source of cultural exchange, environmental awareness, and sustainable ecological preservation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). A sustainable tourism model will positively augment the visitors' interest in local heritage and culture, strengthen local pride, allow tourists to further appreciate the local Indian culture, and provide economic benefit to the

local communities (Drishti, 2003). Ecotourism is, in actual fact, a combination of sustainable tourism and nature-based tourism. Conceptually, sustainable tourism leaves little or no negative impact on the surrounding environment and local culture (Hunter, 1997). The nature-based tourism is simply defined as visiting an area for the purpose of experiencing its ecosystem, geography, or climate (Priskin, 2001). Lindsay (2003) has analyzed that the residents in an ecotourism community are benefitted from a sense of pride and empowerment by sharing with the visitors their knowledge about their local culture. The direct cultural exchange from tourist to local host creates a connection between the visitor and the host that lasts beyond the visit.

Bhavani (1991) has appropriately described ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” He has found that eco-tourists claim to be educationally sophisticated and environmentally concerned, but they rarely understand the ecological consequences of their visits and how their day-to-day activities append physical impacts on the environment. Medina (2005) explains that a criterion for sustainable tourism should include indicators of social and economic sustainability adding up to the indicators of environmental sustainability. Likewise, Wall (1997) has argued that for tourism to contribute to sustainable development, it must be economically viable, environmentally sensitive and appropriate, and the forms that this might take are likely to vary with location. Li (2013), while analyzing the advantages of ecotourism and sustainable project in Costa Rica, finds a positive influence in future improvement of community-oriented ecotourism and its assessment system. Although there is an apparent gap in terms of actual application of indicators while establishing a suitable sustainable assessment framework, a considerable volume of literature covering methodology and approaches to selecting the indicators of sustainable development would help minimize its drawbacks.

ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The potential of ecotourism as an effective tool for sustainable development is the main reason why developing countries are now embracing it and including it in their economic development and conservation strategies. Ecotourism, as an alternative tourism, involves visiting natural areas in order to learn, to study, or to carry out environment-friendly activities, thereby emphasizing a symbiotic relationship between the environment and tourist activities through appropriate policy, careful planning and tactful practicum. Carefully planned and operated ecotourism sites, especially if it is village-based and

includes local participation, is able to provide direct benefits that might offset pressure from other less sustainable activities that make use of natural and cultural resources. By reducing the negative impact of travel activities, ecotourism can surely create viable and sustainable tourism opportunities, alongside improving the lives of the local inhabitants. The development of ecotourism is based on four principles: economic, ecological, social and cultural. To achieve sustainable tourism goals tourism should be ecologically sensitive, economically viable and socially and culturally apt/acceptable is thus contingent on environmental protection and reconciling tourism activities with local socio-economic values.

The concept of sustainability first appeared in the public scene in the report put out by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) in 1987. The commission report advances the idea of sustainable development by noting that economic growth and environmental conservation are not only compatible but they are necessary partners. One cannot exist without the other (Harris et al., 2002). Sustainable development has high potential for any community within economic, social, cultural, ecologic and physical constraints (Bhuiyan et al., 2012). Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is often called intergenerational equality, the idea is that we should share natural resources not just with people who are alive on the planet today but also with future generations of the earth’s inhabitants. Sustainable development integrates economic, social with the aforementioned environmental goals (Dixon & Pretorius, 2001). Thus, the concept of ecotourism and sustainability focuses on comprehensive and long-term development, delivering significant impacts to local and national economic growth, encouraging local participation to support social equity, and minimizing the risk of environmental damage.

Tourism can be sustainable, if development meets the needs of tourists and local residents while protecting future opportunities. Natural and cultural landscape values form a basis for ecotourism. These values are geographical position, microclimatic conditions, existence of water, natural beauties, existence of natural vegetation, existence of wildlife, surface features, geomorphologic structure, local food, festivals and pageants, traditional agricultural structure, local handicrafts, regional dress culture, historical events and people, heritage appeals, architectural variety, traditional music and folk dance, artistic activities (Kiper, 2006). Ecotourism operates for one or more of the eco-friendly alternatives for the economic use of natural resources compared with mining, hunting, farming and so on.

Climatic features alongside flora and fauna of a region influence tourism directly and indirectly and play a crucial role in the development of tourism. Besides, historical, religious and folklore values are important sources for ecotourism. According to Soykan, traditional commercial products are one of the most significant appeals leading to development of ecotourism in a region. This is because whole production process from planting to harvest and processing bear cultural differences, and most of them are performed in traditional ways (Kiper, 2011). Ecotourism has the potential to seriously impact local communities, largely due to the tendency of ecotourists to have a greater interest in people, culture and nature of the areas they visit, as compared to mass tourists.

