



Assessing the Impact of Ecotourism on Economic Expansion and Environmental Conservation: A Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Ecotourism has been gaining popularity over the past 20 years as a sustainable substitute for traditional tourism. India is a popular travel destination worldwide. Himachal Pradesh is a popular tourism destination in India. Tourism has emerged as a significant economic sector with considerable potential for fostering economic development and environmental conservation. The objective of research paper is to explore the role of sustainable tourism in achieving a balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being. It examines the positive impacts of sustainable tourism on local economies, the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and community empowerment. The paper also addresses the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable tourism practices and presents strategies for effective implementation. By analyzing case studies and existing literature, this study provides insights into the potential of sustainable tourism as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development. Examining the primary biological and environmental conditions in Himachal Pradesh is one of the study's main goals. The objective is to examine the factors that led to the growth of ecotourism, the benefits of ecotourism resources, the market characteristics of ecotourism, the overall concept, specific actions and measures, the regional structure of ecotourism, the actions to be taken, and the strategy for promoting ecotourism.

Introduction

A major contribution to sustainable development can come from tourism. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) want to encourage all nations to ensure that their policies and activities for its development and Sustainability is completely embraced by management. Likewise, the potential presented by tourism should be fully considered in policies that support sustainable development. The importance of tourism and sustainability was emphasized at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. Numerous international treaties and declarations have established

principles and criteria for sustainable tourism. Numerous nations claim to be pursuing or intend to follow, sustainable tourism policies. Despite this enthusiasm, there is still some confusion about the scope and goals for increasing the sustainability of tourism, as well as a lack of understanding about how to really implement these changes[1].

As per data from the World Tourism Organisation, the tourism sector represents a substantial portion of the global economy, accounting for approximately US\$ 5890 billion, equivalent to 9.9% of the total global GDP. In India, tourism stands as the largest service industry, contributing 6.23% to the national GDP and employing 8.78% of the total workforce [2]. Approximately 260 million jobs worldwide are sustained by Travel & Tourism, either directly within the industry or in associated sectors. These employment opportunities play a crucial role not only in supporting the livelihoods of workers but also in benefiting their families and the broader communities in destinations where tourism thrives [3].

In HP, tourism is not a novel idea. Its origins can be traced to the Chinese explorer Hiuen T-Sang, who traveled to India and recorded significant findings regarding Jalandra, Kuluta, and Srugna. In addition to Hiuen T-Sang, numerous other foreign visitors have left insightful accounts of their travels to different regions of the Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh. William Moorcraft has done a wonderful job of describing the hill state's flora and fauna, climate, art and architecture, paintings, economic and social situations, and the power of the many Rajas[4].

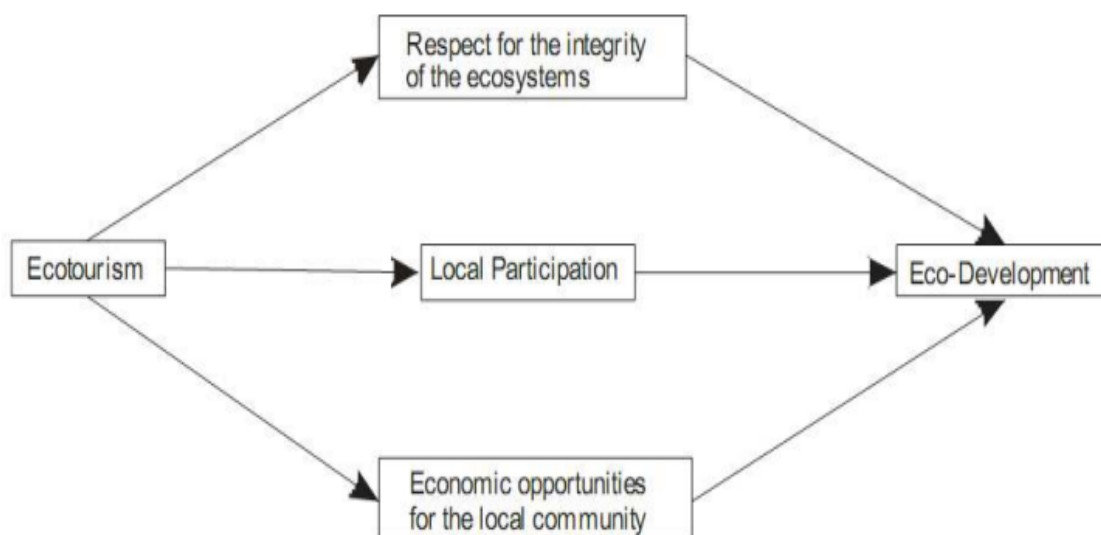
Himachal Pradesh's tourism industry didn't start to take off until the British began building hill stations for relaxation and tranquillity in the 19th century. After the British declared Himachal their summer capital in 1864, the region received international recognition. Highly lucrative tourist destinations like Kulu, Manali, Kangra, Dharamsala, Shimla, Chail, and Dalhousie were transferred to Himachal Pradesh following the state's reorganization in 1966. With the implementation of the Second Five-Year Plan, the tourism industry in Himachal Pradesh started to grow. The government of Himachal Pradesh has now recognized the value of tourism as a significant economic activity and in 2000, it announced the creation of a new tourist policy. In the summer, when people swarm to its hill stations to escape the oppressive heat of the plains, Himachal Pradesh is a pleasant state for tourists. The majority of travellers come to Himachal Pradesh to enjoy its picturesque and natural splendor[5].

