



An Exploratory Study on the Sustainable Tourism Development in the Homestays of the Darjeeling Hills

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism development is found to be very critical in conserving nature and preserving the indigenous culture. With the adoption of sustainable development goals this is a contemporary global issue. Tourist destinations very often rely on the natural and cultural resources to form their basis of attraction. These natural and cultural resources are associated with the economic development and vitality of the local community. The Darjeeling hills of West Bengal are one of the most popular tourist destinations not just across India but across the globe. The lush greenery, the panoramic view of the hills and the hospitality of the indigenous inhabitants across attracts tourist to the place. This paper explores the sustainable tourism development in the homestays of this place. A homestay as the word suggests involves the staying of tourists at someone's place as a paying guest for a short time period to feel at home away from a home. The stay may be provided at the individual i.e. family level or community level providing accommodation and other facilities for the short time visitors. This leads to the economic development the local community. Homestays are one of the essential components of rural tourism and community based ecotourism initiatives aimed at the development of sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Rural Tourism, Eco Tourism, Homestays, Sustainable Development, community based ecotourism.

Introduction

Homestay is a form of hospitality and lodging facility whereby visitors share a residence with a local to where they are travelling. Homestay is a form of tourism that develops microenterprise and employment opportunities for the local community. With good number of tourist inflows there is a high potential for the local people to provide environment friendly accommodation and facilities and which promotes the local economy. The homestays are the integral part of the local community as it helps the local population to develop with the economic and social strength

which in a way helps to achieve the goal of vocal for local. Sustainable homestays are designed in a way to minimise the negative impact on the environment, preserve the local heritage and ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared with the local culture. Homestays give the tourists an opportunity to experience the local culture, engage in meaningful interactions with locals and gain a deeper understanding of the destination as a whole. The cultural exchange between the tourists and the hosts, helps create mutual understanding, respect and appreciation. Tourists can also contribute to community development or environment conservation initiatives.

With the introduction of the Bread and Breakfast scheme under the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, the concept of homestay tourism is found to grow in various parts of the country with not only foreign tourists but also local tourists preferring to stay in a comfortable homely environment with not many protocols.

The onset of homestay tourism in the tourism, and hospitality sector in the hills of Darjeeling which is considered as one of the well-known world-class tourist hubs with the elegance of the magnificent mountain landscape associated with snowy peak mountains, lush verdant hills and world renowned tea estates attracting individuals of all ages, interests and experience to the destination.

India has a unique cultural, social and natural information and it is known for the best of its hospitality. The Indian slogan of ‘AtithiDevoBhava’ is truly lived up by the homestays in India and tourists are welcomed with great delight to the homes. The tourism spots of the Western Ghats, Himalayan Mountain Ranges and other interior forest places have lots of homestays to cater to the tourists visiting those places. The foothills of the Himalayas including Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Ladakh are offering homestays with cuisine, amenities, local activities and sightseeing.

The development of tourism in the developing nations is found to have unique infrastructural as well as operational difficulties in mountains and rural areas where there are prominent subsistence economies, widespread poverty and fragile natural ecosystem (Sood et. al. 2017). With the hilly communities mostly dependent on agriculture, there are more susceptible to climate change and other catastrophies. Hilly communities need to focus more on the non-agricultural sources of income like the tourism sector (Rasul&Kollmair, 2010). Sustainable tourism has become more and more important to maintain a great environment as tourists focus more on spending vacation with nature.

According to World Tourism Organisation sustainable tourism is defined as the one which meets the needs of the present host regions and the tourists and at the same time protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. Sustainable tourism helps to empower the local communities of a particular area. The emergence of sustainable tourism took place in the 1970’s. Sustainable tourism provides a triple bottom line framework that focuses on the importance of integrating economic development goals with the conservation of the environment and preservation of the culture and society eventually leading to tourism stakeholders identifying their roles in developing responsible practices in the day to day operations leading to sustainability of the destination (Kokkranikal, 2012).

Various researches around the world have showcased the fact that tourism does not necessarily lead to development and conservation unless deliberate efforts are created to link the industry with the development of the mountain regions- mainly environmental conservation, poverty alleviation and the empowerment of the local communities (Banskota & Sharma, 1998). The main challenge is to balance the resource and various conservation factors to develop a sustainable tourism in the mountain regions, so that the positive impact on the mountain communities and environment is maximised and the negative impacts are minimised as much as possible.