Ecotourism destinations are always environmentally sensitive because ecotourism activities directly involve various environmental phenomena including bird watching, trekking, mountaineering, horse riding and elephant riding within the forest wilderness trail, staying in natural caves, studying about flora and fauna, simple bush walking, fishing, animal behavior study, ecological studies (Rahman, 2010). Ecotourism always incorporates various activities in nature (hiking, mountain climbing, observing the living beings in their

natural habitat, etc.), but it may include cultural activities, too. Ecotourism is an important educational component, it is a chance to learn respect for nature, for the local culture, and for some it is a chance to self-reflection being inspired by the beauty of the surroundings.

Ecotourism is increasing in popularity across the world, but has significant practical value in developing countries where the needs of impoverished communities may conflict directly with the need to capitalize on the growing tourism industry. In many cases developers move in and designate certain areas as tourism hotspots without giving much thought to the impact that this will have on local communities. These communities may depend on the area for food and shelter, but their concerns are buried beneath the potential for financial revenue. Ecotourism is a move to counter this. It aims to create viable and sustainable tourism opportunities, and limit the impact that all related activities will have on the environment, while improving the lives of the local people living in the area. In all the tourism regions on the globe, the ecotourism development mainly aims at four principles: Economic, ecological, social and cultural, aspects emphasized through table 1.

Table 1: Principles for Sustainable Tourism

Environmental sustainability goals of ecotourism	Promotes environmental protection (impact assessment and environmental planning, construction methods and materials, visual impacts, water supply, air quality, waste minimization and litter drainage and storm water, water conservation, energy minimisation— buildings, energy minimisation— transport, minimal impact on wildlife) provides environmental education, increase public environmental consciousness, fosters healthy attitudes and behaviors towards nature, encourages donations to contribute to the protection of local natural resources and air quality .
Socio-cultural sustainability goals of ecotourism	Promotes local peoples active participation, promotes local ownership, empowers local people’s i.e. local people’s confidence/self-esteem, enhances local communities’ equilibrium, and encourages intercultural appreciation and communication between host communities and tourists.
Economic sustainability goals of ecotourism	Contributes to local economic development, creates permanent jobs for local people, drives the development of other related industries, upgrade local infrastructure, profit earned retained within local communities, promotes production and maintenance of protected areas, uses natural resources efficiently.

Table 1 explains that sustainable tourism should include the indicators of social and economic sustainability adding up to indicators of environmental sustainability. In addition, for tourism to contribute to sustainable development it must be economically viable, environmentally sensitive and culturally appropriate and the forms that this might take are likely to vary with location. The above table develops suitability goals of ecotourism. To achieve sustainable tourism goals tourism should be ecologically benign, economically feasible and socially acceptable is thus

contingent on environmental protection and reconciling tourism activities with local socio-economic values.

ECOTOURISM IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Himachal Pradesh Forest Department formulated the Eco-tourism Policy in 2001, which was revised in 2005. The central theme is to decongest and disperse over flowing city tourist destinations and bring the tourists closer to nature and ensure adequate economic return to the State and livelihood opportunities to the local communities. This natural and cultural richness of the State coupled with its

simple peace loving people and traditional hospitality makes the State a most favoured tourist destination (<http://shodhganga>). People with a passion for life, a spirit of adventure, a penchant for peace and ardor for nature will find the immaculate environment of Himachal Pradesh ideal for their dreams and aspirations. However, the modest sizes of urban areas in Himachal do not allow mass tourism to appear. This beautiful state is endowed with magnificent natural beauty of mountain ranges, natural meadows, lakes and valleys, and a forest cover of 14,696 sq. k.m. with alpine pastures and deciduous forests of

deodars/cedars, oaks, firs, spruce and pines. The state has five national parks and 26 wildlife sanctuaries. With exotic and rare varieties of flora and fauna, and numerous trekking routes and trails amid its dense forests, sky is the limit for exploring and experiencing the vast untapped potential for promoting ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh (<http://terragreen.teriin.org>). It is perhaps with this realization that the state government revised its ecotourism policy once again in May 2016 to make this Himalayan state a leading destination for ecotourism in India.

Table 2: Ecotourism–Sustainable Tourism in Sanctuaries/National Parks of H.P.

