Exploring Tourism Destination: A Potential of Mountain Tourism in Sudurpaschim Province

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Abstract

Exploring competitiveness of tourism destinations is very important in order to understand problems and potentials of regional tourism development and formulation of effective tourism strategies. Most of the tourists and tourism activities in Nepal are concentrated and clustered in central and north-eastern part of the country. In this context, the current paper assesses the existing status of tourism resources at provincial level and focuses on potentials and challenges in the far-western province. Three major components of tourism competitiveness as identified by Ritchie and Crouch (2003) namely, primary resources, secondary resources and tourist demand were analyzed based on 6 selected indicators and 25 variables identified by Goffi (2013). A total of 3224 sites in seven provinces were identified under core tourism resources. Core tourism is rated highest in competitiveness, while tourism policy and planning resulted a lowest rating. Bagmati has the highest score whereas Karnali has the lowest in overall competitiveness. Greater level of dispersion is found in adventure and leisure tourism resources. The study found that, though strategies like diversification and improvement of tourism products and the new area are acknowledged, specified 200 destinations under Visit Nepal 2020 don't adhere to such standards. Visit Nepal 2020 identified the least number of touristic destination in Sudurpaschim. Though tourism infrastructure and services are found to be fair in the Sudurpaschim province, while destination promotion through digital platforms is limited. Increasing repetitive visits and seasonality are major areas of concern with the lowest rating value. It is concluded that the development and promotion of adventurous and leisure activities in Sudurpaschim have potential to diversify inbuilt seasonality of other provinces and increased length of stay. Essentially, local inhabitants should be encouraged in tourism sector, who are the immediate and most important stakeholders to proliferate the competitiveness of tourism destinations.

Keywords: destination, tourism policy and planning, tourism resources, tourism services

Introduction

Nepal is a mountainous country and it embraces eight of the fourteen highest mountain peaks above 8000 meters in the world. Mountain tourism is one of the most important constituents of tourism development in Nepal which provides a means of livelihood of mountain

community. Mountain and hill region of Nepal offers adventurous and attractive natural touristic sites for activities like; mountain climbing, hiking and trekking, white river rafting, paragliding, etc. as well as cultural and heritage attractions. According to World Tourism Organization, UNWTO (2022), two hundred-thirty thousand tourists visited Nepal, generating around 238 million US dollars in the tourism sector, which corresponds to 0.71% of its the gross domestic product. These tourists came from different countries to enjoy natural/scenic beauty and local culture and tradition. Of the total tourist arrivals in 2020, 61% came for holiday/pleasure, 16 %came for trekking and mountaineering, and 12% came for pilgrimage (MoCTCA, 2022).

Sudurpaschim province (Far-West province) is one of the 7 provinces of Nepal occupying 13.22% land with spatial coverage of 19515.52 km2 (DoS, 2021). It comprises 9 districts and provides diverse tourist attractions like Suklaphanta National Park and Ghodaghodi lake in Tarai region to Api-Nampa Conservation area in mountain region. In-between lies, Khaptad National Park in hill region (Mahabharat range area) of the country. The natural landscapes, geographical landforms, and climatological environments of the region also provide distinctive perspectives and offer unique experiences. Besides, it comprises a number of important historical and cultural/religious sites of the country. However, tourist flow in this part of the country is relatively, low as compared to other provinces. It is evident from the 2019 tourist arrival data that, despite comprising three large national parks and conservation areas, only 0.1% of the total tourist visited national parks and conservation area of Sudurpaschim as compared to 77% in Gandaki province (MoCTCA, 2022).