Purpose of the Study

The present research study would help in recognising the potentiality of homestay tourism in the sustainable and ecotourism sector. Tourism is a social activity and involves interaction between different communities- i.e. the hosts and the guests and their culture. Homestay tourism is a great tool for sustainable development of tourism through the community participation at the rural level. The research study helps to understand the role, functions and contribution of the homestay operators besides understanding the demands and requirements of the tourists or customers. It aims to explore the potentiality of the sustainable tourism through the homestays of the Darjeeling hills.

Objective of the Research Study

- To have an insight of the concept of Homestay tourism in the Hills
- To study about the sustainable tourism development in The Darjeeling Hills
- To study about the community based ecotourism in the Himalayan regions of the Darjeeling hills

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design involves both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research study was conducted through the analysis of various research paper in this area.

The quantitative research study was conducted through the assessment of a structured questionnaire for the hotel and guest using the convenience - sampling technique. The research design involves both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research study was conducted through the analysis of various research paper in this area.

Use of survey study

It has been found under various studies that surveys are used for explanatory, exploratory and descriptive researches and are mainly used for studies that have individual people as units of analysis. The survey method helps to collect a large amount of data from a sizeable population in a highly economic way. Moreover the survey process is very easy to understand. In order to fulfill the purpose of the study the survey approach was adopted. A well-structured questionnaire

was designed for the purpose of the data collection for the survey. The questionnaire was framed on some closed ended questions and some on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating strongly agree and 5 strongly disagree.

Sample for the study

The data collection for the purpose of the research was done through convenience sampling method. Sample size for the purpose of the research was 50 respondents involving both tourists and the hosts.

Review of Literature

Sustainable development is a development strategy that manages all assets for increasing the long term wealth (Tosun, 2001). It is the management of all resources in such a way that the economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological process, biological diversity, life support system (Cooper et. al., 2008). Sustainable tourism is the concept of visiting a place as a tourist and trying to make a positive impact on the environment, society and economy of the place of visit (Lisse, 2009). The sustainable tourism principle relies on the optimal use of environmental resources, which are critical for the development of tourism, preserving of the ecological processes and contributing to the preservation of natural heritage and biodiversity.

The Himalayan regions of Darjeeling which include the hilly areas of the Darjeeling and the districts of Kalimpong is one of the current attractions as a tourist destination because of the geographical location of being situated at the pedestal of Mt. Kanchenjunga and the eastern Himalayas. It is considered as a noteworthy example of India's booming homestay tourism. It is considered as the 'Queen of the Hills' for the beauty, the charming European hill Station and the world famous tea estates (Kannegieser, 2015; Roy et.al., 2021). According to (Bhatt, 2012) the feasibility and economic viability of homestays as a community based tourism product in the Himalayan regions of North India has been highlighted. Homestays in the Himalayan region have upto some extent played an important role in the enhancement of the economy of the Himalayan inhabitants. Many villages in the Darjeeling himalayan region provide tourists with scenic beauty and traditional homestays. In the homestay tourism concept the commoditization of both the environment and the culture takes place, the market value of which is created with the demand of the tourists. Apart from agricultural activities, homestay tourism has the additional role of sustaining the livelihood of the local people instilling the feeling of environmental conservation. Despite generating income and focusing on economic benefits, some other strategies need to be adopted to cope up with the climate change. Stakeholders need to take some steps to frame guidelines specifying the qualification of homestays.

According to (Amin & Ibrahim, 2015), in community based tourism, homestay communities have an impact in safeguarding the environment and increasing cultural awareness. Since the homestays are managed by the local community the tourists travelling to those areas are able to recognise the culture of the local communities and the cohesive relation between them. . in order

to ensure sustainable development, the assistance and involvement of local communities is very much critical.

