
POTENTIAL OF ECOTOURISM IN NEPAL

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Abstract

Ecotourism is a new approach in modern tourism. Sustainable tourism, green tourism, rural tourism, community-based tourism are the relative terms for ecotourism which have been emerged before 30 years. The potential of ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development which was recognized during the Earth Summit in 1992 when sustainable tourism was considered as an environment friendly economic activity.

Ecotourism is a burning issue and one of the fastest growing sectors in the world tourism industry. In Nepalese perspective tourism is in flux and gradually heading towards mass tourism. So it is the right time to implement the principles of ecotourism for its sustainability. Nepal Tourism Policy 2009 and Vision 2020 identify ecotourism as the key vehicle for sustainable tourism. Nepal government has been focusing it since long. Proper implementation of ecotourism principles can be very beneficial in Nepalese industry to achieve the desired goal.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, Conservation, Sustainable tourism, TRPAP projects*

Background

People say Tourism is evolved from the west and is the western concept. Western scholar theorizes it through Sunlust and Wanderlust tourism but it is not new to the east and not new to Nepal too. In Sanskrit literature there is found different terms for tourism derived from the root *atan*, which means leaving home for some time to other places (Negi, 1982). They had different types of tourism known as *paryatan* (going out for pleasure and a knowledge), *deshatan* (going to the places of religious importance) *tirthantan* (going for religious purpose) etc. (Kunwar, 2012).

Till 1950 Nepal was isolated from international community in terms of tourism because of closed door Rana Policy. After the popular democratic movement of 1950-51 Nepal became liberated and changes were witnessed in the country in every corner of life. Nepal was opened for the visitors (Ojha, 2018). Before 1950's only handful tourist visited Nepal under strict permission of Rana regime. Now, tourism has been recognized as a highly paying industry and very important source of foreign earning, has been priorities by the government.

Ecotourism in Himalayan country like Nepal has its advantages as well as disadvantages. If it is implemented properly, it can provide income to poor communities, giving them an economic stake in protecting the environment. It can raise global awareness, foster Cultural exchanges, increases employment opportunities and infrastructural growth. Tourism income may help to conserve natural landscape, wildlife and cultural heritages. If it is not monitored properly, it can damage the ecology and environment because of the mass tourism. It also affects the social economic and cultural life of the hosts. So, it is the right time for Nepal to discuss the merit and

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demerit as well as the potentiality of ecotourism in the changing context. Nepal Tourism Policy 2009 and Vision 2020 identify ecotourism as the key vehicle for sustainable tourism. Though Nepal government has priorities it in its strategies but concrete research hasn't been done for its implication. So it is the right time to discuss on its potentiality as feedback for policy makers and future research.

Statement of the Problem

Nepal is a homeland for international visitors. The diversity in Nepal cannot be found elsewhere in the world. The lowest point in Nepal is 59 meter above sea level in Terai region while the highest point is Everest, 8848 meter above the sea level; the two points are in a straight line only 200 k.m. apart. Besides, homely environment, friendly people, natural beauty, national heritages, flora and fauna are the other products of Nepalese tourism Industry. Eco- tourism has a high potential value and a tool for sustainable tourism development. Nepal can be benefited from the concept of eco-tourism which has high potential in the industry.

Some national and international articles tried to address on different aspects of ecotourism and its potentiality but they don't cover the overall aspects of ecotourism. This article intends to identify some unidentified problems on potentiality of ecotourism in Nepal.

Research Question

So many such problems have been raised by so many researchers listed in review of literature. There are some areas which are not addressed that are being focused by this research. The research tries to answer following question,

1. Why ecotourism is potential in Nepalese tourism industry?
2. How ecotourism has been practicing in Nepal?

Objective of the study

In order to present the study two main objectives were selected:

1. To identify the potentiality of ecotourism in Nepalese tourism industry.
2. To explore the ecotourism practice in Nepal.

Review of the Literature

Ecotourism is defined as the science of the relationships between organism and environment. The definitions about ecotourism reported in the Travel Industry Association of America's study, Tourism and the Environment are as follows:

- Ecotourism is environmentally friendly travel.
- Ecotourism is a tool for conservation.
- Ecotourism is ecologically responsible tourism (Kunwar, 2012).

