

CAN ECOTOURISM SUPPORT SUSTAINABILITY OF HILL AREAS - A STUDY OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract:

For the growth of the economy, various policies are formulated by the governments. Himachal Pradesh a hill state of India is one the major tourist destinations in the world. The Himachal government has focused on the growth of tourism in its policies for earning revenue for the state. This is evident in the goals of 'State Tourism Policy 2005' which stresses the growth of tourism and increasing tourist influx by positioning Himachal Pradesh as a leading global destination by the year 2020. But over the years it has been found that the crucial aspect of environmental management has been neglected and the rapid growth of tourism, especially in the 80s and 90s without proper planning and effective policy has created serious environmental problems in the fragile mountainous state. Almost six million tourists visit Himachal Pradesh every year, which is almost equal to its actual population. Since tourism is one of the important components of the economy of the state it cannot be avoided but its nature can certainly regulate the maintenance of a sustainable environment. Although the state government adopted a new ecotourism policy in 2001 and involved local communities to support their livelihoods and conserve local culture, ecology and environment but an assessment of the effectiveness of ecotourism has not been done. This study analyses various factors associated with ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainability, Livelihoods.

Introduction

The economy of Himachal Pradesh is highly dependent on two sectors i.e., tourism and horticulture where each sector contributes around 8 percent of the State's Domestic Product. The Tourism Policy 2005 of Himachal Pradesh mainly focuses on the growth of tourism and increasing the number of tourists as is clear in its goal "To make tourism the prime engine of economic growth in the state by positioning it as a leading global destination by the year 2020". The Tourism Policy (page 15) proposes to do careful planning and increase the state Domestic Product to 15 percent by the year 2020. Though the state has attracted large numbers of tourists (almost 60 lakh tourists visit Himachal Pradesh every year, as much as its actual population) it is not able to attract many quality tourists. Much of the tourism activities are concentrated only in the four major hill stations of Shimla, Manali, Dharamsala and Dalhousie.

Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

The Tourism policy 2005 of Himachal Pradesh clearly focuses on the fact that the development of tourism will be the prime engine for economic growth and prosperity of the

State, besides effectively addressing the problems of unemployment and poverty. The state's topography, climate, landscape, and vegetation are the factors which popularize it as a tourist destination. Different regions i.e., Shivaliks, Middle and Greater Himalayas have their characteristic vegetation, climate, relief, valleys, and meadows. Not only this the peace and serenity, relatively less pollution and mesmerizing weather attract various forms of tourism i.e., eco-tourism, heritage, health, pilgrimage, adventure and culture, etc.

The real beginning of tourism in Himachal Pradesh happened in the 19th century when the British came to establish their colonies, especially as spas. With Shimla becoming the summer capital of India in 1864 and the capital of the state of Himachal Pradesh in 1971 some of the destinations got recognized as health centres or summer spas. Later on, the development of tourism got a boost with the Kashmir problems in the 1980s and 1990s when attention was diverted from Kashmir to Himachal Pradesh. With this, the number of hotels grew many folds in this period haphazardly. It was more of demand-driven tourism which concentrated only on a few destinations like Shimla, Manali, Dalhousie, McLeodganj, Kasauli and Chail. Gradually the number of hotels grew to accommodate a large tourist influx.

By focusing on quality tourism, the State Government also aims at promoting sustainable tourism and encouraging the private sector to develop tourism-related infrastructure in the State – without disturbing the existing ecology and environment. The government is trying to develop Himachal as “A Destination for All Seasons and All Reasons.”

What is Ecotourism

Negative consequences associated with conventional tourism gave way to sustainable, green and ecotourism. Sustainable tourism may be defined as the 'management of all resources in such a way that we can fulfill economic, social and aesthetic needs while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems' (Murphy 1995: 279). All are somehow related to the conservation of the environment social or physical. In the 1992 Rio Summit's global action plan Agenda 21, tourism was focused on the sustainability of 'mountain economies' and 'threatened areas' of wildlife, national parks and bio-diversity (Stancliffe 1995 cf. Savage *et al.* 2004). The city, however, is not conventionally considered a fragile and endangered environment because urban areas are seen to be the leaders of development, and urban transformations are often visible and planned. Lots of literature deals with sustainable tourism (Daniel 1993; Hall and Lew 1998; Page and Dowling 2002) and even a journal (Journal of Sustainable Tourism) is also meant for dealing with its issues, many focus on its ill effects on nature, forests and rural areas (Savage *et al.* 2004:213) urban areas are recognized as the most important types of tourist destinations, 'they are generally excluded from discussions on sustainable tourism' (Hall and Lew 1998: 185). Tourism's diverse impacts include “changes to the ecological and hydrological systems of cities, overloading of infrastructure, alteration of land use, as well as transformations in the visual, architectural and social-cultural fabric of cities” (Page 1995, 147 in Savage, Huang and Chang, 2004:214)

