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## Exploring the Potentiality of Ecotourism in Betana Simsar Community Forest, Koshi Province, Nepal

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### KEYWORDS

*Biodiversity  
Ecotourism  
Employment  
Households  
Income*

### ABSTRACT

The Government of Nepal has focused on ecotourism activities within community forests; but not all community forests are equally potential for ecotourism. This paper mainly focuses on available facilities and services regarding ecotourism development; and tries to analyse local people's perception of ecotourism promotion as well as visitor's satisfaction in the Betana Simsar Community Forest of Morang district in Koshi province, eastern Nepal to explore the potentiality of ecotourism. This research was based mainly on household survey (n=53), visitor's interviews (n=96), key informant survey (n=10) and observation of available infrastructure related to ecotourism development. The study revealed that rich biodiversity and natural scenery of the wetland have attracted more than four million visitors annually. The income received from the tourism has not only supported management of the community forest but also provided employment to eight local people and supported local livelihoods. Two third of the visitors were found satisfied with the available facilities and natural beauty of the area. These facts show the opportunities for ecotourism development in Betana Simsar community forest; however, lack of institutional collaboration among different agencies has been identified major limitation for converting this potentiality into the reality.

### INTRODUCTION

Thousands of tourists from all over the world travel to different places to enjoy natural and cultural attractions. Tourism is one of the economic sectors growing fast throughout the globe. It is also identified as the major sector having competitive advantage in Nepal (NTIS, 2016). This sector has contributed nearly 6.5 % of total employment in the Nepal (WTTC, 2022). Nepal is regarded as

an exclusive tourist destination due to its unmatched natural, biological and cultural diversity. More than one million foreign tourists visited Nepal in 2019 and, of these visitors, 35.89% visited national parks and wildlife reserves (MoCTC, 2020). Tourism policy- 2016 has identified ecotourism as one of the major sectors for tourism promotion in Nepal (MoCTC, 2017).

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Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visit to undisturbed natural areas for enjoyment and appreciation of nature that promotes conservation with low visitors' impacts and active socio-economic involvement of local population (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Ecotourism promotes sustainable tourism which focuses on biodiversity conservation, environmental protection, poverty alleviation and economic development (Duff, 2008; KC et al., 2015; KC, 2016). Emphasizing ecological resource integrity, environmental conservation, community development, and economic growth, it places importance on maintaining a low-impact and non-consumptive utilization of local resources (Stem et al., 2003).

The international ecotourism society has defined ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015). The idea that nature-based tourism could contribute social and environmental benefits emerged in the late 1980s and became virtually a phenomenon in the 1990s. It has traditionally been accepted as a way to secure environmental conservation and uplift the living standard of marginalized communities in developing countries (Korosi, 2013). Ecotourism is an important segment of sustainable tourism that focuses on preserving and protecting the natural system, wildlife conservation, environmental protection, poverty alleviation and economic development.

Forest Act, 2019 has also provisioned the development of ecotourism in community forest. According to the forest act, the users' group may, upon following the procedures as prescribed, operate such forest enterprise and eco-tourism programs as specified by the approved work plan on its own or in partnership with local level or organization or the private sector or cooperatives (GoN, 2019). To make ecotourism programs easier for the user groups inside community forest,

Department of Forest, Government of Nepal has approved "Work Procedure for Ecotourism Development within Community Forest, 2017" (DoF, 2017).

Ecotourism can provide considerable benefits in a sustainable manner to the local people once the area is explored out to the tourists; however, every community forest could not be developed as ecotourism destination. To be an ecotourism destination, an area has to be a unique attraction with socio-cultural acceptance and contribute to conservation from tourism activities. Though some studies have initiated analysing potentiality of ecotourism destinations in the country, most of them have been confined to national parks and wildlife reserves and buffer zones (Aryal & Maharjan, 2018; Ojha, 2020; Neupane et al., 2021; KC et al., 2021). Very limited studies have been found focussed- on community forest. It is, therefore, important to analyse ecotourism potential through analysis of environmental attractions and systematic assessment of the people's (both visitors and hosts) perception of different components of ecotourism. So, this study was focused on Betana Simsar Community Forest (CF), Belbari, Morang, a prime hotspot of ecotourism in Eastern Nepal. This study was also carried out to learn about the socio-economic condition of the users, document the various facilities and service concerning tourism in the study area, explore users' perception of ecotourism development in the community forest and discover the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in promotion and development of tourism.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Study area**