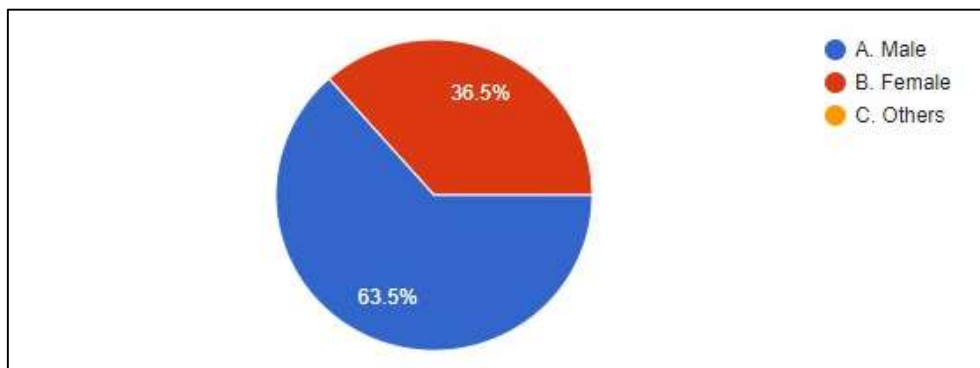
According to (Samsudin et. al., 2014), the focus of sustainable tourism is in terms of environmental, social and cultural aspects. Homestay tourism is one of the community based tourism concept that inculcates the feeling among rural people to preserve the conserve the concept of cultural landscape. The awareness of the cultural landscape encourages the local community especially the young generation to participate in the tourism industry and preserve the cultural and environmental landscape for the future generation. The green marketing tool has an impact on the tourists willingness to stay at a homestay business is terms of visitors satisfaction and length of stay (Kartika et. al. 2020).

The homestay tourism policy of West Bengal and the initiatives of the development of rural tourism in the hills of Darjeeling have an impact on the capacity to preserve the traditional values and beliefs, conservation of the environment, creation of sustainable livelihood options, promotion of local and sustainable handicrafts, enhancement of the income of the local community and organic food production contributing to sustainable rural tourism development (Rawat, 2019). Homestay can create a mind shift of the local community towards environmental consent. It helps to preserve the natural structure of any destination.

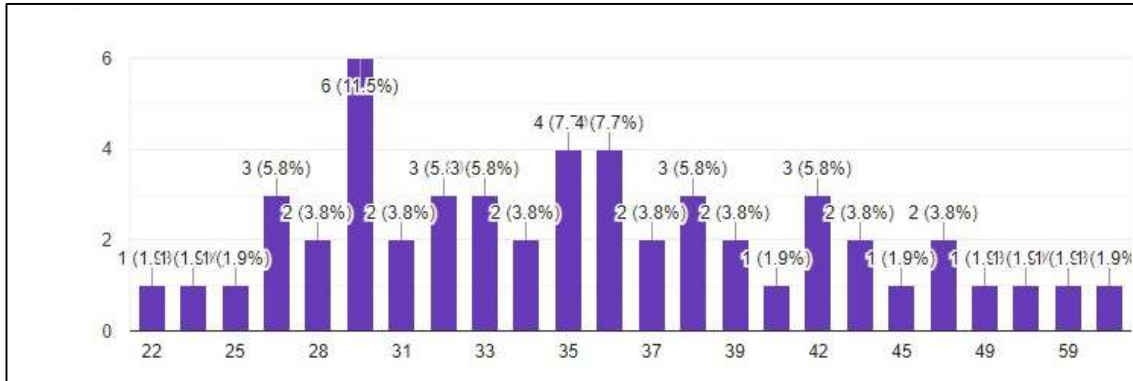
According to (Acharya & Halpeny, 2013), homestays are associated with community based ecotourism practices, tourism initiatives thereby indulging in responsible tourism practices often being used as development strategy for destination sustainability and improving the quality of life of the local communities in the Himalayan region. The program of homestay has sensitized the tourism sector as an element of community based tourism practice, because it tries to ensure the economic development of the communities as well as its direct involvement in community based tourism.