Conservationists are both optimistic and skeptical that ecotourism may help protect nature while meeting the economic needs of local residents. Ecotourism has also grown in response

to alternative tourism. Generally defined, alternative tourism includes "forms of tourism that are consistent with natural, social, and community values, and which allow both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences" (Eadington & Smith 1992:3 cf. Stronza 2001:274). *Journal of Ecotourism* and the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* are meant for dealing with the possibilities and limitations of alternative tourism. In general, the literature seems more balanced than earlier research on tourism. It proposes linkages between economy, culture, and ecology in what Norgaard (1984 cf. Zurick 1992:608) calls "co-evolutionary development".

At times government control offends tribal people and conflicts with their age-old customary rights and in many cases, the displacement of the communities threatens their livelihood (Reti 1986 cf. Boora 2005:254). For commercial benefits development of infrastructure in an unplanned manner leads to unregulated tourism which is not good for conservation and environmental management. It affects biodiversity mainly by hunting, loss of forests, further affecting breeding and migration of birds and animals and causing all kinds of pollution (Boora 2005:254).

Ecotourism is connected with sustainability more precisely the conservation of the environment and giving economic benefits to the local community. The term eco-tourism was coined by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain in 1983 and was initially used to describe nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed areas with an emphasis on education. The concept has developed into a scientifically-based approach to sustainable tourism. Eco-tourism is an enlightening and participatory travel experience to natural and cultural environments, which is beneficial to all tourism role players. 'Eco-tourism may be defined as the ability of human beings to utilise the natural resources for the promotion of tourism without being destructive to the ecosystem' (Mathew 2005:243). 'Eco-tourism is an environment-friendly activity that inculcates environmental values and ethics' (Mathew 2005:244). The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines ecotourism as "Tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both of the past and present) found in these areas" (GOI 1998). Protecting nature with a sense of social responsibility. The International Ecotourism Society 1990 states it is 'Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people' (http://www.himachalecotourism.nic.in/What_is_ecotourism.html).

It must contain three elements: Environmental conservation, participation of local communities and it should be viable to sustain itself. Various activities can be conducted under ecotourism in Himachal with its serene landscape, varied climate and rich flora and fauna. These are trekking and camping, adventure trails, rock climbing, bird watching, village visits, fishing, etc. This is under the Forest Department which has already formulated an ecotourism policy in consultation with the Tourism Department. Under this Ecotourism Societies have been established on CBET (Community Based Eco-Tourism basis) to cover the Great Himalayan National Park (Kullu), Himalayan Nature Park (Shimla), Renuka Wildlife Sanctuary (Sirmour) and Potter's Hill Van Vihar (Shimland: 29).

Wildlife Tourism is an integral part of ecotourism. At present, there are 32 Sanctuaries, 2 National Parks and 3 Game Reserves. The sanctuaries include Simbalwara (Sirmour), Churdhar, Chail (Solan), Maharana PratapSagar (Kangra) Manali (Kullu), Kanwar (Kullu), KalatopKhajjiar (Chamba) and Daranghati (Shimla). The National Parks are Pin Valley National Park, Spiti and the Great Himalayan National Park, Kullu; the Nature parks are at Kufri (Shimla), Manali (Kullu) and Gopalpur (Kangra).

The government is also trying to develop lakes and wetlands as part of eco-tourism. Water sports in MaharanaPratapSagar, Chamera and GobindSagar will be developed to international standards and national and international level events will also be organised to popularize these destinations.

Status of Ecotourism in Himachal Pradesh

Tourism has an increasingly important place in the state's economy, and the state government adopted a new ecotourism policy in 2001, making the HPFD (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department) the nodal department for ecotourism. With this policy now notified, the state is expecting a major shift in livelihood patterns, especially for the poor communities by increasing employment opportunities. Under this, Ecotourism Societies have been established on CBET (Community Based Eco-Tourism basis) to cover the Great Himalayan National Park (Kullu), Himalayan Nature Park (Shimla), Renuka Wildlife Sanctuary (Sirmour) and Potter's Hill Van Vihar (Shimla). Engagement of local communities in tourism not only be helpful for providing livelihoods but will promote the conservation of local culture, ecology and environment. Hill sites are used by the film industry. In villages around the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) and Manali, villagers rent out accommodation to tourists and provide them with guides, porters, cooks, tents, shoes and warm clothes, etc. This activity is just developing in the Kullu district with the support of the GHNP and interventions by SAHARA (a local NGO). To enhance accessibility in remote areas, ropeways are also being planned. Ecotourism societies are being established in the Shimla district at Kufri.

