

ROLE OF ECOTOURISM IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN OVERVIEW

Tanesh Indwar¹, Dr. P.K. Muthukumar²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Sociology & Social Work, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

Email: taneshindwar@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of Sociology & Social Work, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

Email: pkmuthu1969@gmail.com

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Abstract

A recent development in tourism is ecotourism. It is one of the tourism industry's fastest-growing subsectors. Ecotourism refers to any type of tourism that is focused on nature, has a little impact on the environment, includes locals in its planning and execution, and emphasises the importance of educating visitors. Ecotourism is distinct from other types of tourism because it is reliant on the maintenance of natural ecosystems so that they, and the cultural values they represent, can be experienced and appreciated by visitors. Many nations have come to rely on ecotourism as a major source of revenue. Ecotourism's ability to foster both economic growth and environmental protection in poor nations is exciting. This article will highlight the vast potential of Ecotourism in India by examining a few of the country's most popular Eco-tourism destinations. The present study also explores the emergence of ecotourism as an economic reader and the use of ecotourism as a tool for balancing environmental issues and sustainable development. This paper also includes a discussion of the government's efforts to promote ecotourism as a means of addressing modern environmental problems, as well as the results of a few studies of India's most popular ecotourism destinations.

Keywords: Biodiversity, Development, Ecotourism, Sustainability.

1. Introduction

Due to the increased pace of modern city life and culture, people no longer have as much time for one another, and public spaces have been neglected as a result. It is impossible to overestimate "the importance of green space in urban life, its sustainability, and its physical and social effects on the urban system, which is why its presence in cities and its optimal distribution is one of the fundamental challenges in urban planning." The multifaceted nature of green space utilisation in urban areas is another factor worth considering. Natural, aesthetic, and social concerns all converge on this land use in the urban setting, making it imperative that it be addressed. Population growth and its spatial concentration have obvious effects on ecosystem health. There is a vicious cycle between population increase, poverty, and environmental deterioration in the world's poorest countries.¹ Third-world countries' efforts to achieve sustainable development have been hampered by the vicious quality-of-life circle. Increasing people's well-being and the ease with which they can live is one strategy for fostering long-term social progress. There is now welfare and peace on earth provided by all governments and authorities.² The physical and spiritual facets of happiness and fulfilment in life are separate yet complimentary. That one of the most important factors in delivering welfare and well-being in densely populated urban green spaces is spiritual comfort, and that this has significant ramifications for residents' welfare. Present-day urban planning practises place a premium on preserving the city's connection to its natural surroundings.³

Growth in eco-tourism has been accompanied by a plethora of new issues, including tensions between fanatical proponents of the practise and illogical use of natural capacity, on the one hand, and conservationists' views on the “sustainable use of these natural resources, on the other. However, in many developing nations, concerns about global warming, environmental protection, and the carbon effects” of business activity have received scant attention.⁴

Because of the growing population and the restricted ability of “natural resources, including the usage of heavenly gifts for subsequent generations, which is connected to nature, there is a fundamental incentive for tourists to visit and to use natural attractions and local culture without causing any disruption.”⁵ Tourists' interest in learning about and learning to identify unique flora, fauna, and natural resources is the single most effective way to encourage them to visit natural attractions, as it leads to a greater appreciation of nature and a stronger desire to safeguard natural areas.⁶ People seek refuge in nature to recover from the stresses of city life brought on by urbanisation, which include migration to and population growth within cities, as well as climate and ecosystem shifts due to environmental factors, technological progress, rising incomes, and a proliferation of identical housing units. When it comes to tourism, a sustainable approach will strike a good balance between the requirements of visitors and future generations while also protecting the planet and its people and their traditions. In other words, sustainable tourism actively seeks for social, economic, and cultural components. Therefore, the term "Ecotourism" encompasses more than just travel. Focusing on environmental awareness and empowering individual experiences, this strategy aims to reduce poverty through community participation, preservation of natural and cultural resources, and enhancement of biocultural variety. Meanwhile, India offers some one-of-a-kind prospects that could be utilised to advance the field of ecotourism. Both the benefits and drawbacks of eco-tourism in India are highlighted in this study.⁷

1.1. Materials

The present study is conducted by using Content Analysis approach. As a consequence of this, the investigation is reliant on a combination of sources that are required and sources that are optional. An investigation was carried out using a method that was characterised by a degree of subjectivity. The optional data that was compiled from reliable sources, such as books and websites on the internet and paper pieces, as well as a variety of international journals and publications, was one of the things that were looked into by the investigation. In addition to that, the study is reliant on many points of view from different people.