The concept of community based tourism originated for sustainable tourism development and focuses on building the local community's capacity by consuming local resources wisely and helps in protecting the environment (Stabler & Goodall, 1996). It has been observed in recent times that the involvement and participation of the local people have been regarded as a focus of sustainable development of tourism (Murphy, 1985) (Richard & Hall, 2000)

Data Collection and Interpretation

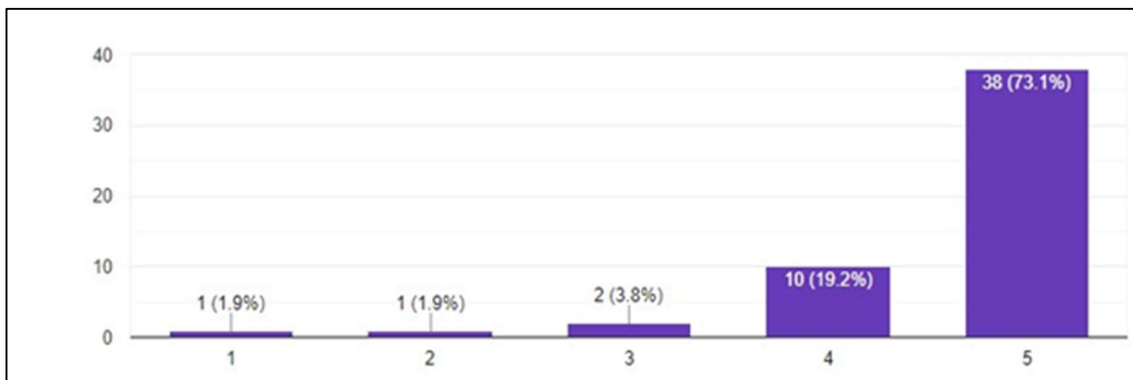


Gender



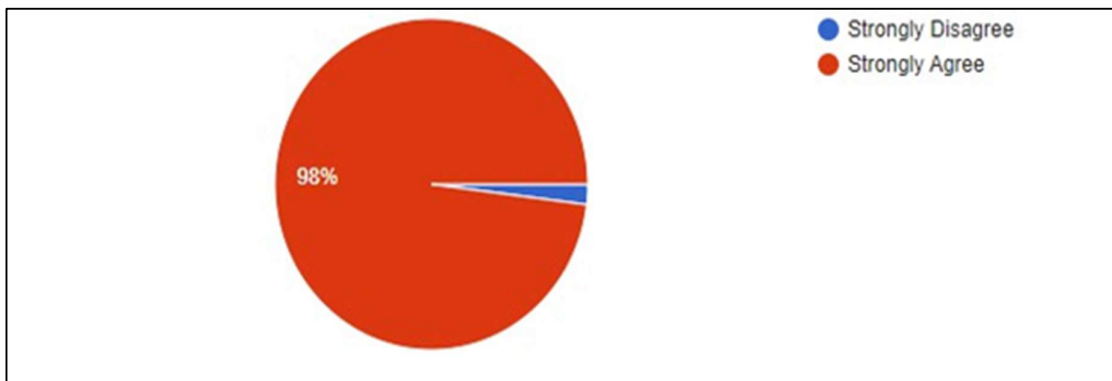
Age

In order to fulfill the purpose of the research the demographic profile of the respondents were of the age group from 22 years and above with people beyond the age group of 28 years with the most of the response. Among the respondents 63.5% were found to be male.



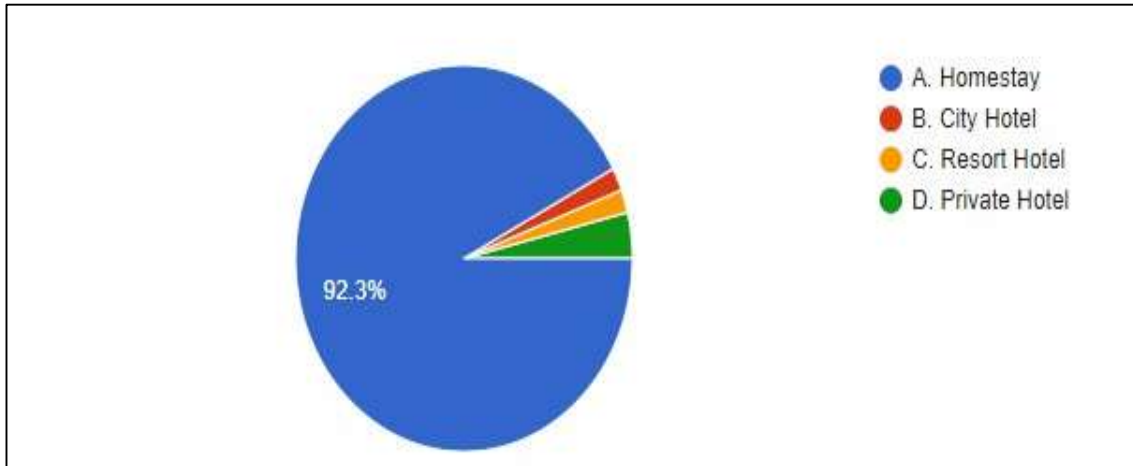
Homestay have more local products as decorative and sellable items