The study was conducted in Betana Simsar Community Forest User Group, which lies in Belbari Municipality of Morang district, Koshi Province, Nepal. This community forest is located 16 km east from Itahari and covers an area of 174.91 hector (ha). It harbours about 18,945 households and is

surrounded by Devithan Community Forest and East-West Highway in the east; Amana Sisauli Community Forest, Basnet Religious Forest in the west and Amana Sisauli CF and road in the south (BCFUG, 2016). The landscape of the CF comprises mixed natural forest of lowland (altitude 113 msl) and wetland covering 5.5 ha. The wetland depth varies from 0.5 - 1.5m during dry season to 1 - 2.5m during monsoon season (Bhetwal, 2020).

*Shorea robusta* (Sal), *Lagerstromia parviflora* (Bot Dhayaro), *Terminalia tomentosa* (Asna) are the major tree species found in the forest. Over 120 species of birds including resident and migratory and more than 30 mammals including *Ursus americanus* (Black Bear), *Sus scrofa* (Wild Boar) and *Axis axis* (Spotted deer) have been recorded in the area (Pokharel, 2015).

The ecotourism activity in the study area was started before it was handed over as community forest to the user groups. The mesmerizing view of Betana wetland, its biodiversity and the nearby forest attract local people. So, Betana Simsar Conservation Committee was formed in 2000 (2057 B.S.) to run this place as a tourist area and utilize the attraction. However, the committee faced legal issues from the division forest office for construction of any infrastructure in the area as forest act restricted any construction work inside the forest area (HMG, 1993). After years of struggle, the area was handed over as a community forest in 2016 and the responsibility of management of the forest including ecotourism activities has been borne by the Betana Community Forest User Group since July, 2016 (BCFUG, 2016).