Areas of Himachal Pradesh with Sanctuaries of Exotic Flora, Fauna and Avifauna		
District	Sanctuaries/National Park	Areas covered (Square Km.)
Bilaspur	Govind Sagar, Sri Naina Devi	223
Chamba	Sach-tun Nala, Gamgul-Siyabchi, Tundah, Kugti, Kalatop-Khajjiar	724
Kangra	Pong Dam Lake, Dhauladhar	1251
Kinnaur	Rakchham-Chhitkul, Lipa Asrang, Rupi-Bhaba	838
Kullu	Sainj,Tirthan, Kias, Khokhan, Manali, Kanawar	272
Lahaul & Spiti	Kibber	1400
Mandi	Mandi, Nargu, Shikari Devi	391
Shimla	Daranghati1&2, Talra,Water Supply Catchment	217
Sirmour	Choordhar, Simbalawara, Renuka	89
Solan	Chail, Shilli, Majathjal, Darlaghat	157
Total Area of wildlife Sanctuaries		5,562
Kullu	Great Himalayan National Park	765
Lahaul & Spiti	Pin Valley National Park	675
Total Area of National Park		1,440
Total Area of Protected Area Network		7,002

Source: <http://www.biologydiscussion.com/articles/tradition-of-ecotourism-and-its-growth-pattern-in-himachal-pradesh-with-statistics/2052>

SOCIAL-CULTURAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM

Tourism can be sustainable if development meets the needs of tourists and local residents while protecting future opportunities. Ecotourism offers benefits for local residents, conservation, development and educational experiences. Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism. It focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora, fauna and their habitats, as well as cultural artifacts from the locality. Ecotourism entails a combination of conservation and tourism to benefit local communities, especially focusing on sustainability. Natural and cultural landscape values form a basis for ecotourism. These values are geographical position, microclimatic conditions, existence of water, natural beauties, existence of natural vegetation, existence of wildlife, surface features, geomorphologic structure, local food,

festivals and pageants, traditional agricultural structure, local handicrafts, regional dress culture, historical events and people, heritage appeals, architectural variety, traditional music and folk dance, artistic activities. Ecotourism operates for one or more of the eco-friendly alternatives for the economic use of natural resources compared with mining, hunting, farming and so on. Ecotourism promotes an enhanced appreciation of natural environments and environmental education by exposing visitors and locals to nature and conservation.

Ecotourism is largely perceived to safeguard natural areas and thereby to contribute to the conservation of biodiversity. It focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora, fauna and their habitats as well as cultural artifacts from the locality. In ecotourism planning the first issue that emerges is the environment and its conservation. An ecotourism destination must in no way be developed without planning in terms of

environmental concern. Within the implementation of ecotourism, existence of water resources creates advantages in terms of both visuality and utilization. The climatic features of a region influence tourism directly and indirectly and play a crucial role in the development of tourism. Plants drawing interest thanks to their size, age or appearance are other appealing components of ecotourism. Flowering plants are important resources in ecotourism. Historical, natural and folkloric values are important sources for ecotourism. According to Soykan, traditional commercial products are one of the most significant appeals leading to development of ecotourism in a region. This is because whole production process from planting to harvest and processing bear cultural differences, and most of them are performed in traditional ways. Ecotourism has the potential to seriously impact local communities, largely due to the tendency of ecotourists to have a greater interest in the culture and nature of the areas they visit, as compared to mass tourists.

Ecotourism destinations are always environmentally sensitive, because ecotourism activities directly involve various environmental phenomena including bird watching, trekking, mountaineering, horse riding and elephant riding within the forest wilderness trail, staying in natural caves, studying about flora and fauna, simple bush walking, fishing, animal behaviour study and ecological studies. Ecotourism always incorporates various activities in nature (hiking, mountain climbing, observing the living beings in their natural habitat, etc.), but it may include cultural activities, too.

Ecotourism is an important educational component, it is a chance to learn respect for nature, for the local culture, and for some it is a chance to self-reflection being inspired by the beauty of the surroundings.

Ecotourism has increased very quickly in recent years, especially in developing countries like India, where ecotourism pertains to economic aspects together with impacts on culture, environmental concerns and development.

ECOTOURISM IN HIMACHAL PRADESH: THE SWOT ANALYSIS

Tourism is connected to the economic fabric of a destination, and therefore, it must address the needs of local communities. Sustainable tourism requires infrastructure that involves collective investment and multipart supply chains. Himachal tourism has diversity of tourism products to be offered to the tourists. The concept of new tourism includes ideas and practices related to responsible, green, alternative and sustainable tourism. Globalization has transmitted these ideas and practices worldwide, thus making the tourism industry more diversified and putting pressure on developing countries to create targeted, niche markets. Competition has become stronger and is based more and more on diversification, market segmentation and diagonal integration, which involves the merger and conglomeration of related business activities. On the basis of various aspects and issues of ecotourism, the SWOT analysis of ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh is as encapsulated in the table below:

The SWOT Analysis of Ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Rich flora and fauna, rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys and a forest cover of 14,696 sq. km. ii) Doing well in comparison to Jammu and Kashmir and Uttaranchal. iii) The huge diversity of natural tourism resources—wild areas unaffected by human intervention. iv) The large number of protected areas (national, natural parks and reservations) approximately 7002 sq. km. v) Traditional manners of life and agricultural practices. vi) Least pollution in rural areas. vii) Rich folklore—with traditional fairs and festivals round the year. viii) The better image of a peaceful and hospitable tourism destination. ix) The presence of webs in ecotourism within the internet network. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Ecological pressures on the destinations. ii) Lack of community participation in planning and execution of ecotourism iii) Lack of education of the rural population in practicing ecotourism. iv) Overexploitation of natural resources through inadequate grazing, land clearing, poaching, and uncontrolled tourism. v) The public transport is insufficiently organized. vi) The cost of air flights to various areas of Himachal Pradesh is high as compared to other states. vii) Less number of foreign tourists. viii) The insufficient recreation infrastructure. ix) Lack of strategies for promotion of ecotourism in the protected areas.

Opportunities	Threats
<p>i) Enhancing public private partnership for developing ecotourism destinations.</p> <p>ii) Increasing international interest for ecotourism.</p> <p>iii) Favourable for exploring the mountain areas round the year by hiking, equitation, alpinism, extreme sports, skiing etc.</p> <p>iv) The climate is favourable for ecotourism activities round the year.</p> <p>v) Infrastructure projects by the forest department in some regions.</p> <p>vi) The existence of international airports near areas of interest for ecotourism.</p> <p>vii) Ample possibilities to attract tourists and foreign investors for exploiting the historical, cultural, spiritual and traditional inheritance.</p> <p>viii) Development of wetlands to attract nature lovers especially bird watchers.</p> <p>ix) Promote the State as an open university and learning centre in mythology, anthropology and ornithology etc.</p> <p>x) Position it as an ideal destination for the film industry.</p> <p>xi) Create new destinations in yet unexplored, but beautiful areas, thereby easing the burden on existing tourist destinations.</p>	<p>i) Ecological imbalance and negative environmental impacts.</p> <p>ii) Degradation of the protected areas through irrational exploitation of the natural resources</p> <p>iii) The weakly developed infrastructure of utilities (water, sewage, waste management) in rural areas.</p> <p>iv) The urbanization of rural population leading to the loss of indigenous customs and traditions.</p> <p>v) The existence of some areas predisposed to natural disasters (floods, landslides).</p> <p>vi) Precarious emergency medical services.</p> <p>vii) Tremendous strain leading to collapse of civic amenities at leading tourist destinations during the season.</p> <p>viii) Haphazard growth & construction threatening the environment</p> <p>ix) Poor garbage/ waste disposal posing threat to the environment.</p> <p>x) Poor disaster management and rescue system.</p>

SUGGESTIONS

1. Using natural as well as socio-cultural resources in a sustainable manner.
2. Maintaining natural, social and cultural biodiversity for long-term goals of sustainable tourism.
3. Involving local communities in the ecotourism activities with a view to improving the quality of ecotourism.
4. Supporting local economies alongside avoiding environmental damage.
5. Training the staff to bring sustainable tourism into work.
6. Marketing tourism responsibly and enhancing customer satisfaction.
7. Undertaking research by using effective data collection and analysis to help solve the problems of the local community, tourism industry and consumers.
8. Improving the basic infrastructure and financial provision for new sites to be developed as ecotourism projects duly keeping in view the challenges of connectivity, transport and parking facilities.
9. Provision of water, electricity and sewage for running the eco camps, seeing that the ecotourism sites are usually close to the forests, for which solar power could be the desirable option—duly ensuring there is no damage to the flora, fauna, and ecology.
10. Identification and development of new eco-friendly areas by new plantation for long-term sustainability of environment.

11. The establishment of environmental protection planning system for ecotourism.
12. The establishment of environmental audit system for eco-tourism.
13. The establishment of ethnic education and management system for eco-tourism.

CONCLUSION

Ecotourism has surely proved to be a potent tool for promoting sustainable local economic development in developing nations, alongside encouraging conservation of ecology and environment. The guiding principle of sustainable development is to meet the needs and aspirations of a region's present generation of people without compromising those of future generations. The sustainable development policies also seek to develop economic systems that run with little or no net consumption of natural resources, and that avoid ecological damage. Furthermore, the environmental impacts and resource needs of ecotourism, which include development of trail systems and access roads, use of fuel and vehicles for transportation to and from the wilderness, and establishment of campsites, are minimal. Thus, ecotourism not only promotes conventional tourism, but also contributes to bringing about sustainable development. Ecotourism ensures economic growth and appreciates social rights by actively involving local communities, besides keeping the environment safe.

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