Himachal is a well-known tourist destination that is well-known both domestically and internationally. International tourists are also drawn to the hill state because of its historical value. There are now new travel categories for both domestic and foreign tourists, such as adventure, trekking, sport tourism and camping. The State Government has implemented a number of initiatives to boost travel and stimulate exploration.

Ecotourism

Responsible travel to natural regions that preserves the environment and enhances the quality of life for locals is known as ecotourism. Within the tourism business, eco-tourism is thought to be expanding at the quickest rate. Eco-tourism is more than just a trendy term for vacationing and leisure activities in the outdoors. The goal of eco-tourism is to protect and maintain the variety of the natural and cultural ecosystems found around the world. It preserves and promotes the local

cultures in the areas it operates in while providing guests with entertainment and accommodations that cause the least amount of environmental disruption. Eco-tourism is all about protecting the natural world around you, including its forests and natural amenities. Whether it involves planning trekking excursions to remote and pristine areas or setting up a wilderness camp.



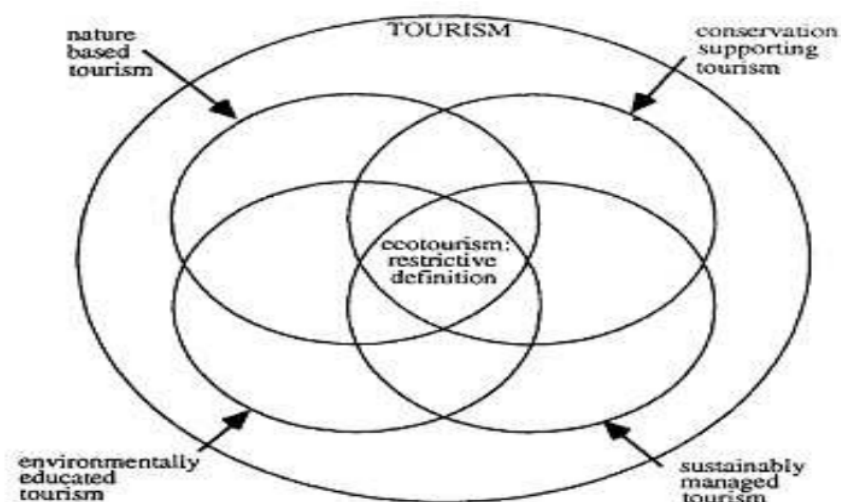
(Source: Hawkins & Khan, 1998)

Figure 1.1: The three concepts for variable ecotourism

The formulation and development of eco-tourism policy has involved a large number of professionals. Their backgrounds include work in Geographic Information Systems, Marine Biology and Oceanography, National and State Park Management, Wildlife Management, and Wildlife Photography. Historians and archaeologists, women in development, environmental sciences, etc. In 1994, the Australian Federal Government's tourist agency defined ecotourism as a controllable and sustainable ecological tour that includes an educational and informative component about the environment along with the natural visit. In 1993, Mr. Valentine provided a very comprehensive definition of ecotourism, stating that it must be founded on unaltered natural regions for the purpose of hosting tours; that there must be no environmental loss or degradation; and that ecotourism must be ecologically sound.