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people". Wight (1994) notes that "There seem to be two prevailing views of ecotourism: one envisages that public interest in the environment may be used to market a product the other sees that this same interest may be used to conserve the resources upon which this product is based. These views need not be mutually exclusive".

Martha Honey (1998) explains in her book, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*, Second Edition: *Who Owns Paradise?*: "Ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (often) small scale. It helps educate the traveller; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and human rights."

Ceballos-Lascurain (1990) provided most comprehensive definition. He said, we may define ecotourism as that segment of tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objectives of admiring, studying and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural features found in these areas.

These literatures are helpful to identify research problems and to generate the ideas. It gives an idea on research and support to analyze the present situation of research on eco-tourism. It is also helpful to generate research tools for further study.

Some national and international articles, books and reports tried to address the different aspects of ecotourism but they don't cover the overall aspects of ecotourism as well as its potentiality. These literatures don't support the raised research questions but it is partially helpful to fulfill theoretical aspects of ecotourism. This article intends to identify some unidentified problems on potentiality of ecotourism in Nepal. Hence, I have reviewed the available literature to explore the research problem.

Methodology

This article is based upon a qualitative analysis. Descriptive, analytical as well as informative method has been used in this research. Focus group discussions (FGD) were done to collect the first hand information on the topic. For more general discussions, focused group discussions (FGD) have been organized in the entire above mentioned topic. Three separate focused group discussion have been organized with tourism entrepreneurs, tourism experts and tourism organization leaders. For FGD mainly the discussion method was used. Both formal and informal discussion was held with the concern stake holders. For the purpose of FGD, resource persons were selected as respondents from TAAN, TGAN and VITOF- the professional organizations in tourism industry.

This research consists of present context data but some historical references are cited in the appropriate places. Basic source of information for this research is primary as well as secondary information. Relevant books, journal articles and government publications have been used properly. All the information collected has been classified, summarized, analyzed and some reflection will be made for this research.

This study is limited to historical study on the potentiality of eco-tourism. It emphasizes the activities in Nepal in general. This study doesn't cover the social, political, economic and other aspects of eco-tourism.

Discussion

Tourism is in flux. International tourist arrivals in Europe reached 1.4 billion in 2018 which is an 6% increment than 2017. Asia and the Pacific recorded 343 million international tourist arrivals in 2018. Arrivals in South Asia grew 5%, in South-East Asia 7% and in Oceania 3%. Arrivals to North-East Asia increased by 3%. 217 million international tourists visited The America in 2018 whereas 67 million tourists visited Africa in 2018. The Middle East increased by 10% in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019). 134 million Chinese tourists visited all over the world in 2018 and they spent about \$ 120 billion USD (<http://www.globaltimes.cn>, 2019). In 2017, 2.5 million Chinese tourist visited Tibet. An average expense of the Chinese tourist is 100 thousand per person (Thapa, 2018) which is encouraging figure in tourism industry. International tourist arrivals (worldwide) reached 1.5 billion. The growth of tourism in recent years confirms that the sector is today one of the most powerful drivers of economic growth and development (UNWTO, 2019).

The Travel & Tourism sector is expected to grow faster than the wider economy and many other industries over the next decade. It is anticipated to support over 370 million jobs by 2026.

International Tourist Trend

Tourism has been recognized as an important sector of the global economy. International tourist arrivals (worldwide) grew 4% in 2019 to reach 1.5 billion. 2019 was another year of strong growth, although slower compared to the exceptional rates of 2017 (+6%) and 2018 (+6%). Demand was slower mainly in advanced economies and particularly in Europe. Uncertainty surrounding Brexit, geopolitical and trade tensions, and the global economic slowdown, weighed on growth. 2019 was also the year of major shifts in the sector with the collapse of Thomas Cook and of several low-cost airlines in Europe and Jet air in India. All regions enjoyed an increase in arrivals. The Middle East (+8%) led growth, followed by Asia and the Pacific (+5%). International arrivals in Europe and Africa (both +4%) increased in line with the world average, while the Americas saw growth of 2%. 134 million Chinese tourists visited all over the world in 2018 and they spent about \$ 120 billion USD (<http://www.globaltimes.cn>, 2019). The growth of tourism in recent years confirms that the industry is one of the most powerful drivers of economic growth and development (UNWTO, 2019).