2. Results and discussion

Furthermore, ecotourism satisfies the goals of sustainable tourism development, including biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation, and environmental protection.⁸ Ecotourism's strong values have helped educate the locals on the need of preserving their environment. Ecotourism is something they attempt to incorporate into their daily lives, with the hopes of creating long-term benefits for the area. Ecotourism is widely regarded as an effective strategy for many nations, as it helps to preserve natural areas, safeguard cultural traditions, generate revenue for national development, and employ locals. Ecotourism, which primarily serves conservation interests, helps promote ecologically sound growth.

2.1. The economic role of Ecotourism in developing sustainable tourism

Ecotourism has been seen as a driving force for regional and economic growth.⁹ Ecotourism is the fastest-growing subset of the tourism industry, and it has numerous positive effects, including creating new jobs, raising the local employment rate, fostering new investment opportunities, and boosting foreign exchange.¹⁰ Some of the most compelling examples of ecotourism's financial dividends can be seen in reports on the subject from Costa Rica and South Africa, for instance. Ecotourism has been shown to increase revenue in Costa Rica by 42% compared to that of the world-famous and widely visited country of France. There is evidence that ecotourism can help

alleviate poverty¹¹; in South Africa, for example, locals have reported higher incomes thanks to the industry.¹² Another recent case study in China¹³ conducted in two distinct provinces found that ecotourism does contribute to regional economic stability in a variety of ways, including value-added, output, revenue, and employment generation. The approach taken to enacting ecotourism could be to blame for the contrasting outcome.¹⁴ Ecotourism can provide substantial income that can assist local households, according to the empirical evidence offered in the ecotourism literature. Ecotourism has supplanted traditional livelihoods like hunting, farming, and raising livestock as the principal economic driver for the local population.¹⁵ It is clear from the aforementioned case studies that ecotourism may boost a country's economy and create jobs.

2.2. Socio-Cultural role of Ecotourism on sustainable tourism

Social and cultural norms are also crucial to sustainable tourism. Eco-tourism has constructive effects on the region's social and cultural fabric. Ecotourism has a good and substantial effect on local culture and society, as outlined by Hall¹⁶, who also noted its economic benefits. As an expansion on Hall's original point, Neth¹⁷ argues that ecotourism helps strengthen local communities, encourages more people to get involved, and increases ties between different parts of the same region. Acquah¹⁸ added that a positive impact of ecotourism on local culture is essential to its preservation. Even Vishwanatha and Chandrashekara¹⁹ acknowledged the good social and economic effects of ecotourism on the local community. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have come to the same conclusion: ecotourism has a net positive social and cultural impact on the region. This includes boosting local economies, improving access to healthcare, fostering a greater appreciation for and understanding of the region's unique cultural traditions, and more. The community's newfound familiarity with ecotourism has the potential to have far-reaching consequences. The benefits of ecotourism have led to a large reduction in unsustainable activities including hunting, fishing, and deforestation.²⁰ This points to a positive correlation between community efforts to preserve the environment.²¹

2.3. Environmental role of Ecotourism in sustainable tourism

One of the cornerstone elements of sustainable tourism is the preservation of natural habitats and their resources. Numerous studies have shown that ecotourism plays a crucial role in preserving the local ecosystem and preserving its resources.²² Ecotourism is a positive force in the fight against deforestation, the protection of wildlife, the expansion of plant life, and the development of renewable energy. Income from ecotourism, according to researchers, also benefits the environment. Scientists have found that ecotourism promotes the preservation of natural areas and, by extension, the region's biodiversity. The ethics of ecotourism are intrinsically linked to those of protecting natural ecosystems. Introducing ecotourism to the region reduces the amount of damage done to the natural world. Ecotourism is a type of tourism that uses as few of an area's natural resources as possible to maximise long-term benefits for both the local population and the environment.²³

2.4. Sustainable Tourism and Eco-tourism

Sustainable tourism is travel that does not negatively impact the environment, the economy, society, or the bottom line. Eco-tourism is a type of tourism that focuses on minimising negative impacts on natural environments and maximising positive ones on local communities and their inhabitants. Its goal may be to instruct the traveller, raise money for environmental protection, help local people gain economic and political influence, or promote tolerance and acceptance of other cultures and human rights. The environmental movement has viewed eco-tourism as essential since the 1980s so that future generations might see the world as it was before mass tourism. Ecotourism is a subset of the tourism industry that focuses on engaging with the natural world through biotic means. Eco-tourism is a form of tourism that emphasises respect for local cultures, personal development, and conservation of natural resources. As a rule, ecotourists visit places where natural beauty and historical significance play prominent roles in the whole experience. The goal of eco-tourism is to help visitors better understand and appreciate our natural surroundings by providing them with first-hand information on the effects of human

activity. Programs that promote cultural preservation among locals and reduce the environmental impact of tourist activities are examples of responsible eco-tourism. This is why eco-tourism is popular among those who care about the world around them and want to make a positive impact on society.²⁴