Three requirements must be met: sustainability must be ensured; third, it must directly contribute to the sustainable management and protection of natural tourism; and fourth, an efficient compliance management system is needed. All things considered, the components of eco-tourism include a focus on sustainable travel and the preservation of the natural environment. In today's and tomorrow's world, eco-tourism will emerge as the dominant trend in the development of tourism and environmental economy.

Ecotourism occupies a position within one of the four circles depicted in Figure 1.2:



In 2023, Himachal Pradesh continues to champion ecotourism through several remarkable destinations, setting benchmarks for sustainable travel.

The **Great Himalayan National Park**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, remains a beacon for nature enthusiasts. Its rich biodiversity, encompassing diverse flora and fauna, draws visitors interested in responsible trekking and wildlife conservation initiatives.

Kangra Valley, renowned for its timeless charm, exemplifies sustainable tourism by blending cultural heritage with environmental consciousness. Travelers partake in eco-friendly activities such as nature walks and heritage site visits while supporting local communities.

Bir Billing, beyond its fame as a premier paragliding destination, stands out for its eco-initiatives. Travelers engage in eco-tourism by exploring Tibetan monasteries, participating in nature walks, and immersing themselves in the local culture.

Tirthan Valley, tucked away in the serene Kullu region, continues to thrive as an ecotourism gem. Visitors embrace sustainable practices by opting for homestays, partaking in organic farming experiences, and engaging in responsible trekking adventures.

Spiti Valley retains its allure as a high-altitude cold desert, promoting responsible tourism. Travelers are encouraged to experience the local Tibetan-Buddhist way of life through homestays, cultural immersion, and appreciating the valley's unique landscape while respecting its fragility.

These destinations epitomize Himachal Pradesh's commitment to ecotourism, emphasizing sustainable practices, community engagement, and the preservation of the Himalayan ecosystem. They offer travelers enriching experiences while fostering a profound connection with nature and local cultures.

Reviews of Past Studies

Earlier research projects carried out by different scientists In his analysis of the social effects, Butter (1974) pointed out that visitors are usually from affluent neighborhoods. The general

public's adoption of a lifestyle that is beyond their means is one of the long-term effects of tourism on society. Consequently, the process of acculturation between foreigners and native communities starts. Tyagi (1989). According to the author, Himachal Pradesh possesses abundant tourism potential the paper "Development and Potential of Tourism in Himachal Pradesh," with all essential elements as well as in terms of different professional bases, creating a distinctive tourist attraction. She asserted that many tourist attractions contributed to this state reaching its potential because the development of the tourism business depends on a destination's reputation. Raja in Shimla (1992) one of the most well-known goods produced by the British Empire, which, prior to independence, was British India's summer capital. In his novel "Shimla-The Summer," Headquarter of British India "After researching this subject, he describes how the town was abandoned by the British and turned into the state capital of Himachal Pradesh. Meena (2004) In 2003, there was an unprecedented influx of tourists into India, as reported by the author of "Tourism High in Incredible India." His analysis indicates that 2.75 million visitors travelled to India in 2013, a 6.3% rise from 2002. He also mentioned that the large number of visitors happened in the first half of the year and had nothing to do with the Iraq War or the SARS outbreak.

Several conferences focusing on ecotourism and responsible tourism have convened to advocate for the latter perspective mentioned earlier. During the 1995 World Conference on Sustainable Tourism in Lanzarote, consensus was reached on the following principle: "Tourism achieves sustainability when its growth and operations involve the engagement of local residents, preservation of the natural environment, equitable economic benefits for both the industry and the local community, and a shared respect and satisfaction among all stakeholders."