Despite, the immense potentials of tourism development, it is not flourished to its full potential. Mountain tourism development in Sudurpaschim province, not only reduces the overcrowding and clustering of tourist and tourism activities in central and north eastern part, particularly Everest region, but also diversifies tourism destinations and opens livelihood options of mountain people of the region. However, research in this area is very limited. Measuring competitiveness of tourism destinations is very important in order to understand problems and potentials of regional tourism development and formulation of effective tourism strategies. In this context, the current study tries to assess the status of tourism resources, services including tourism product, development infrastructure, awareness and promotion and explore the competitiveness of tourist destinations in Sudurpaschim province.
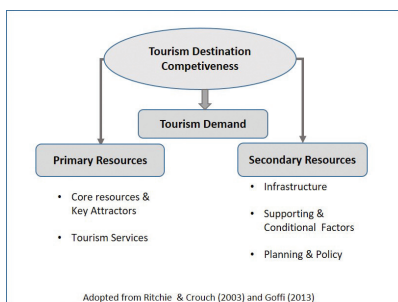
Conceptual framework

Sustainable tourism is an approach which focuses on economic, environmental and social benefits of tourism (White et al., 2006). This approach emphasizes on efficient resource management and development of competitive tourism activities by maintaining socio-cultural integrity and bio-ecological processes and diversity (Lozano-Oyola et al., 2012). Competitiveness of tourism destinations is the one of the decisive attraction factors of increased and regular tourist flow (Goffi, 2013). Competitiveness, in recent literatures is more linked to sustainability aspect (environmental, social and local economic benefit) of tourism destination (Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Artal-Tur & Kozak, 2015) besides tourist expectations, satisfaction and demand potential (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016; Dwyer & Chulwon, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Nonetheless, competitiveness of the destinations is dependent on and influenced by various factors. According to Ritchie and Crouch (2003), the destination competitiveness is also determined by comparative resource endowment and competitive advantages based on resource deployment. They have identified three major

components of tourism competitiveness: i) primary resources and activities, which refer to core resources, attractors, and tourism services, ii) secondary resources and activities, which refer to infrastructure, destination management, and tourism planning and policies, and iii) tourist demand. Likewise, different methods to measure competitiveness are identified and two broad approaches applied are quantitative/deterministic and qualitative analysis based on different sets of indicators (Liu et al., 2022; Lopes et al., 2018; Cibinskiene & Snieskiene, 2015; Goffi, 2013; Enright & Newton, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). This study is based on integrated approach by adopting tourism component of Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and selected tourism destination competitiveness indicators of Goffi (2013) as presented in Figure 1.

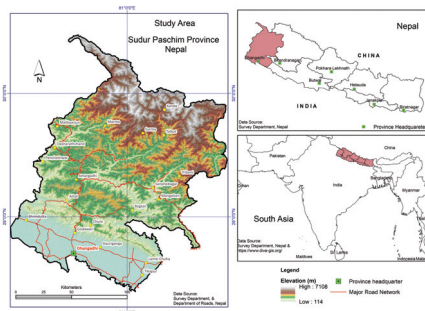**Figure 1**

Conceptual framework

Study area

Sudurpaschim Province covers 13.22% land of the country with spatial coverage of 19515.52 km2 (DoS, 2021). It comprises 9 districts extended in three ecological regions from south to north, namely, Tarai includes two districts, Hill includes four districts, and Mountain includes three districts. The capital of the province is Dhangadhi located in Tarai region of Kailali district. The elevation of the province ranges from 114 to 7108 meter from mean sea-level (Figure 2). According to the preliminary result of the national census of 2021, the total population of this province is more than 2.7 million (27,11,270), with a density of 136 persons per km2 (CBS, 2021). The inter-census annual growth rate is reported as 0.58 and the sex ratio is 90.49, which is the lowest among all 7 provinces. The Khas/Chhetri is the major ethnic/caste group and major spoken languages include Doteli followed Nepali and Tharu. *Deudanaach*, *Thadibhaka*, and *Hudkeuli*, are famous cultural dances and songs of the province.

Figure 2

Location map of the study area

Material and method

The current study is carried out at two levels based on an integrated approach using both primary and secondary data sources. At first level, spatial distribution of core primary touristic sites at provincial level, was explored using a GIS tool. GIS data layers of touristic resources (sites), infrastructure and services, and topographical features are obtained from Google Earth, Open Street Map (OSM), and topographical sheets from Survey Department of Nepal. Major touristic sites were field verified during 2021. A structured field protocol and checklist were developed and used separately for field verification of tourist sites. Relevant tourism reports from tourism department of Nepal and Tourism Board, past empirical researches, policy documents and journal articles were reviewed to assess the tourism development situation in Sudur Paschim Province. A total of 3224 sites were identified under core tourism resources. These sites were grouped into 4 categories of adventure and leisure (341 sites), cultural and religious (1296 sites), historical and archaeological (456 sites) and natural resources (1131 sites). The percentage share and coefficient of variation (CV) was calculated to measure the dispersion in site location.