2.5. How Natural Resource Conservation and Eco-Tourism Can Work Together to Protect the Environment

Conservation of natural resources and efficient use of existing infrastructure are crucial to the growth of ecotourism in the long term. Eco-environmental tourism's toll isn't any higher than that of other types of vacationing. However, they have a recreational role and require facilities and equipment throughout their time in the region. Consequently, it is incumbent upon those tasked with the planning and design of tourist facilities to devise thorough and detailed strategies for mitigating the potentially negative impacts of eco-tourism. However, it also reflects both positive and negative impacts on the natural world. If this problem is disregarded or left unchecked, it could cause ecological changes in the ecosystem that would be disastrous for a wide variety of animal and plant species. Visiting national parks and other wildlife areas can enhance your trip in many ways, including contributing to the protection of watersheds and ecosystems, enhancing the local environment, and preserving the value of natural heritage.

Today, it is expensive to safeguard the environment and make the most of existing natural attractions. As a result, these countries ought to encourage eco-tourism in their national park and other regions with natural appeal. A move like this, however, would demonstrate people's desire for and dedication to pursuing peace, quiet, and reconnecting with nature, as well as provide an opportunity to learn about and appreciate their natural heritage and that of others. Eco-tourism provides a financial mechanism for regulating national parks and other protected places, and it is often the first line of defence in their defence. If the right kind of tourism management is in place and in proportion to the area's carrying capacity, then these pursuits are feasible.²⁵ Additionally, this mindset will increase public consciousness of the significance of preserving and guarding the natural world. In most situations, the funds raised are adequate to cover the costs of running national parks and eco-tourism operations, and in other cases they even exceed those costs, as evidenced by the experiences of tourist countries that have used scientific and competent management in this area. Since the tourist activity is one of the most complicated kinds, and since population expansion and the desire for people to play their leisure role are both on the rise, it's clear that sustainable tourism development may be achieved when host countries consider mixed tourism. Culture is conscious of its identity as a thinking creature, its social and environmental contexts, and the importance of preserving both. That's why eco-friendly measures need to be included in any comprehensive cultural plan. Systematic and reasonable exploitation of natural resources and data calls for the most effective training approaches. Finding a middle ground between recreational needs and the preservation of natural landmarks is essential. The notion and philosophy of accommodating eco-tourism and environmental attractions must be determined by the quest for such equilibrium.

2.6. Analysis of eco-tourism development in India

India's natural beauty and wealth of geographical attractions—including “waterfalls, straits, rivers, mountains, and mountains, as well as a temperate climate and thousands of species of flora and aquatic plants”—mean the country has the potential to attract many more domestic and international visitors than it currently does. In other words, if measures are taken to improve the country's eco-tourism infrastructure, it will almost certainly lead to the creation of new jobs and increased economic growth. Indian tourism numbers will remain bad so long as locals do not appreciate what they have to offer. These misconceptions need to be corrected at the cultural and educational level. Another difficulty is getting the locals to recognise the significance of the area's natural, cultural, and historical landmarks. They should consider these features an asset. Eco-tourism and sustainable development are essential if we don't want people to damage our natural resources by littering, polluting, leaving unwanted presents at, or landing on the old fort wall. The provision of facilities for drawing and lodging to the people of the host communities; the organisation of training classes; and the gradual protection of the environment, cultural and

historical treasures, natural attractions, and ecotourism; all constitute attractive solutions for sustainable development. One of the biggest problems is the country's lack of thorough planning, while another is its lack of organised promotion. The full scope and variety of ecotourism opportunities in India have not been identified or compiled; as a result, the industry is unable to be pushed. Therefore, there is no advertisement, or if we have one, the organisation is not targeted, and the resulting influx of people is not as great as it would otherwise be. Assume the locals have received training. If that happens, they will come up with innovative and practical solutions to save the area's natural and cultural treasures from destruction and defend the region from harm.²⁶ As a whole, the most significant problems with ecotourism in this country are:

i) Economic challenges

As a result of a failure to identify potential eco-tourism destinations and a lack of supporting infrastructure, this industry is still in its infancy. Ecotourism has a number of economic hurdles, including but not limited to the following.