It was found from the survey that most of the products used as decorative and sellable items by the homestays of the region were locally made handicrafts promoting the concept of sustainable tourism. Local ingredients are being used to prepare them.



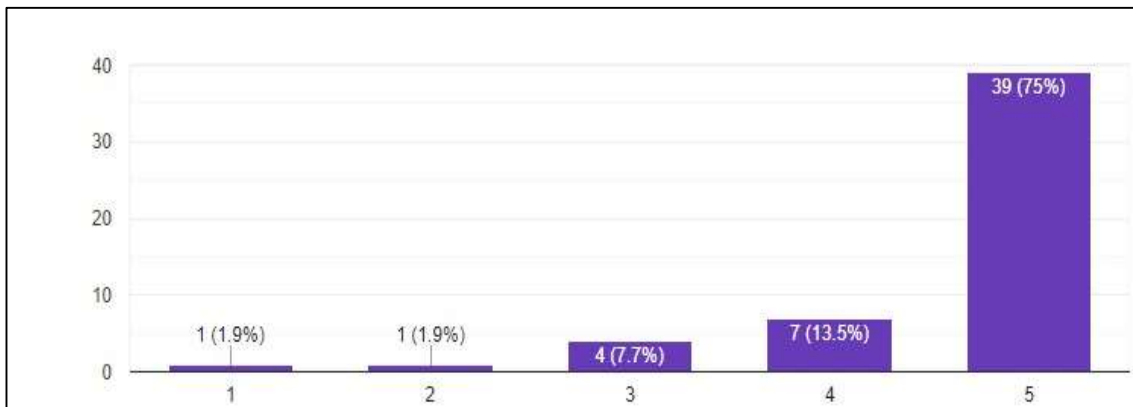
Homestay promote Eco Friendly Products in the Property more than any other Hotels

Homestays in the Darjeeling region promote the use of eco friendly products by providing eco friendly amenities in rooms for the guests. There is use of organic materials for the products which is another way in developing sustainability.



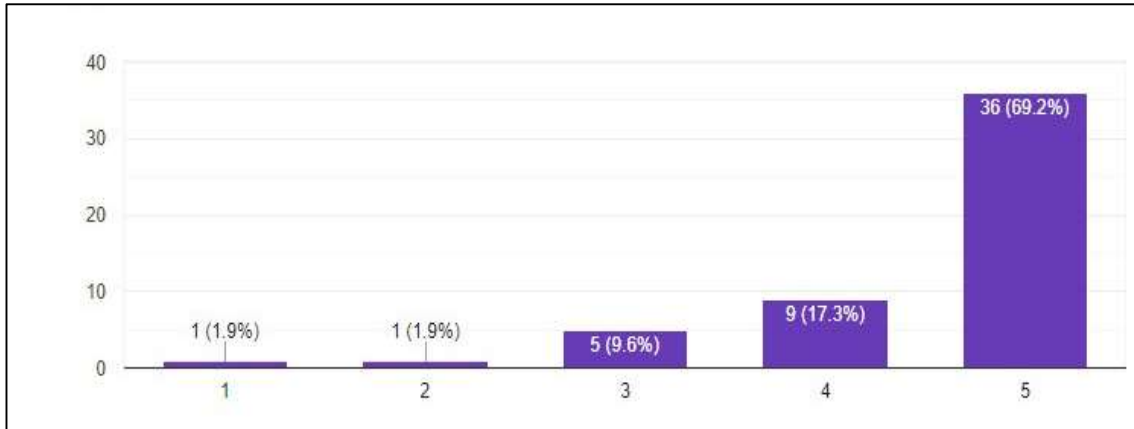
Dependence of local people on type of accommodation

The local Community of the destination area found to depend most on homestays for their livelihood as compared to luxury and resort hotels. The mostly rely on promoting the local culture through the homestays.



