

Transformation in Perception towards Tourism of the Local Community: An Important Stakeholder of Sunderbans Tiger Reserve, India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 Pandemic has been a disaster for all the population of the world. Every single person's life is affected on one or multiple levels. People's perception has also changed due to the pandemic. Immense fear has been established among the living for their lives and health. People have limited their interaction and exposure to the outside world, even to the known ones. The tourism industry has suffered a great deal due to this COVID-19 pandemic, as tourism relies on the people's willingness to explore and interact with different cultures and populations. The local community of the protected areas has shut themselves from the neighboring areas and are entertaining limited tourists on a per need basis. The local community is a prime stakeholder in any protected site as they hold a key control and knowledge of the land, hence their corporation is very important and needed for the success of tourism plans for the site. One of the priced positions of India is Sunderbans, a protected site which is famous all over the world. This paper studies the change in the perception of the local community of the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve towards tourism. The data was collected in two facets, one prior pandemic which was in January 2020, and one during pandemic in February 2021. Researchers collected data from 100 people from the local community both times. This study will compare the data and determine which variables are affected due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Cronbach alpha test was applied and the test depicts that the data is reliable for any further analysis. Descriptive analysis is used to identify the perception of the local community. The result of the study does identify a shift in the perception towards tourism in the local community due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concludes by listing recommendations that will help to impose and maintain a positive perception of the local community towards tourism and tourists.

Keywords: Local Community, Perception, Tourism, Sunderbans Tiger Reserve, Perception towards Tourism, COVID-19 Pandemic impact.

Introduction

The term “perception” refers to the thinking or impression of a person towards other people or matters (Cherry, 2020). People's perceptions can make or break an industry. Among many industries, the Tourism industry is one of them which relies heavily on the people for its success. A positive and supportive population will help the industry to make a firm growth and profit, however, a negative and unwelcoming population can be disastrous.

Especially in the case of tourism in protected areas, the local community plays a vital role. The local community is the key stakeholder in tourism activities in and around the protected areas. It is very crucial to have the support and permission of the local community in order to carry out tourism services smoothly (Nagarjuna, 2015). A positive perception of the local community can help tourism in the protected areas grow in a sustainable manner while uplifting the condition of the area and the lifestyle of its surrounding population (Pillai, 2011). A negative perception of the local community can make the local community unwelcoming and against tourism in the protected areas (Kreag, 2001).

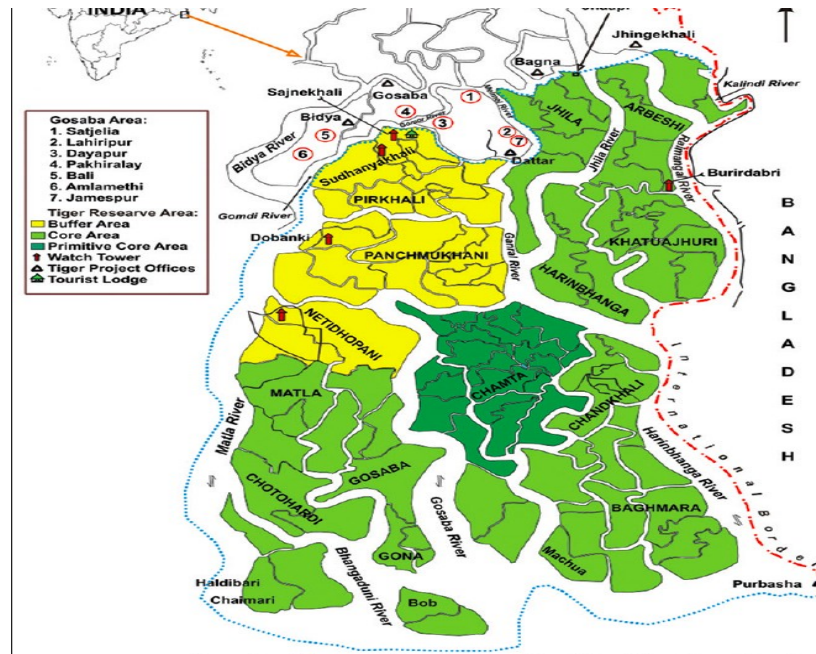
In India, the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting people's lives from the beginning of 2020 and they are still fighting against it. The country has suffered a lot of loss of life due to the virus (Ellis-Petersen, 2021), which has resulted in increasing fear and resistance among the population. The tourism industry has taken a huge hit due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People are restricting their travel and interaction with the outside world. Although tourism supports the economy in many rural areas as well as protected areas, people are still hesitant. In this paper, we will study the perception of the local community towards tourism in the study area under two circumstances which are pre-COVID-19 pandemic perception and during COVID-19 pandemic perception. This study will help identify and highlight the segment of tourism that is affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research methodology