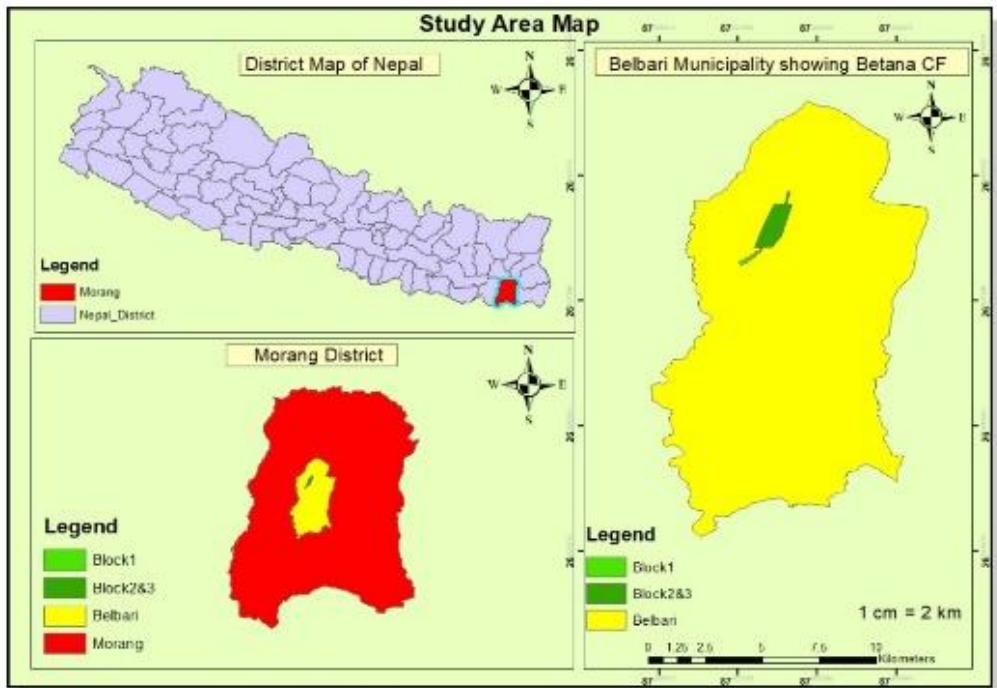


Figure 1: Map showing study area

### Sampling design and data collection

The field study was carried out from September to December, 2021. Due to the smaller number of households in the study area (buffer region of 1 km), 100 % households (n=53) were surveyed using questionnaire. Most of the visitors were from nearby district including Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari; so the visitors from these districts were also included in the survey. A total of 96 tourists visiting in the area during the time of study were surveyed to know the visitors' satisfaction level and their preferred activities. Apart from the household as well as visitor survey, key informants' interview (n=10) with government officials, boat operators, and fisherman were also conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire. Household survey was carried out to acquire relatively detailed information on local people's perception of ecotourism, socio-economic status of the users, biophysical situation of the site, opportunities and problems of ecotourism. Information related to the problems and management activities, tourist attraction centres, income and employment opportunities from ecotourism activities, issues and constraints of ecotourism were focused in key informants survey. Among the total respondents, nearly

half (47%) were female. More than 50% respondents represented ethnic communities including Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Tharu and Magars. Similarly, 49 % respondents were from the productive age group (15 to 60 years) and more than half of them had secondary level of education. Regarding occupation of the respondents, 30% had agriculture as their primary occupation followed by business (26%) and employment (23%) in different government and non-governmental organizations. Table 1 shows the detail about the selected respondents.

### Data analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed with the help of statistical package MS Excel and SPSS version 22. People's perception and visitors' satisfaction were assessed with the use of 3- point Likert scale. Weighted mean was used to determine the ranking of different people's Perception on Ecotourism Development.

$$\text{Weighted Mean} = \frac{\{(x_1 \times w_1) + (x_2 \times w_2) + \dots + (x_n \times w_n)\}}{\text{total respondents}} \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

Where, w= weight of ranked position; n=no. of choice, x represents response count for answer choice.

**Table 1: Socio-economic status of respondents**

S.N.	Socio-economic variables	Results
1.	Gender	Male 53% & Female 47%
2.	Ethnicity	Brahmin (20%), Rai (19%), Chhetri (17%), Limbu (13%), Tamang (9%), Tharu (8%), Dalit (6%), Magar (4%) and others (4%).
3.	Age-group	Young aged (<18 years (34%), Middle aged (18-60 years=49%) and Old-aged (>60+yrs)17%
4.	Education	Illiterate (17%), Primary level (19%), Secondary level (55%), and Higher education (10%)
5.	Occupation	Agriculture 30%, Business 26%, employee 23%, Students 15% & others 6%

**RESULTS**

Existing features/attractions and activities for ecotourism in Betana Wetland

Betana Simsar is one of the beautiful community forests in eastern Nepal with rich natural and cultural resources. There are numerous flora and fauna that are attractions for tourists. All three Ecological, Socio-cultural and Economical attractions were observed in the study area.

**Ecological attractions**

The study area is a wetland with beautiful scenario of lake and forest rich in biodiversity. They were found operating a mini zoo where rescued wild animals including Spotted deer, Python, Eagle, Vulture, Wild cat and Owl were kept. Nature walks, wetland visit, boating, picnic spot, walking trails and wild animals kept in the mini zoo were major attractions for the visitors.

**Socio-cultural attractions**

Cultural shows, awareness on environment conservation, training, hospitality, attractive wooden and concrete bridges, fences, foot-trails, infrastructure development, like sanitary toilets, seminar hall, were found available for the promotion of ecotourism activities in the area.