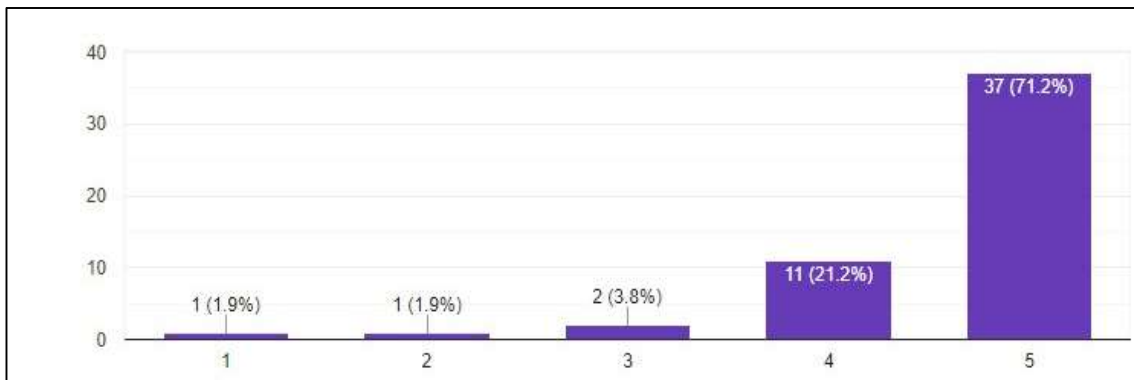
Homestay Recycles Products in various Ways and Make it Useful

In order to preserve and conserve the natural ecosystem, the homestays follow the principles of 3 R's involving reduce, reuse and recycle. In this regard homestays are found to recycle products in various ways to make them reusable for the tourists.



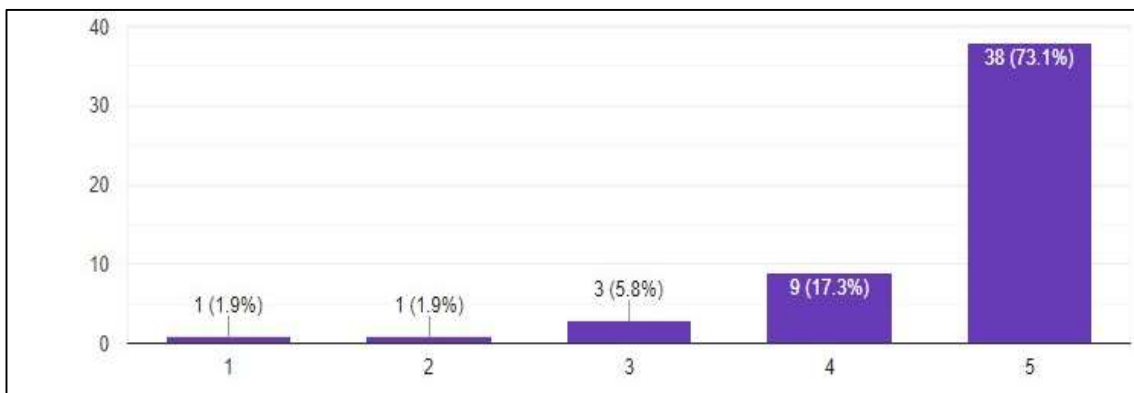
There are minimum to no Wastages In Darjeeling

Homestays are found to minimise waste generation and use proper techniques for waste disposal in order to preserve the natural ecosystem. As a result it reduces on the nature which helps to create appositve natural environment.