At the second level, key expert informant evaluation through interview methods and informal discussions with locals were carried out. Interview with a total of 30 key expert informants, with at least 7 years of experience in and knowledge of tourism sector, was carried out which included 18 from 9 districts of Sudurpaschim (2*9) representing tourism services (accommodation and travel service local entrepreneurs, local tourism authorities), 9 district level tourism authorities and 3 national tourism experts. Informal discussion was carried out with locals and community leaders who have more than 5 years of experience in and knowledge of tourism sector besides tourists found visiting the sites at the time of field work were also consulted.

Table 1

TDC indicators and variables

Component	Indicators	Variables
Primary Resources	Core Resources & Attractors	Natural Resources
		Historical/Archaeological
		Cultural/Religious
		Adventure and Leisure Activities
		Green area and Natural Landscape
	Tourism Services	Accommodation Quality/Hospitality
		Accommodation Quantity
		Tourist oriented services/e-tourism
		Gastronomy (Typical/Local food product)
Secondary Resources	Infrastructure	Road Connection/Accessibility
		Communication
		Health
		Sanitation

	Supporting Conditional Factors	Accessibility to destinations
		Proximity of destinations
		presence of local business/entrepreneurs
		Community involvement
	Planning & Policy	Integrated approach
		Public sector Commitment
		Participatory Tourism Planning
		Promotion
Tourism Demand	Tourism Demand	Tourist awareness
		Seasonality
		Preference
		Repetitive visit

There are number of studies on tourism destination competeveness (TDC), which have identified range of indicators and variables. The major literature reviewed on indicators and variables for the current include Liu, 2022; WEF, 2022; Kunst, & Ivandić, 2021; Goffi, 2013; Dupeyras & Mac Callum, 2013; White et al., 2006; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003. However, these studies show that there is no a specific, standard group of indicators applicable to any destination and researchers has established different group of indicators and variables based on local physical and socio-cultural context as well as level of economic development, which are considered to be the most relevant features to achieve competitiveness (Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

After a review of these studies, three major components based on Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and 6 selected indicators and 25 variables based on Goffi (2013) were selected and grouped under i) primary resources, ii) secondary resources and iii) tourist demand. As depicted in Table 1, under primary resources 2 indicators, namely, core tourism resources with 5 variables and tourism services with 4 variables were selected (Table 3). Under secondary resources, 3 indicators, infrastructure, conditional factors and tourism policy and planning, each with again 4 variables were selected. Similarly, Demand indicator comprised 4 variables (tourism awareness, seasonality, preferences and revisit).

Key informants were asked to rank each variable based on their experience and knowledge. Variable ranking as adopted by Rheeders (2022) was adopted for each variables and were ranked from 1, the lowest to 5, the highest in Likert scale and aggregation of scores using weighted arithmetic mean was calculated (WEF, 2022; Cibinskiene & Snieskiene, 2015) for each indicator to analyze the competitiveness. Studies indicate that competitiveness analysis using qualitative surveys like opinion survey and quantitative measurement using statistical methods and indices together provides basis for comparative analysis. But combining data is challenging for interpretation as many of the factors and indicators are difficult to quantify, and relate to perception, and are context-specific (Dias, 2017).

Results and discussion

Primary resources

Core tourism resources and tourism services are selected as primary resource indicators.

Core tourism resources includes nature-based resources like bio-geographic, natural protected heritage, diverse ecosystems and landscape, hydrographicsites as well as anthropogenic tourist attractions like historical, cultural/religious sites, adventurous, recreational and leisure based activities (Knezevic, 2008). Nepal has numerous existing and potential core tourism resources. However, spatial distribution of these resources is varied as evident from Table 2. Bagmati and Gandaki followed by Koshi share the highest number of core resources, whereas Sudurpaschim comprises the minimum share followed by Madesh and Karnali Provinces. Adventure and leisure resources are also limited in Madesh and Sudurpaschim followed by Karnali. Among 4 categories, Sudurpaschim Province has dominant historical and archaeological resources followed by natural resources.