**Economical attractions**

The management committee generates enough revenue for development and management of Betana Simsar area and provides wages/salary to the workers such as security guard and gardener. The income is also spent on infrastructure construction, social development, women and disadvantaged groups’ empowerment programs, scholarship to the local students, etc. The locals were seen engaged in income generation through home-stays/hotels, parking of vehicles, charging for picnic spot, boating, employment opportunities in the wetland, selling of local and hand-made materials.

The major activities and services available in the in Betana Simsar Community Forest are tabulated in table 2.

**Table 2: Ecotourism attraction and services available in the study area**

S. N.	Sector	Attraction/Activities
1.		Natural scenery of Wetland/Lake with spiritual peace
2.	Ecological	Rescued animals’ exhibition (spotted deer, python, eagle, vulture, wild cat, owl, wild rat, rabbit etc)
3.		Rich biodiversity (Birds, Fishes, Turtles, flora, fauna)
4.		Picnic Spot
5.		Boating
6.		Bird watching
7.	Economic	Research related to biodiversity
8.		Attractive wooden and concrete bridges, fences, foot-trails
9.	Sociocultural	Hospitality to the visitors
10.		Homestay

**Revenue generation from tourists**

The community forest collects revenue from the visitors enough for management and development of wetland. The entry fee received from the visitors was the major share of the community forest. Annually, more than 100 thousand people visit the community forest for their recreational purpose. The visitors have to pay the entry fee and also other service charges including boating, vehicles parking and use of picnic spot. Entry fee covers more than 80% of the total revenue followed by use of picnic spot (8.9%) and boating (7.8 %). Small amount of income was also received from the parking of the vehicles. The community forest is being developed as one of the attractive

destinations for picnic spot in eastern Nepal particularly Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari districts. From October, 2021 to February, 2022, particularly on public holiday, about 10,000 individuals from 500 different picnic groups had visited the area for picnic purpose (Source: In-charge of Betana Simsar). The income generated from visitors in the year, 2021/22 has been presented in table 3.

Since Betana Simsar CF is a conserved CF where timber and other forest products cannot be extracted and sold outside, most of the income generated from the tourism activities has been invested for conservation, development and maintenance of the site. Some amount of fund was being invested for maintenance of the picnic spot and establishment of the hoarding board in different areas to provide information to the visitors. The amount has been invested to provide year-round employment to 8 people as direct employment (boat sailor, gardener, ticket persons and guards) and also to support social and cultural development by organising awareness and training programs, providing scholarships to the capable and deserving students.

### People's perception of ecotourism

Individuals' perception of ecotourism was gauged by having respondents evaluate 17 distinct statements based on their personal

experiences. The findings yielded a diverse array of responses. Majority of respondents expressed agreement with statements concerning the existing products and services, as well as the positive impact of ecotourism on both local livelihoods and the conservation of biological and cultural diversity within the area. However, a point of contention arose as respondents revealed dissatisfaction with perceived inadequacies in biodiversity conservation efforts, particularly pertaining to the management of rescued animals in the locally initiated mini-zoo.

Among the respondents, a prevalent recognition of ecotourism's manifold benefits for local population was evident. Agreement was predominant concerning statements linked to ecotourism promotion. In contrast, a sense of neutrality emerged regarding statements related to the distribution of ecotourism benefits for socioeconomic purposes and biodiversity conservation. Similarly, coordination for the advancement of the area as an ecotourism destination elicited a neutral stance among respondents. However, the majority disagreed solely with statements suggesting negative impacts attributed to ecotourism. Respondents seemed to believe that the influx of tourists did not yield any discernible detrimental effects within the study area.