The Department of Tourism & Civil Aviation, HP, is the nodal agency that plays a proactive role in the promotion of tourism in the State. The Department also plays a regulatory role under the H.P. Tourism Development and Registration Act, 2002.

Problems and future concerns

Though tourism has been developed in the state still the state has negligible air and rail link; Inadequate flow of foreign tourists; severe strains on civic infrastructure during the peak season; Lack of trained tourist guides at important tourist places and historical tourist sites; Saturation at the established tourists' destinations; Lack of adequate parking places; Poor marketing and very little budget; Problem of land acquisition and Problem of conversion of forest land; Haphazard growth & construction in disharmony with the local environment; Unscrupulous commercialization affecting social and cultural values; Lack of coordinated strategy by the different Government Departments and poor waste disposal systems (as listed in sections 4.2 and 4.4 of Tourism Policy of Himachal Pradesh: 18-19).

Due to overcrowding, a number of problems arise such as traffic snarls, pollution, waste disposal, and gradually the place becomes less attractive. If a tourist destination becomes environmentally degraded, tourists themselves start shunning it. Tourism has the potential to bring about changes in mountain environments, which are fragile and vulnerable to irreversible damage. Manali is an example of unregulated urban expansion with numerous multistoried buildings and hotels discharging sewage into the Beas River causing water pollution. Reduced green area has destroyed its natural landscape, and the pedestrian path has become a regular vehicular road causing air and noise pollution (Rajputnd: 2).

EQUATIONS recognises the fact that tourism does not directly contribute to conservation due to the extractive nature of tourism. But there is insufficient knowledge about the role that tourism plays in the conservation of forests, coasts and hills and mountains (EQUATIONS, 2011: 2).

Ecotourism activities, in an ecologically sensitive area, need close monitoring as tourism in these natural areas should be ecologically sustainable. There should be a provision for the visitor to be educated about the environment. Changing lifestyles of villagers gradually become less appealing to tourists. For example, one village, Lisu Lao Tha, suffered a significant downturn between 1979, when it was described as "one of the two focal points on the standard Jungle Tour" (Cohen 1979; 13 in Dearden, 1991), and 1986, when no tourists came to the village. By contrast, other villages have rejuvenated their tourism by shifting to short stays like Meo Mae Sa Mai and Meo Doi Pui (Dearden, 1991: 405).

Cultural and environmental effects of Trekking

Tourists influence natives by taking a keen interest in their attires and food items. Natives consider western clothes as signs of modernity and try to change their lifestyle. Gradually they transform their traditional dress and food. Apart from state intervention, one of the most visible effects of trekking is the increased tendency of the hill tribes to abandon their traditional forms of dress. Regular trekking activities in Nepal have led to soil erosion, litter generation and deforestation for fuel wood and in Thailand, depletion of bamboo in areas close to major rafting sites (Dearden, 1991: 410) are some of the ill effects. Coral reefs an important source of genetic material and a component of the ecological system of Andaman and Nicobar Islands were under threat of siltation, logging and blasting which made the islands extremely vulnerable to erosion (Rajputnd: 2).

Social evils of begging, prostitution and opium selling can be found in some places rather than poverty alleviation (Dearden, 1991; Oppermann 1998 in Stronza, 2001: 268). More dependence on tourism and a reduction in subsistence farming affected the health of the natives of Spain and France (Stronza, 2001). Sherpas in the Khumbu region have left their traditional farming and become part of trekking (Stevens, 1993). An inherent threat of losing the host culture of indigenous people is associated with the process of earning. Erismansays

that the “massive influx of foreign goods, people, and ideas to rural host destinations has a negative impact, which, ultimately, “erodes people's self-esteem” (1983: 350).

Suggestions:

Although ecotourism has many issues associated with it but regulated and quality tourism is essential for boosting the economy. There is a need to engage the indigenous community for their stake and environmental management. The World Ecotourism Summit held in Quebec, Canada, in May 2002 emphasizes the need of establishing a sustainable relationship among all the stakeholders in ecotourism (Boora, 2005: 253). It is important for generating revenue and boosting the local economy. Rural youth will be able to earn their livelihoods restricting them to their native places rather than seeking employment in urban areas. But it is crucial for the planners and policymakers to decide about its nature. Controlled quality ecotourism without impacting the social and cultural ethos of an indigenous community and maintaining the ecological balance is needed.

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