Based on current trends, economic prospects and the UNWTO Confidence Index, UNWTO forecasts a growth of 3% to 4% in international tourist arrivals worldwide in 2020 (World tourism barometer : January, 2020).

Tourist Trend in Nepal

Nepal Tourism Policy 2009 identifies tourism sector as an important vehicle for economic and social development. Vision 2020 focuses tourist arrival to two million and tourism related employment to one million by 2020.

Trend of tourist arrival was in increased order up to 2012 which declined thereafter. Year 2015 seems most shocking having decrease by 32 percent compared to 2014 (Nepal Tourism Statics: 2016). After 2015 it gradually geared up. According to the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) totally 969,287 tourists visited Nepal via air and 203,785 tourists came via land in 2017. The tourism sector of Nepal enjoyed a phenomenal growth in international tourist arrivals to Nepal in 2018. The consistent and upward momentum continued throughout the year and the annual arrival figures have reached well above the one million mark. According to the Immigration Department (and its offices) 969,287 international visitors came by air and 203,785 came overland. In aggregate, a total of 1,173,072 visitors visited Nepal in 2018, a cumulative increase of 24.77% over the same period in 2017. The overall arrivals from SAARC countries registered a speedy growth of 85 % in 2019. 1.5 million tourist visited Nepal in 2019. Nepal received 209611 Indian tourists and 169543 Chinese tourists from China in 2019. Other include United States- 93196, United Kingdom- 61139, Sri Lanka- 55869, France- 30,644, South Korea- 29679, Spain- 19057 and so on (Department of Immigration, 2019)

Nepal tourism began its 2019 journey on a positive note where 2020 is not encouraging. Nepal has already started celebrating 2020 as tourism year but because of Corona led problem tourism has unexpectedly slow down. Most of the reservation has been cancelled. Government of Nepal has post ponded the most awaited Visit Nepal 2020 programme.

Tourist Arrival in Nepal

Indicators	2016	2017	2018
Tourist Arrival by			
Air	572563	760577	969287
Land	180439	179641	203785
Total	753002	940218	1173072
Sex			
Male	399091	509598	624928
Female	353911	430620	548144
Top Five Country in Nepalese Tourism			
Rank 1	India	India	India
Rank 2	China	China	China
Rank 3	Sri Lanka	USA	USA
Rank 4	USA	United Kingdom	Srilanka
Rank 5	United Kingdom	Sri Lanka	United Kingdom

(Source-Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2019. P.3)

Conceptual Frame work

Principles of Ecotourism

Ecotourism comprises a number of interrelated components. There are five key principles. They are-

1. Nature Based

Ecotourism is based on the natural environment with a focus on its biological, physical and cultural features. The conservation of the natural resources is essential to the planning, development and management of ecotourism.

2. Ecologically Sustainable

Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism undertaken in a natural setting. The challenge to ecotourism in any country or region is to develop its tourism capacity and the quality of its products without affecting the environment.

3. Environmentally Educative

The educative characteristic of ecotourism is a key element which distinguishes it from other forms of nature-based tourism. Environmental education and interpretation are important tools in creating an enjoyable and meaningful experience. Ecotourism attracts people who wish to interact with the environment in order to develop their knowledge, awareness and appreciation of it. Ecotourism education can influence tourist, community and industry behavior and assist in the longer-term sustainability of tourist activity in natural areas.

4. Locally Beneficial

The involvement of local communities not only benefits the community and the environment but also improves the quality of the tourist experience. Ecotourism generates income for resource conservation management in addition to social and cultural benefits. The contribution may be financial with a part of the cost of the tour helping to subsidize a conservation project.

5. Tourist Satisfaction

Satisfaction of visitors with the ecotourism experience is essential to long term viability of the ecotourism industry. Information provided about ecotourism opportunities should accurately represent the opportunities offered at particular ecotourism destinations. The ecotourism experiences match the realistic expectations of the visitors.

The first characteristics are considered as ecotourism product while the two characteristics are desirable for all forms of tourism (Murgan: 2006)

Styles of Ecotourism

In planning and management of ecotourism it is important to know the different style of ecotourism.