**Table 3: Income generated in FY 2021/22**

S. N.	Service/Facility	Fee (in NRs.) (a)	No. of visitors (b)	Total Income (a*b) (NRs.)
1.	Entry Fee	30	1,21,500	36,45,000
2.	Parking of Bike	10	2500	25,000
3.	Parking of Car/Van	50	1000	50,000
4.	Boating (Normal)	150	1400	2,10,000
5.	Boating (Special)	200	700	1,40,000
6.	Picnic Spot Fee	600	500	3,00,000
7.	Picnic Ticket Fee	10	10,000	1,00,000
Total in Words: Forty-four lakh seventy thousand only /-				44,70,000 /-

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**Table 4: People's Perception of ecotourism development**

S. N	Statement	Response (%)			Weighted Mean
		Agree	Neutral	Disagree	
A. Statement related to environmental factor					
1.	Eco-tourism in the area has promoted the conservation of environment.	72	19	9	2.62 (3)
2.	The biodiversity and other natural/cultural features were well maintained for sustainable use.	81	15	4	2.77 (3)
3.	The hidden natural/cultural/religious features of the area have been explored.	70	17	13	2.56 (3)
B. Statement related to economic factor					
4.	Eco-tourism has supported the local livelihood.	91	9	0	2.90 (3)
5.	Opportunities to promote local and cottage enterprises	15	81	4	2.11 (2)
6.	Income from tourism was used for community development.	25	58	17	2.07 (2)
7.	Poor and disadvantaged groups were encouraged and involved.	19	51	30	1.88 (2)
C. Statement related to socio-cultural factor					
8.	The culture and tradition of the area was being conserved.	62	17	21	2.41 (2)
9.	Good hospitality was being provided to visitors.	73	21	6	2.68 (3)
10.	Women were empowered and encouraged.	53	36	11	2.41(2)
D. Other factor					
11.	The area was potential to promote ecotourism.	83	17	0	2.83 (3)
12.	The village was maintained as an ideal village to attract tourists.	13	36	51	1.62 (2)
13.	There was good support from private / government organizations for ecotourism.	21	74	5	2.15 (2)
14.	There was no negative impact of eco-tourism.	7	23	70	1.37 (1)
15.	There was sound social, political condition.	13	78	9	2.03 (2)
16.	The status of entry point was good.	87	13	0	2.87 (3)
17.	There was year-round facility for transportation.	96	4	0	2.96 (3)

Interestingly, respondents' perceptions exhibited slight variations influenced by their socio-economic backgrounds and educational statuses. Among those who agreed with statements related to ecotourism development, a clear trend emerged. This was particularly prominent among male, young and middle-aged individuals, the literate, and those with stable economic status. It was found that the statement for ecotourism development was mostly agreed by the male, young and middle-aged group, literate, and economically well-off respondents because these groups seemed to possess a more comprehensive understanding and awareness regarding the significance of ecotourism development.

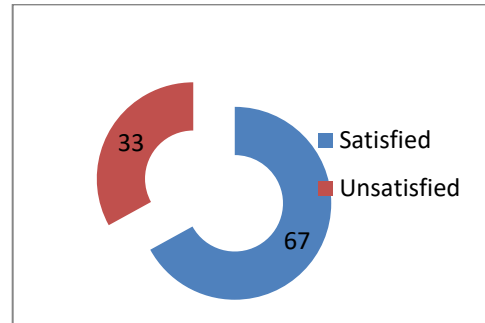
For a comprehensive overview, Table 4 provides insights into the distribution of responses to each statement and the corresponding weighted mean scores.

The table shows that people have strong perception of support from the ecotourism for conservation of resources as environmental factors. Similarly, the respondents had neutral views on economic factors as well as contribution to socio-cultural aspects from ecotourism development in the area. The respondents had mixed responses to other factors. Respondents were found aware of the possible negative impacts of tourism on the area. Respondents were found agreed on available physical facilities particularly to road access and status of entry point. The respondents believed that there was not good coordination among the private and government organizations for further development of the area for ecotourism destination.

### Visitors' satisfaction

The visitors surveyed mostly represented the residents of nearby districts (Morang, Jhapa, Sunsari). Very few of them were from other distant districts. As per the survey, 68 % were frequent visitors and remaining 32% were first time visitors of the site. Similarly, 85% of the surveyed had visited the area with their

family and friends and only 15 % were visited alone.