The Place of Tourism in Policies and Initiatives for Enlargement

The state's tourism sector was facing extreme urgency, and the administration was determined to move forward with developing the basic infrastructure needed to support the growth of travel, including airfields, transportation, community services, accommodations for passengers, and reasonably good public spaces. There are five variable statements in this section of the questionnaire, ranging from low-slung to top-slung. Since one is seen as negative, two as good, three as respectable, four as exceptional, and five as remarkable. Using a 5-point Likert scale, the Pradesh Health Government assesses the status of tourism in relation to policies and initiatives. With a standard deviation of 0.750280 and an average value of 3.0170, tourism is a sector that Pradesh has prioritized in its development policies. Travel is becoming more popular in the state, although its average value is the greatest at 3.58970, and its standard deviation is 0.736760, at this point it is evident that all policies and tourism-related initiatives are directly or coincidentally related to the average value. Administration support for the private sector in tourism development and federal and state government support in their annual tourism development budgets is 0.573000, with a standard deviation of 0.660950 and a mean of 3.37670. The lowest mean value and standard deviation, 2.99610 and 0.66830, respectively, are found in the combined mean value of national and international organizations promoting tourism development.

Challenges at Ecotourism Destinations

Ecotourism, while a sustainable and responsible form of travel, faces several challenges and occasional failures:

- **The effects of overcrowding on the environment:** Well-known locations for ecotourism frequently deal with the paradox of success: an increase in tourists may result in habitat damage, environmental deterioration, and stress on available resources. Adequate management is necessary to prevent harm to fragile ecosystems.
- **Inadequate Regulation and Implementation:** There are times when rules pertaining to responsible tourism are not followed or enforced. This may result in problems like wildlife disturbance, littering, or unsustainable development in ecotourism destinations.
- **Participation of the Community and Benefit Sharing:** Local communities need to be involved in and benefit from tourism activities for ecotourism to prosper. Failures happen when these communities' traditional ways of life are adversely affected or when tourism income do not flow down to them.
- **The push towards commercialization:** The necessity for infrastructure and facilities in ecotourism sites may lead to commercialization, altering the surrounding environment and reducing the authenticity of the experience.
- **Natural Disasters and Climate Changes:** Destinations that cater to ecotourism are susceptible to the effects of climate change, such as changes in biodiversity patterns or extreme weather occurrences. Natural catastrophes have the potential to harm ecosystems and impede tourism.
- **Juggling Preservation and Tourist Attractions:** It might be difficult to strike a balance between conservation initiatives and offering significant visitor experiences. Limitations aimed for safeguarding the environment may restrict visitors' access and enjoyment.
- **Knowledge and Consciousness:** The success of ecotourism programs might be impeded by a lack of awareness or education regarding sustainable practices among tourists and local communities. Promoting awareness and respect for the environment and regional cultures is essential.

While these challenges exist, they present opportunities for learning and improvement. Successful ecotourism destinations address these issues by implementing effective management strategies, involving local communities, educating visitors, and prioritizing environmental conservation alongside tourism development.

Over-tourism

In 2023, overtourism and the sensitive subject of carrying capacity will continue to be major problems for Himachal Pradesh's ecotourism destinations.

Over-tourism Challenges

- **Crowding and Environmental Impact:** Growing numbers of visitors to well-known ecotourism destinations like Spiti Valley and the Great Himalayan National Park are stressing the ecosystem, creating problems with waste management, and destroying habitats.

- **Infrastructure Strain:** The amount of tourists beyond the infrastructure's carrying capacity leads to problems with disposing of trash, shortage of water, and degradation of paths because of high foot traffic.
- **Loss of Authenticity:** The genuine experience of these places may be diminished by excessive tourism. The pure and tranquil atmosphere these locations provide could be compromised by commercialization, an increase in crowds, and an emphasis on mass tourism.

Carrying Capacity Issues:

- **Ecosystem Vulnerability:** Himachal Pradesh's delicate ecosystems are vulnerable to harm as a result of heavy tourist traffic. This includes pollution, devastation of natural resources, and disturbance of wildlife habitats.
- **Community Concerns:** The communities that are in close proximity to these places could be burdened by excessive tourism, encounter social and cultural disturbances, and struggle to cope with the heightened demand for resources and services.