Table 2

Percent share of core tourism resources of Nepal

Province	Core Resources (% share)			
	Leisure/ Adventure	Cultural/ Religious	Historical/ Archaeological	Natural
Koshi	12.90	18.11	9.01	21.50
Madesh	0.88	16.85	3.74	5.84
Bagmati	36.07	21.62	19.56	20.80
Gandaki	34.02	16.18	26.81	21.33
Lumbini	9.97	13.64	21.76	10.09
Karnali	4.11	5.48	9.45	11.95
Sudurpaschim	2.05	8.12	9.67	8.50

Source: MoFA, 2019, GoogleEarth, OSM, 2021, Field 2021

The coefficient of variation, CV among 4 categories of core resources reveal that greater level of dispersion is found in adventure/leisure tourism resources (Table 3). It requires relatively higher investment in infrastructure including safety. The lowest variance value of cultural and religious resources followed by natural tourism resources indicates uniform spatial distribution over the provinces.

Table 3

Variation in core tourism resource distribution

Core Tourism Resources	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Adventure/Leisure	48.71	46.78	0.960
Cultural/Religious	899.43	331.93	0.369
Historical/Archaeological	65.00	35.43	0.545
Natural	161.429	70.441	0.436

So far as TDC in core resources is concerned, natural resources and green natural landscape are regarded as the dominant attractor in contrast to adventure and leisure activities. Quality and hospitality are rated highest among services in comparison to e-tourism (online services), local products and quantity (Table 4). In overall scoring, core resources are rated relatively higher than tourism services, indicating improvements are needed in tourism service sector.

Sudurpaschim province is found to be in fourth place (together with Koshi and Karnali) regarding core resources and attractors whereas falls in fifth place regarding tourism services.

Table 4

Tourism core resources and services rating and score

Indicator	Variables	Sudurpaschim	Karnali	Lumbini	Gandaki	Bagmati	Madesh	Koshi	Total	Rating
Core Resources Attractor	Natural Resources	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	35	5.00
	Historical/ Archaeological	4	4	5	4	5	4	3	29	4.14
	Cultural/Religious	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	23	3.29
	Adventure and Leisure Activities	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	9	1.29
	Green area and Natural Landscape	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	34	5.00
	Sum	**18**	**18**	**19**	**20**	**21**	**17**	**18**		**Score**
	Mean	**3.6**	**3.6**	**3.8**	**4**	**4.2**	**3.4**	**3.6**		**3.74**
Tourism Services	Accommodation Quality/Hospitality	2	1	4	5	4	2	3	21	3.00
	Accommodation Quantity	2	2	4	4	4	2	2	20	2.86
	Tourist oriented services/ e-tourism	1	0	2	2	3	1	2	11	1.43
	Gastronomy (Local specialty/product)	3	2	3	3	4	1	3	19	2.71
	Sum	**8**	**5**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**6**	**9**		**Score**
	Mean	**2**	**1.25**	**3.25**	**3.5**	**3.75**	**1.5**	**2.25**		**2.00**

Some of the most attractive tourism destinations in Sudurpaschim, beside Khaptad National Park, are Api-Nampaand Saipal mountain region with a number of mountain peaks, meadows, e.g. Dhauli-Odaar, Kalidhunga Lake, Ramaroshan, Ajayamerukot, Chameliya River and surrounding villages in the mountain and middle hill region (Figure 3). Suklaphanta National Park, Ghodaghodi Lake and Ramsar area, Shivapuridham are major destination in Tarai plain.