- Poor quality of life; we need to provide a more all-encompassing concept of happiness that extends beyond material prosperity.
- The absence of direction and economic strategies in the eco-tourism sector. The deficiency and failure of infrastructure services, such as roads.

ii) Social challenges

Possible allusion to the cultural, social, and linguistic challenges brought on by the modernization agenda and the respective cultures of the two sides. As a collective travel culture, tours are on the rise, and this may be observed in the increasing reliance on the expertise of host firms, which have not yet been institutionalised in India. Important natural, cultural, and historical sites must be recognised and valued by the host community. India's ecotourism industry is struggling due to a lack of strategic marketing and overarching strategy at the national level. The full breadth and depth of India's potential eco-tourism routes is still unknown. Lack of information prevents any kind of promotion or implementation; marketing lacks focus and direction, leading to the inevitable introduction of government regulation. The following is yet another complicated facet of ecotourism:

- Generational disengagement: In the present, choices must be taken with an eye toward the long-term effects on the environment.
- Lack of involvement: Institutions should be reorganised to ensure that all voices are heard during the decision-making process; Lack of social justice: everyone should be able to prosper in a supportive atmosphere;
- There is a dearth of hotels and resort centres in eco-tourism hotspots, and visitors have a hard time acquiring tourist visas and staying in the nation due to a lack of infrastructure.

2.7. A Brief survey of Ecotourism in India

India's varied topography—including mountains, deserts, plateaus, plains, coastal plains, and islands—provides a fertile environment for an abundance of plant and animal life as well as a wide range of human cultures. Of the world's 35 biodiversity hotspots, only four are found in India, making it one of the 18 mega biodiversity countries. Many nature lovers and ecotourists are drawn to India by the country's picturesque surroundings.²⁷ India has approximately 106 national parks covering an area of 44,402.95 km², 18 biosphere reserves, and 567 wildlife sanctuaries covering an area of 122,564.86 km² all dedicated to protecting and conserving the country's wildlife (MoEF annual report). Ecotourism-friendly areas that are now open to the public.²⁸

(i) Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Many islands in the Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep have been opened up for ecotourism thanks to investments of between Rs. 5 crores and Rs.100 crores (roughly US\$1.1 and 21.8 million) in 2004 by the

“Department of Environment & Forests of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands Administration and the Ministry of Tourism of the Government of India”.²⁹

(ii) Chhattisgarh

“Kanger Valley National Park, Barnawapara Sanctuary, Sitanadi Sanctuary, Udanti Sanctuary, and Achanakmar Sanctuary” are only some of the pristine natural regions in the state. All around India, places like “Mainpat (Surguja), Keshkal valley (Kanker), Chaiturgarh (Bilaspur), Bagicha (Jashpur), Kutumbsar caverns, Kailash caves, Tirathgarh falls, and Chitrakot falls (Bastar)” are being marketed as "exciting locations" for environment and wildlife tourism. Primarily, we'd be looking at wildlife preserves, camping spots, and hiking trails. The “Hill Myna (*Graculis religiosa peninsularis*) and the Wild Buffalo (*Bubalis bubalis*)” are both protected species that the government is counting on ecotourism to save. This is why ecotourism is so important to the protection of wildlife.

(iii) Uttarakhand

According to the state's official tourism policy, “Because Uttarakhand is endowed with an exceptionally rich variety of flora and fauna, it is an ideal location for the development of ecotourism, projects, and activities. Some examples of these include jungle safaris, trekking on mountain and forest trails, nature walks, and catch-and-release angling for mahaseer and other fish species.” Each of these endeavours must be carried out in a way that not only raises environmental consciousness but also aids in preserving the delicate ecological balance. In addition, there are many other beautiful places to visit in Uttarakhand if you're interested in wildlife, not just “the world-famous Corbett National Park. Birdwatchers will enjoy visiting places like Rajaji National Park, Govind Pashu Vihar, the Asan Barrage, Chilla, and the Saptarishi Ashram.”