Mainly they are-

1. Frontier Ecotourism

Frontier ecotourism involves individuals or small groups of generally ten or less people who utilize non-motorized forms of transport to visit relatively remote and lightly used natural areas. Visitors are generally self-reliant and have few demands for supporting services and infrastructure such as trekkers and rafters.

2. Small Group Ecotourism

This type of ecotourism involves individuals or relatively small groups who utilize motorized forms of transport vehicle to visit areas of special interest which are generally 'off beat'.

3. Popular Ecotourism

This type of ecotourism involves the transportation of large numbers of visitors to, through or across a country's best known and most popular natural attractions. It relies on high capacity mechanized forms of transport such as buses. There are low requirements for self-reliance and the degree of challenge is generally low. There may be substantial requirements for supporting infrastructure and services. This style of ecotourism is available to all visitors irrespective of age or physical capacity (Murgan 2006).

Eco-tourism in Nepal

It is hard to say exactly when ecotourism had started in Nepal. But it is generally believed that the importance and necessity of ecotourism was realized significantly with the enactment of the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act in 1973 and establishment of various natural Protected Areas in the hope of conservation of ecosystem and development in community and other sector in an integrated way for sustainable development of Tourism.

With an aim of poverty alleviation through sustainable tourism, the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP) is an initiative of the Nepal Government toward eco-tourism in Nepal with technical and financial support from various international development agencies and non-government organizations. It is believed to contribute to the poverty alleviation objective of the government through sustainable tourism development that is pro-poor, pro-environment, pro-rural communities and pro-women, making the benefits of tourism reach grass-roots level in the specific programme sites.

Economy model based on eco-tourism is the only model that still shown constant improvement. Basic tourism infrastructure and facilities such as clean drinking water, sanitation, transportation system and roadways are fundamentals to attract more tourists for sustainable tourism development in Nepal. If basic infrastructures and facilities are provided into the country, the flow

of tourists also increases. If the number increases, the economy of the local stakeholder will be increased, is the center idea of the programme.

Potentiality of Ecotourism in Nepalese Tourism Industry

Recent developments on the major trekking trails especially on the Annapurna and Everest region have been a serious concern to both the environmentalists and locals and for the ecotourism. Because of the increased number of tourist and teahouses in the trekking trails and unplanned road connectivity, indirectly increased the demand of wood and fuel which led deforestation as well spoilt the nature. Waste matter such as plastic materials, oxygen cylinder and so on, in the trekking trail has been increasing rapidly without the proper mechanism for disposal.

Ecotourism development requires a partnership and friendly relation between tour operators, travellers, local stake holders and the concerned government authorities. Working with a range of National and International partners Nepal have built up a wide range of Green tourism experience. (www.acrosshimalaya.com).

Therefore, ecotourism can act as an exemplar for other forms of environmentally responsible tourism promoting best practice in planning, design, management and operation. Because of geo and bio- diversity Nepal is blessed for preserving and promoting ecotourism. Hence, it has a high potential value in Nepalese tourism industry.

Conclusion

Now, ecotourism is a popular concept in modern tourism. The concept has emerged 30 years before and recognized in 1992. Many developing countries have been focusing eco-tourism as the tool for sustainable tourism development. Nepal, a diversified and highly potential country for international visitors has a high value.

The potential of ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development was recognized during the Earth Summit in 1992 when sustainable tourism was considered as an environment friendly economic activity and Nepal has introduced it in 1973 in its industry. Sustainable tourism development principle focuses on three major things- socio-economic, cultural and environmental. Eco-tourism addresses the three components of sustainable tourism

In Nepalese perspective tourism is gradually heading towards mass tourism. So it is the right time to implement the principles of ecotourism in the growing field of tourism and to discuss on its potentiality.

There is no doubt that proper use of ecotourism can be very beneficial in various aspects. Nepal is blessed with various resources for attracting tourists in different ways. These resources need to be utilized properly, and ecotourism can be the best vehicle to deliver socio-economic enhancement of remote and rural areas and also to safeguard the environment of host community. Thus it has high potentiality in Nepalese perspective.

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