Sunderbans Tiger Reserve is among the first nine tiger reserves identified under the Project Tiger Initiative in 1973 and it is also a site of higher significance as it is a world heritage site (National Tiger Conservation Authority / Project Tiger, 2017). Sunderbans Tiger Reserve is located in West Bengal and is one of a kind site to experience tiger spotting. The reserve is a mangrove forest that is divided into many islands. The best time to visit the reserve is from October till March every year (West Bengal Tourism, 2018).

The data was collected in two faces, one prior pandemic which was in January 2020, and one during the pandemic in February 2021. Researchers collected data from 100 local communities for pre-pandemic perception and 100 local communities were interviewed during pandemic perception. 5 perceptions towards tourism statements were identified and recorded on the scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. Descriptive statistics are used to determine their perception of tourism. The software used for analysis is IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

(SPSS) Version 23. Cronbach’s Alpha test was applied to check the reliability of the data and the scores show a value of 0.746 which suggests the data is reliable.



Source: indianjpsychiatry.org

Figure 1. Map of Sunderbans Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India

Result

The data was collected majorly from the males compared to the females. People falling under the age group of 18-25 years participated majorly in the research. The majority of the sample population did not have any education qualification followed by matriculation. The majority of them were not working, followed by labor and fishing as common occupations among those who are employed. Most of them had no income followed by annual income less than 1,00,000.

To study the perception of the local community towards tourism before the COVID-19 pandemic, 05 statements were recorded as represented below in Table 1. The results depict a total score of 4.182 which represents an overall positive perception of the local community towards tourism in their study area.

Table 1. Pre COVID-19 Perception towards Tourism

S. No.	Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Tourism benefits your family.	4.06	0.345
2	Tourism benefits your whole community.	4.46	0.211
3	I am happy to see tourists.	4.88	0.134
4	Tourism uplifts the destination.	3.75	0.452
5	Tourism benefits everyone.	3.76	0.344

To study the perception of the local community towards tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, the same 05 statements were recorded as represented below in Table 2. The results depict a total score of 4.01 which represents an overall positive perception of the local community towards tourism in their study area. However, there is a difference in the scores of positive perception between the pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic among the local community.

Table 2. During COVID-19 Perception towards Tourism

S. No.	Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Tourism benefits your family.	4.65	0.227
2	Tourism benefits your whole community.	4.34	0.453
3	I am happy to see tourists.	3.02	0.587
4	Tourism uplifts the destination.	4.01	0.322
5	Tourism benefits everyone.	4.03	0.279

Conclusion

The findings of the study show a positive perception of the local community towards tourism in Sunderbans Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India in both the cases which are pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result supports the finding of other research in positive perception of tourism (Lepp, 2006). However, the studies identify a shift in the perception of the local community towards one factor namely “I am happy to see tourists.”. The score of this particular factor has deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic data collection time. Upon investigation, it was found that the local community is scared and uneasy to see tourists as they fear the tourists will spread the COVID-19 virus in their locality which will put their lives in danger.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of the local community immensely. They are facing difficulties in meaning day-to-day necessities. Their families depend on tourism to support their lifestyles, however, the virus has created a panic and fear in them in entertaining visitors in their area. The study indicates that the fear shall go away when the COVID-19 will end but from now on the local community will look for more hygienic ways to operate tourism activities in the future. However, it is important to indicate that the shift is alarming for the tourism industry as well as government stakeholders as tourism is one of the main sources of earning and welfare for the study site.

The particular study collects the perception of a limited number of residents’. This seems to be limited but not the end. Further research can include a larger number of respondents from various protected sites in India to analyze the perception and analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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