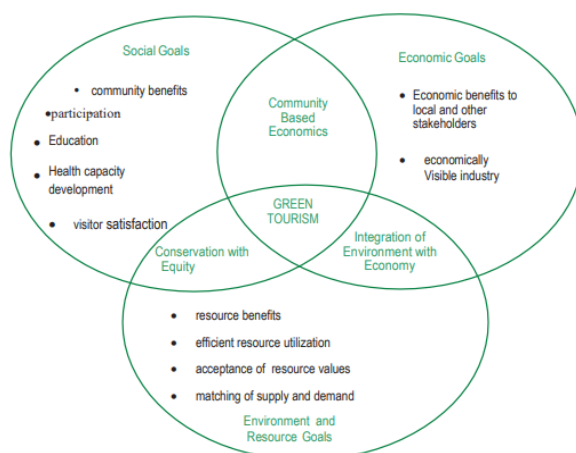
(iv) Kerala

When it comes to ecotourism, Kerala is a relatively untapped wonderland. Ecotourism can flourish there because of the region's proximity to the coast, its abundance of natural beauty (including evergreen forests, mountains, hills, valleys, streams, rivers, backwaters, beaches, and lagoons), its historical and cultural significance, and its wealth of flora and fauna. Thenmala in Kerala is India's first planned eco-tourism destination, with accommodations that allow visitors to enjoy the outdoors while still being connected to modern conveniences. Here, visitors can breathe in flower-scented air and enjoy a cup of hot coffee or a hearty breakfast to the sounds of birds chirping in the trees above.

2.8. Link between Green Tourism and Sustainable Development

Since the “Earth Summit in 1992, there has been considerable pressure placed on the tourism industry to improve its environmental performance in line with that of other economic sectors. This has been a driving force behind the global push toward the development of green tourism.” In addition to the other three tenets of sustainability, cultural sustainability is an important factor to consider when developing sustainable tourism, particularly in situations where tourist practises in a particular region are founded on the culture and tradition of the indigenous people who live there (environmental, economic, and social). “Although the concept of sustainable tourism development on a global scale is still teleological, the path toward sustainability is essential for the present and future of economic, ecological, and socio-cultural well-being, and it should be integrated with community-based economics, conservation with equity, and environmental economics. In spite of the fact that the concept of sustainable tourism development on a global scale is still teleological, the path toward sustainability is essential for the present and future of economic, ecological, and socio-cultural wellbeing.”

Figure 1: A model of green tourism values and principles



Source: Adapted from Hall et al. 1997

2.9. National Strategy for Eco Tourism

The Ministry of Tourism has formulated a National strategy for Eco Tourism.³⁰ Under this the Ministry plans to implement the following strategies:

- **Action Plan**

To carry out the Strategy, “the Ministry of Tourism will work with other relevant Ministries, State Governments, and Industry Stakeholders to develop a comprehensive National Action Plan.” The Action plan will be evaluated and tracked using the established governance structure. The development of ecotourism, adventure tourism, and sustainable travel will be addressed in separate plans prepared by individual state governments. The Ministry will provide the States with examples of effective policies and plans of action to follow.

- **National Nodal Agency**

“The Ministry of Tourism will work with the National Nodal Agency” they've designated to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for boosting ecotourism across the country. In particular, the Nodal agency will help the Ministry carry out its duties. The Nodal agency will organise the necessary infrastructure and hire qualified personnel to aid the Ministry of Tourism in carrying out the strategy. The Nodal Agency will get the necessary funding from the Ministry through a number of tourism promotion and development programmes.

- **State Nodal Agency**

Each state shall appoint a nodal agency to organise and promote eco- and adventure-friendly tourism inside their borders. To fulfil its mandate, the agency needs a sufficient budget and sufficient manpower. Financial and technical support will be provided by the Ministry of Tourism “under various schemes of the Ministry for development of tourism infrastructure, tourism promotion, and capacity building of tourism service providers” in collaboration with the designated State Nodal Agency.

3. Conclusion

Ecotourism must be driven by environmental concerns rather than financial gain. If the only motivation is financial, then difficulties will arise. When tourism growth exceeds what the environment can sustainably provide for, it can have devastating effects on the natural world. Overcrowding and inappropriate behaviour can do irreparable harm to natural wonders. Deforestation and other environmental damage may result from the

construction of hotels and resorts. These actions can lead to pollution, garbage, and non-biodegradable waste, all of which can have a negative impact on the ecosystem and natural animals. When carried out properly, ecotourism can have significant positive effects on the economy and the education of those who participate. It has the potential to reach out to new audiences and garner support for conservation efforts, all while educating the general public on the value and precariousness of these ecosystems. It also encourages people to use wilderness areas without taking anything from them, which helps the populations that are located in and depend on wilderness regions. Nature tourism provides a temporary escape from the stress of the artificial world and the smog of major cities. When people have an intimate encounter with nature, they develop an appreciation for protecting it in their own lives. It raises awareness of and appreciation for indigenous and regional cultures. Because of its positive effects on the economy, the environment, and the local community, ecotourism is a powerful tool for community development. In a developing nation like India, ecotourism can help with environmental protection, local community building, economic growth, and sustainable development. From what has been said above, it is clear that the central government in India recognises the value of ecotourism, and that a number of popular tourist spots have been developed accordingly; however, the state and UT governments also need to work together to promote ecotourism. Therefore, both the federal and state governments in India need to put in a lot of effort to promote ecotourism in the country.

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