Figure 3
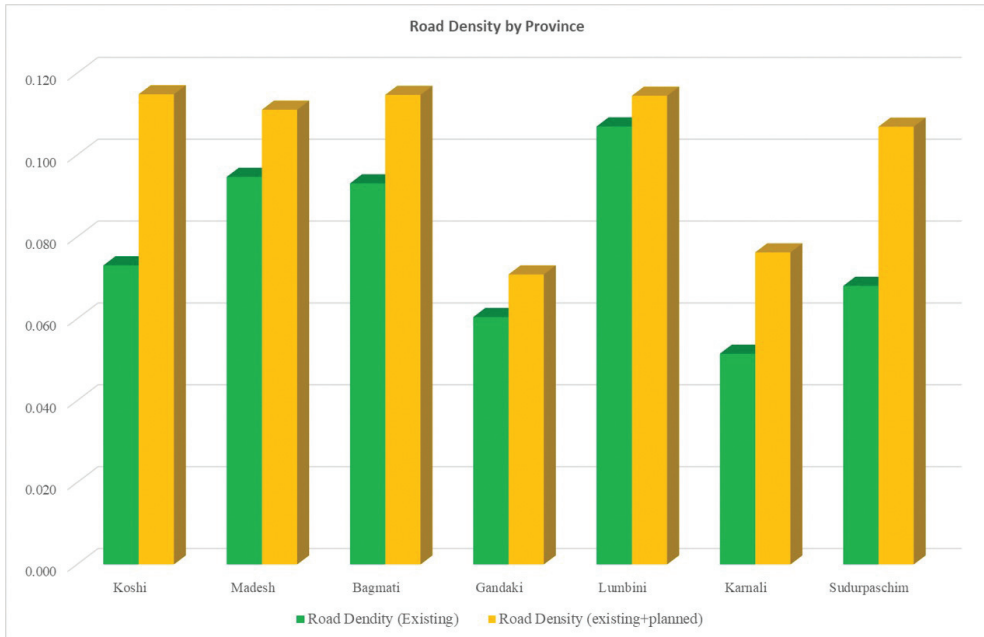
Core tourism resources of Sudurpaschim

Secondary resources

Infrastructure, supporting/ conditional factors, and

tourism policy and planning at local and national levels are selected as secondary resources. Transport and connectivity, communication network, supply system are major factors which largely determines the tourist flows. Distribution and density of existing road infrastructure is concentrated in relatively flat area i.e. Lumbini and Madesh Provinces, whereas Karnali has the lowest transport infrastructure followed by Gandaki (Figure 4).
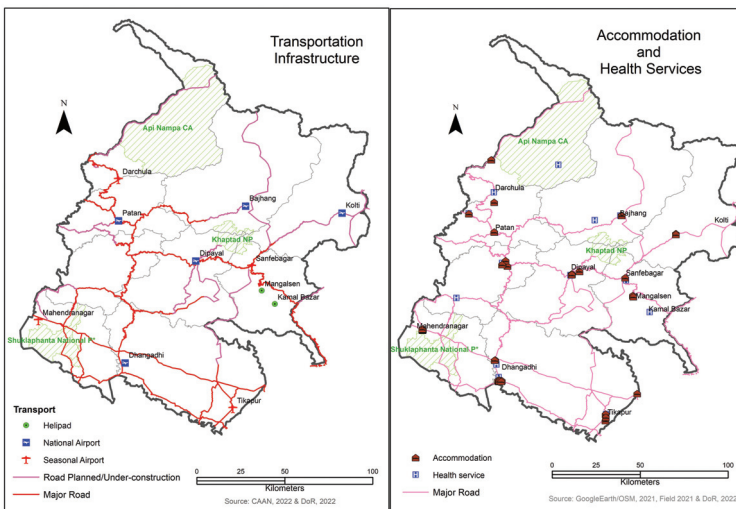
Figure 4

Road density by province

Figure 5

Infrastructure and facilities in Sudurpaschim Province

However, number of road construction projects are ongoing, including Midhill highway in Sudurpaschim province. It is apparent that after the completion of road under construction and planned road, transport infrastructure facility will enhance tourism competitiveness. Besides, air transport service in the province is also comparatively good as it has 8 airports (5 national and 3 seasonal) of which 6 airports are in-operation (Figure 5). There are 138 accommodation facilities located in district headquarters and along major road junctions. These accommodation facilities include 19-star hotels and resorts.