Management and Mitigation Strategies

- **Visitor Management Plans:** Putting into practice techniques like visitor quotas, timed entrance, or permits can assist in controlling the amount of tourists and distributing their visiting across various hours.
- **Infrastructure and Waste Management:** The negative environmental effects of excessive tourism can be reduced by making investments in eco-friendly buildings, waste management programs, and sustainable infrastructure.
- **Community Involvement and Benefit Sharing:** Incorporating local communities into tourist planning and guaranteeing their share of tourism earnings can promote a feeling of responsibility and concomitantly enhance responsible tourism behaviors.
- **Educational Campaigns:** It is imperative to increase consciousness among both visitors and residents regarding environmentally conscious tourism, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable tourism practices.

The difficulty is striking a balance between protecting these ecotourism locations' natural and cultural legacy and the economic benefits of tourism. Authorities in Himachal Pradesh are aggressively investigating and putting into practise ways to control overtourism, preserve the integrity of these delicate ecosystems, and provide tourists with worthwhile experiences.

Methodology

One of the world's highest mountain ranges is the Himalayas. It occupies an area of 55,673 square meters. M. Km. The region is incredibly hilly, rising between 350 and 6975 meters above sea level. The greater Himalayas, also known as the alpine zone, the mid-mountains, and the outer Himalayas, also known as the Shivalik, are the three comparable zones that make up the Himalayas. There were 507 responders in all, with 56.2% of them being men and 43.8% being women. Due to the fact that I gather data from tourist destinations, especially from people who are either directly or indirectly involved in tourism, there is a higher number of male responders.

Key findings and Discussion

Without a doubt, tourism contributes significantly to the state's financial prosperity and it also offers a development alternative. However, the state's tourism industry is constantly impacted by the government's lack of focus and the construction of basic infrastructure, which puts Himachal Pradesh is not in a good position to compete in the domestic and global travel markets. The tourism industry is the backbone of the Himachal Pradesh economy, and it must be retained, maintained, and sustained by any means required. According to respondents' responses, the state's tourism industry makes a significant contribution to revenue and service generation, and there are a lot of visitors arriving. However, the current concern is that the state's infrastructure is not developing to a level that will draw in enough tourists.

- The core of the Himachal Pradesh economy is the tourist sector.
- There is a big role for the community and government in promoting and encouraging tourism.
- The Himachal Pradesh economy has not benefited from the tourism sector as anticipated.
- The tourist sector raises the general public's standard of living in Himachal Pradesh.
- It creates jobs for people from different ethnic groups in the state.

Conclusion

The economy of Himachal Pradesh is largely reliant on the rapidly growing tourism industry. It is supported by a 9.26% compound increase in the tourist sector's share of the state of Himachal Pradesh's gross state domestic product. The worldwide gross domestic product (GSDP) has reportedly grown almost yearly, with the biggest increases recorded in 2009–10 (24.74 percent) and 2011–12 (20.67 percent). According to data, Himachal Pradesh allocated Rs. 710000 lakh, or 1.20 percent, of the total of Rs. 8513 lakhs for tourism for the 2019–20 fiscal year. The results of this study showed that the tourism plays an important role in reviving the economy of Himachal Pradesh. It has become clear that the mountainous areas of Himachal Pradesh are rich behind the lowlands for a variety of reasons, but there is great potential and resources to develop Himachal Pradesh. However, this requires a focused approach to evolving infrastructure and sectors such as horticulture and tourism that have the potential to generate income and employment in Himachal Pradesh. Success in tourism has been universally accepted, especially by industrialized and under developed countries, as one of the main ways to improve the country's economy. Studies and research, both academic and practical, on tourism development and its implications are now very important in developed and developing countries. The noteworthy impact of tourism on the economy of Himachal Pradesh rationalizes the need for public and government involvement with the aim of promoting and increasing tourist demand and, conversely, providing and developing the tourist offer. The economic impacts generated by tourism are benefiting enormously all sectors of the Himachal economy. Tourism has the greatest direct impact on the service sectors, it is the life cycle of Himachal Pradesh and requires all major efforts to preserve and sustain it

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