**Figure 2: Satisfaction of the visitors**

The survey showed that the area was becoming popular for visiting the site with their family and the friends. The result of questionnaire survey with the visitors shows that 67% of the respondents were satisfied with the available facilities and natural beauty of the area where 33% were not found fully satisfied as much as their expectation before visiting the site. The major dissatisfaction of the visitors was with poor road condition from the highway and facilities available in the area including insufficient information about the community forest particularly the key features of the wetlands.

### Issues and problems of ecotourism development

Visitors have identified major eight issues in the area including garbage disposal, improper management of rescued animals, poor condition of wooden infrastructure and lack of drinking water. Both visitors and local residents had identified unavailability of children's park as a major issue since the visitors visit the site with their families. Similarly, improper garbage disposal was identified the second issue followed by insufficient information board and awareness raising activities. Poor management of rescued animals and bad conditions of the wooden infrastructure were other identified issues by the visitors (Table 5).



**Table 5: Issues and problems identified by visitors**

S.N.	Issues/Problems	Response
1.	Lack of children’s park	20%
2.	Improper garbage disposal	18%
3.	Lack of information board and awareness on conservation	14%
4.	Improper management of rescued animals in mini-zoo	12%
5.	Bad condition of wooden infrastructure	12%
6.	Unmanaged invasive species	8%
7.	Lack of drinking water inside park	4 %
8.	Unavailability of swimming area, lack of proper toilets and quality and quantity home-stays and hotels-lodges, etc.	12%

**Stakeholders coordination**

The area had initially started ecotourism activities before the handover of the area as community forest. Many stakeholders were found involved in the development of the area as ecotourism site; however, lack of coordination and unclear responsibilities

were observed by different stakeholders for development of ecotourism activities in the Betana Sinsar Community Forest. During the household survey and key informants’ interviews, the following were identified as major roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders and major gaps identified (Table 6).

**Table 6: Roles and responsibility of the organization to promote ecotourism**

Institutions	Major role expected	Existing role	Gap
Community forest user group	Proper management of CF including wetland as per the management plan; equitable benefit sharing of revenue.	Unbalanced sharing of benefits	Weak governance; Delay in General Meeting
Division forest office	Awareness raising; capacity building and good governance related training; creation of sense of ownership; and making users responsible towards conservation	Facilitator; technical support	Coordination with the user group; Preparation of plan in consideration of ecotourism and clear benefit sharing scheme.
Local government	Coordination; promotion; advertisement; increasing people’s participation; financial and political support; establishment of ecotourism-based industries	Financial support with coordination of user group	Formulation of local law based on ecotourism; Political hurdles; Time to time monitoring and feedback
Eco-tourism management committee	Proper counselling of user group on ecotourism with concrete suggestions to improve ecotourism	Conducting various activities in tourism sector	Supportive legal institution is inadequate

Tourism management committee has been envisioned under the chairmanship of the head of the community forest users committee or nominated by him/her following the government approved working procedure for promotion of ecotourism in community forest (DoF, 2017) for the overall co-ordination among different stakeholders of local, provincial and federal agencies. Other members could be the representatives from sub-division forest office, wards of the municipality and representative from chamber of commerce and industries. Such a committee was envisioned in the working procedure, but no such committee was found functional in the area. Most of the decision regarding revenue collection and distribution were taken by the community forest user group without coordination with local government and private sector. Not any strategic plan for the promotion of ecotourism in the area was observed. Most of the activities were implemented as per the annual plan of community forest user group.

## DISCUSSION

Ecotourism plays a crucial role in natural resource and biodiversity conservation (Amati, 2013; Cao et al., 2014), which was also observed in the Betana Simsar area. The main environmental components supported by the ecotourism activities were conservation of forest, management of rescued animals and increasing awareness level of the local inhabitants as well as visitors. It resembled the findings of Cheung and Jim (2014) and Khatri-Chhetri et al. (2015). The facts that the community forest had restricted the harvesting of timber products and management cost of community forest was totally covered by the revenue generated by tourism activities proved that ecotourism had positive contribution to biodiversity conservation in Betana Simsar area.