In 2019, Government of Nepal specified 100 existing and 100 potential tourism destinations for the tourism year promotion in 2019-2020 arrivals (MoCTCA, 2020). Of the total potential destinations, highest number of destination (n=21) is identified in Bagmati followed by Gandaki (n=18) and Lumbini (n=16). Number of existing destinations for promotion and improvement are also the highest in Bagmati followed by Gandaki and Lumbini (Figure 6). One of the major approaches identified in National tourism strategy plan 2013 (NTSP, 2013) is diversification and improvement of tourism products and location of new area within 2014-2019 (MoCTCA, 2013). However, specified 200 destinations under visit Nepal 2020 doesn't adhere to such approach of diversification of tourism to potential and less explored existing sites.

Figure 6

Number of tourist destination identified for Visit Nepal 2020

While evaluating the competitiveness of secondary resources, policy and planning are rated at the lowest (1.68) in comparison to infrastructure and conditional factors (Table 5). Conditional factors like proximity of destinations and accessibility to destination is regarded as most positive factor which is also indicated by even spatial distribution of road and air transportation infrastructure. Planning according policy and implementation of policy into practice is major challenges in most cases. Competitiveness of supporting and conditional factors in Sudurpaschim is found to be higher (2nd place) whereas it falls in 5th place regarding infrastructure and 4th place regarding policy and planning. Promotion of core resources having low tourist flows despite attraction factors in the study area and participatory tourism planning is least practiced according to the key informants. It is followed by presence of local business and entrepreneurs in tourism sector.

Table 5

Rating and score of secondary tourism resources

Indicator	Variables	Sudurpaschim	Karnali	Lumbini	Gandaki	Bagmati	Madesh	Koshi	Total	Rating
Infrastructure	Road Connection/ Accessibility	2	1	3	4	4	3	2	19	2.71
	Communication	2	1	3	4	4	3	2	19	2.71
	Health	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	10	1.40
	Sanitation	1	1	2	3	3	2	2	14	2.00
	Sum	**6**	**4**	**9**	**13**	**14**	**9**	**7**		**8.71**
	Score	**1.5**	**1**	**2.25**	**3.25**	**3.5**	**2.25**	**1.75**		**2.18**
Supporting/ Conditional factors	Accessibility to destinations	3	1	3	4	4	3	3	21	3.00
	Proximity of destinations	3	2	4	4	5	3	3	24	3.43
	presence of local business/entrepreneurs	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	11	1.57
	Community involvement	4	4	3	1	2	3	3	20	2.86
	Sum	**12**	**8**	**12**	**11**	**13**	**10**	**10**		**10.86**
	Score	**3**	**2**	**3**	**2.75**	**3.25**	**2.5**	**2.5**		**2.71**
Policy & Planning	Integrated approach	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	11	1.57
	Public sector Commitment	2	1	3	4	4	2	3	19	2.71
	Participatory Tourism Planning	1	1	1	2	2	0	2	9	1.30
	Promotion	1	0	1	3	2	0	1	8	1.14
	Sum	**6**	**3**	**6**	**11**	**10**	**3**	**8**		**6.71**
	Score	**1.5**	**0.75**	**1.5**	**2.75**	**2.5**	**0.75**	**2**		**1.68**

Tourism demand

The tourist flow pattern in protected areas of the country has changed rapidly within the duration of six years (Table 6). The flow is frequent and intense in Gandaki, Bagmati and Koshi Provinces. In 2015, the majority of tourists visited protected area sites in Bagmati Province, which shifted to Gandaki Province in 2020, comprising slightly more than 77% of total tourist flow. Gandaki and Koshi provinces comprised more than 91% of tourist flow in 2020, whereas tourist flow decreased to 6.3% in Bagmati within a time period of 5 years. The tourist flow shifted to Gandaki followed by Bagmati again in 2021. The decreasing trend of tourist flow is evident in Madesh Province, whereas tourist flow is on a gradual increase in Karnali and Sudurpaschim Provinces, and a variable trend is visible in Lumbini Province. Preceding data on protected area visitors also show that Sudurpaschim received less than 1% of total international arrivals (MoCTCA, 2022).