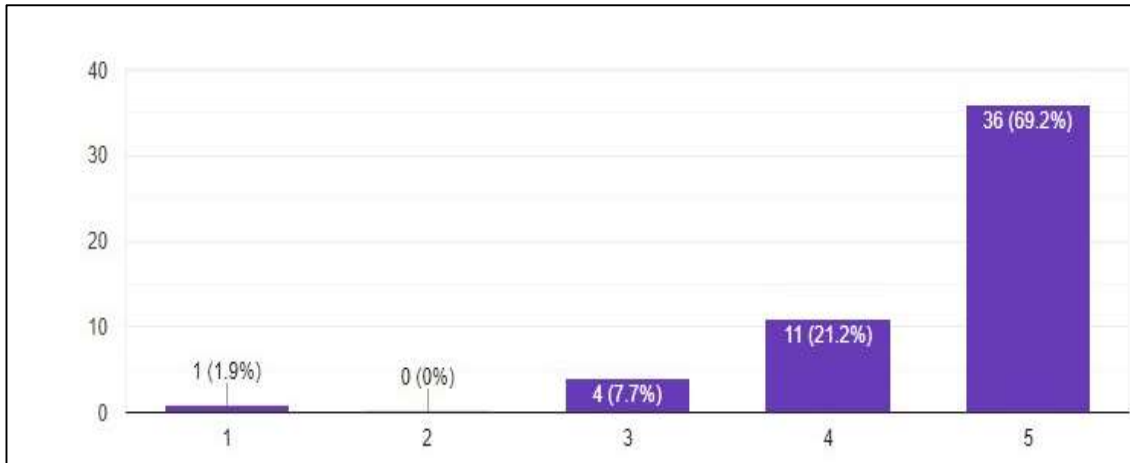
Use of eco friendly cleaning supplies by Employees

Homestays use eco friendly cleaning supplies using local ingredients. The use of these products are ecologically sustainable and at the same time minimise the harmful impacts of using chemicals.



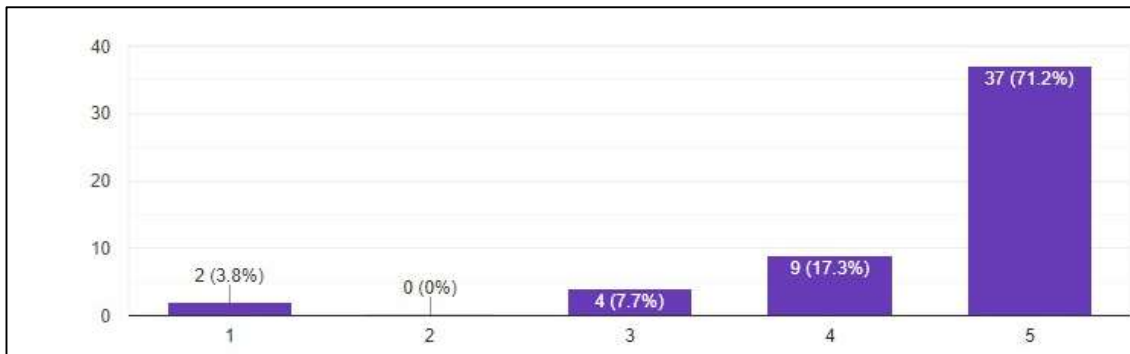
Rainwater Harvesting in Homestays for water supply in off seasons

Homestays perform rainwater harvesting to reuse the rainwater in the off season to minimise the shortage of water in the off season. These are outcomes of sustainable tourism practices in the region.



Installation of Sensors, Dimmers for energy conservation

In order to conserve the energy few of the homestays are found to use sensors and dimmers. These are few of the modern day technologies to conserve the energy. Dimmer controls provide variable indoor lighting and can be operated manually, or with timers or sensors. When you dim lightbulbs, it reduces their wattage and output, which helps save energy



There is a positive impact on social, economic and environmental sustainable development in homestays

Sustainable homestays in Darjeeling Himalayan region offer a unique and responsible approach to tourism, supporting local communities of the region while providing enriching experiences for travellers. By choosing sustainable homestays, tourists can make a positive impact on the environment, support local economies, and engage in authentic cultural exchanges. These accommodations create a sustainable tourism model that preserves cultural heritage, protects the environment, and promotes the well-being of local communities.

Conclusion

Homestays and ecotourism are an effective tool for sustainable development in the Himalayan regions of Darjeeling. It meets the needs of both tourists and hosts, protecting the natural environment. It plays an important role in community development and empowerment of women in the region through sustainable livelihood. There is an influx of tourists all around the year except for the monsoon season. Due to the tourist influx there may be stress on the environment and wildlife leading to deforestation, soil erosion, landslides, ecological imbalance etc. So initiatives need to be taken to develop a sustainable tourism environment improving tourism facilities and experience as well as the environment.

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