Ecotourism has huge potential to generate direct and indirect community benefits from conservation activities (Ormsby & Mannle,

2006; Khatri-Chhetri et al., 2015). This study has shown that ecotourism activities generated employment at local level. More than 90 % of the respondents had agreed on the statement that ecotourism activities had supported local livelihoods. The fact is also supported by the findings that eight people had got direct employment in community forest as boat sailor, gardener and ticket persons.

The success of tourism development depends on the participation of the local people and also the satisfaction of the visitors (Bhuiyan & Darda, 2023). This study has shown that local people had positive perception of the different statements. Similarly, more than two third of the visitors were found satisfied with the facilities and services available and interested to revisit the site with their friends and families. Trang (2015) has identified that natural experiences are attracting tourists to an ecotourism site. We also found that the natural scenery and rich biodiversity of the area were major attraction for visitors. KC (2017) has identified that ecotourism could play a great role in poverty alleviation, rural development, agricultural transformation, community enrichment and social empowerment of women in Nepal. We have found mixed perception of the results on major achievements. Moghavvemi et al. (2017) argued that community participation in tourism development and planning is crucial for their positive perception. The study has shown that both local people and the visitors had high level of satisfaction in the study area regarding the facilities available and the support to the local livelihoods. Another study by Moghavvemi et al. (2020) in Malaysia has outlined that several factors influence the local communities to contribute to tourism development including a sense of ownership, decision-making opportunities, creating awareness, and participation in the management process. We found in this study that none of the organizations in the study area had provided strong financial support for the promotion of the ecotourism till date;

however, all the stakeholders were found positive towards the promotion of ecotourism. The result has shown encouraging potentialities of this area for sustainable development of ecotourism activities once it gets support from the stakeholders; but there was lack of stakeholder coordination in the area. Betana Sinsar Conservation Committee, which was initiated for ecotourism promotion had faced the legal issue imposed by the division forest office as the area was lies inside the forest area. As a result, the committee was dissolved after the area was handed over as a community forest and tourism development committee was formed in the leadership of the chairperson of the community forest user group. Due to the poor functioning of the tourism development committee, the committee was unable to attract support from local government for the ecotourism promotion activities. The stakeholders could provide other support (technical, linkage work, moral support) and were keenly interested to promote ecotourism in sustainable manner; however, such coordination was found lacking in the area

Kipper (2013) argued that ecotourism destination should be environmentally sensitive and directly involve environmental phenomena including bird watching, trekking study about flora and fauna. This study explored that the visitors were much interested in bird watching, nature walk and research on biodiversity including flora and fauna with high priority. This has supported that both visitors and forest users were found keenly interested in the conservation of natural beauty and biodiversity and proper waste disposal. Poor drinking water facility, old infrastructure, improper management of rescued animals and unmanaged picnic spot were some of the major limitations identified in the area. Besides, lack of leadership, awareness and proper knowledge of the term ecotourism were other limitations identified in the study area. The stakeholders felt that it was the responsibility of local people, tourists themselves and guides to follow the code of

conduct for the sustainability of ecotourism in the study area. Nault and Stapleton (2011) have revealed through their study in Mongolia that ecotourism ensures local participation to implement tourism regulations with other stakeholders. Thus, coordination among stakeholders for providing required training as well as awareness raising has been identified as a required activity for better management of the ecotourism in the area.

## CONCLUSION

This article focuses on the possibilities and issues of ecotourism development and people's perception of ecotourism in the study area. People's perception regarding the facilities and services concerning tourism in the study area was found positive for further promotion of tourism in the area. Apart from the existing features and activities, lots of opportunities were found for promotion of ecotourism through development of view tower, establishment of cultural museums, children park and camping site. However, proper communication and coordination among the stakeholders were the major limiting factors for further promotion. Hence, it is recommended that the management officials of Betana Sinsar Community Forest, Sub-divisional Forest Office, Belbari and Divisional Office, Morang and Tourism Board of Nepal could make the integrated ecotourism development plan for future planning.

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