Table 6

Tourist flow in protected areas of Nepal

Province	Name	Spatial coverage (% share to total provincial area)	% share to country area	% tourist flow 2015	% tourist flow 2020	% tourist flow 2021
Koshi	Makalu-Barun, Sagarmatha, Koshi Tappu*, Kanchanjunga	18.08	3.17	9.818	14.00	21.45
Madesh	KoshiTappu*, Parsa*,Chitwan*	8.30	0.54	0.072	0.05	0.04
Bagmati	Langtang, Chitwan*, Shivapuri-Nagarjun, Parsa*, Gaurishankar	20.69	2.85	53.197	6.30	32.46
Gandaki	Annapurna, Dhorpatan, Manaslu	48.95	7.13	33.039	77.40	43.31
Lumbini	Bardiya, Banke, Dhorpatan*, Krishnasar	6.89	1.04	3.728	1.90	2.35
Karnali	Rara, Shey-Phoksundo	13.08	2.48	0.145	0.20	0.28
Sudurpaschim	Api-Nampa, Khaptad, Suklaphanta	12.22	1.65	0.001	0.10	0.12

Source: DNPWC, 2021 & GIS data calculation

*part of protected areas

While analyzing the competitiveness of tourism demand, it is found to be at the 2nd lowest position (1.93) just above policy and planning (1.68) under secondary resource component. Amon four variables of tourism demand, Repetitive visit has the least competitiveness score followed by seasonality (Table 7). Sudurpaschim lies in the 5th position regarding competitiveness on tourism demand and shares the least value in all four variables, in parallel to Karnali and Madesh province.

Table 7

Rating and score of tourist demand variables

Indicator	Variables	Sudurpaschim	Karnali	Lumbini	Gandaki	Bagmati	Madesh	Koshi	Total	Rating
Tourism Demand	Tourist awareness	1	1	3	4	4	1	2	16	2.29
	Seasonality	1	1	2	3	3	1	2	13	1.86
	Preference	1	1	3	4	3	1	2	15	2.14
	Repetitive visit	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	10	1.43
	Sum	4	4	9	14	12	4	7		7.71
	Score	1.0	1.0	2.3	3.5	3.0	1.0	1.8		1.93

The Tourism Master Plan of Sudurpaschim (MoITFE, 2022) targets to increase 30% (average annual growth) of tourist arrivals, increase length of stay, and raise tourism's GDP contribution

to 10% by 2032, which in its current state is less than 1%. Identification of new tourism products, improvement of infrastructure and destination management are major strategies among 10 identified strategies. Opening of new cultural circuit as a gateway to larger Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) is the most potential attractor for increasing Indian and international tourists. In this setting, as per the key informants, the most determinant factor is awareness of tourists regarding destinations, which is directly linked to promotion at international level. Increasing repetitive visits and seasonality are major area of concerns which currently has scored the least rating value.

Overall competitiveness

A z-score was calculated to measure the overall tourism destination competitiveness. It shows that, core resources and key attractors received the highest rating among six indicator followed by supporting and conditional factors (Table 8). Policy and planning (to implementation) on the other hand, received the lowest rating followed by tourism demand. In case of competitiveness at province level, it is found that only three provinces namely Bagmati, Gandaki and Lumbini is above mean value where other four are below mean score value. Sudurpaschim province is in 5th position showing larger competitiveness gap between the first ranked Bagmati province. However, it has received the second highest score on supporting and conditional factors showing the relatively proximate destinations and better condition of participation, local entrepreneurship and accessibility to destination.

Table 8

Overall tourism destination competitiveness

Province	Total scored value* (5x25)	% share* (5x25)	Core Resources Attractor	Tourism Services	Infra-structure	Conditional factors	Policy & Planning	Tourism Demand	Overall Score	Rank
Bagmati	84.00	67.2	1.79	1.32	1.36	1.38	1.13	1.13	1.40	1
Gandaki	83.00	66.4	1.01	1.05	1.36	0.09	1.47	1.65	1.34	2
Lumbini	68.00	54.4	0.22	0.78	0.09	0.74	-0.25	0.34	0.34	3
Koshi	60.00	48.0	-0.56	-0.04	-0.54	-0.55	0.44	-0.19	-0.19	4
Sudurpaschim	**54.00**	**43.2**	**-0.56**	**-0.58**	**-0.86**	**0.74**	**-0.25**	**-0.98**	**-0.59**	**5**
Madesh	49.00	39.2	-1.34	-1.13	0.09	-0.55	-1.27	-0.98	-0.92	6
Karnali	42.00	33.6	-0.56	-1.40	-1.50	-1.84	-1.27	-0.98	-1.38	7
Sum	**440.00**		**131.00**	**71.00**	**61.00**	**76.00**	**47.00**	**54.00**		
Mean	**62.86**		**18.71**	**10.14**	**8.71**	**10.86**	**6.71**	**7.71**		
SD	**15.08**		**1.28**	**3.68**	**3.15**	**1.55**	**2.91**	**3.81**		

*Note: *Maximum score value (5) for 25 variables*

Potential

Though tourism destinations promotion for diversification, diversion of tourist to low tourist flow areas and identification and promotion of new sites are stipulated strategy of government (MoCTCA, 2013), the implementation of 10-year strategic plan doesn't exhibit such practice. To date, major tourism destinations of the country listed on the government tourism authority sites do not include a single tourism site from Sudurpaschim Province. Likewise, top destinations and places recommended to visit in Nepal by 10 travel and tourism websites,

namely National Geographic (top 5), Lonely Planet (top 12), Planetware (top 15), Tripadviser (top 12), TripCraft (top 11), Himalayan Glacier (top 12), Holidify (top 33), and Thrilliphila (top 56) don't mention a single site from Sudurpaschim, whereas 2 sites, Touropia (top 12) and TravelTrinagle (top 42) mentioned Khaptad and Suklaphanta national parks.

The tourist entry charge for trekking is also higher in the protected area of Sudurpaschim as compared to other protected areas in Bagmati, Koshi and even some of Karnali province (lower Dolpa and Humla), which is another factor affecting the tourist flow and re-visit.

The most potential site for immediate tourist flow is Khaptad National Park (Figure 7). It is one of the most accessible protected area (entry point only 16 Km from major highway), well managed and relatively easy route with tranquil surroundings still visited by very few tourists. This national park should be promoted as nature based eco-tourism site, hill-station for Indian tourists. Promotion of value-added recreational activities like ski and other winter recreation could be targeted for international tourists.

Figure 7

Landscapes of Khaptad National Park

Promotion of eco-tourism, i.e., promoting tourism by protecting nature and generating employment and income for rural and remote mountainous regions, must be the main strategy, which is an integrated approach to protection and conservation of nature and the local environment, enhancement of local livelihood and community ownership, and utilization of local resources in tourism infrastructure with relatively lower investment such as community homestays and conservation-based hiking and trekking. On the other hand, a regular monitoring and evaluation strategy by government authorities, performance through the measurement of efficient resource use, sustainability, and balanced tourism carrying capacity,

shall contribute to effective strategic and operational actions for tourism policy implementation (Cracolici et al., 2006).

Despite core tourism resources like a pristine natural environment, abundant wildlife, and rich culture and traditions, tourism development in the country is not up to expectation because policy implementation has remained one of the major issues (Ghimire, 2009; Stevens, 1988).

Conclusion

Natural resource endowments enhance provinces potential for tourism development and economic growth. Core tourism resources positioned in different ecological regions of Sudurpaschim Province provide ample tourism potential despite tourism destination promotion and modest tourism infrastructure development in the hill and mountain regions, which has remained major challenges. There is an obvious spatial differentiation in tourism competitiveness among seven provinces, as well as the 3 ecological regions and 9 districts of the Sudurpaschim province, besides distinctive competitiveness among seven provinces. This provides greater opportunities for diversification of current tourist flow pattern leading to sustainable tourism development through efficient planning strategies contextualizing unique geographic characteristics for improving local economy and livelihood options in Sudurpaschim province of Nepal.

The development and promotion of adventurous and leisure activities has potential to diversify inbuilt seasonality and increase length of stay, which are also emphasized on Tourism Master Plan (2021/22–2031/32) of Sudurpaschim Province. Livelihood and economic benefits from tourism are determinants of the local people's ownership feelings. Ownership by local community is of vital importance for sustainable and responsible tourism development. Local residents are immediate and most important stakeholders who help to proliferate the competitiveness of tourism destinations.

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