

Impediments to Eco-Tourism in Darjeeling Hill Area

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is a unique and a creative form of tourism. The concrete definition of ecotourism is still evolving. Generally, ecotourism is defined and comprehended as a new form or subset of tourism which integrates environmental and socio-economic development. Ecotourism provides activities that justify socio-economic development without disturbing the integrity of the natural resources. In an area like Darjeeling its geographical condition does not favor any other economic activities other than tourism. Darjeeling is a globally beloved tourist destination. Tourism had added excessive unhealthy pressure on the vulnerable natural resource of the area popularly famous as “Queen of Hills.” In the view of this ecotourism emerged as a tool that generates revenue creating employment opportunities and sustainable development without compromising the genuineness of the natural resources. This paper analyzes the dimension of ecotourism in Darjeeling for socio-economic and sustainable development. In view of the perceived benefit of ecotourism in Darjeeling there are many impediments for the long-term success of this new venture of tourism. This paper aims to highlight those challenges that pose a severe threat to the future of ecotourism.

Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in global economy. Tourism has been a unique activity ever since the dawn of human civilization. With the dawn of the industrial revolution, improvement in rail, road, air, and water transportations and advancement in communications consequently, travelling became accessible to the masses.

Gradually, large amounts of people for new experience and knowledge began to travel and thereby tourism became a formalized sector with high speed in growth. Tourism in no time became a fastest growing sector, generating employment opportunities and a great gear for economic development. Tourism grew rapidly as the world was also accelerating in an unprecedented manner by using natural resources that was available without thinking about the future and environment. However, in no time it was realized that the world had over used the natural resources available thereby, depleting it rapidly and this resulted to environmental problems.

To address the environmental problems without compromising the development of the world and to avoid putting burden to the future generations. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WECD) in its report ‘Our Common Future’ (1987) popularly known as Brundtland Report highlighted the fundamental concern for environmental care and sustainable use of vulnerable natural resources for long term economic development. Thus, it emphasized that long term development should be paralleled with the sustainable conservation and use of available natural resources.

Similarly, the environmental governance initiated by the United Nation to sensitize about the critical environmental degradation encouraged tourism sector also to find an environmentally compatible approach for making tourism, sustainable. Consequently, wandering of people with an enhanced sensitivity about the preservation of the earth’s vulnerable natural resources gave birth to a sustainable alternative strategy to tourism known as ecotourism. Ecotourism, with components like economic viability and accountability to social, cultural, and environmental developments, as an alternative strategy to tourism gradually began to be incorporated and became widespread.

Within this background Darjeeling popularly known as “Queen of Hills’ is a globally famous tourist destination. It is rich in ecology, scenic beauty, diverse cultures and ethnicity, flora and fauna and medicinal herbs and colonial heritage etc. along with its climatic and geographical condition. Tourism is the main source of livelihood activity in Darjeeling. But the growing demand of tourism in Darjeeling

had added excessive unhealthy pressure on the vulnerable natural resource of the area. In the view of this ecotourism emerged as a tool that generates revenue creating employment opportunities and sustainable development without compromising the genuineness of the natural resources.

Therefore, this paper analyzes the dimension of ecotourism in Darjeeling for socio-economic and sustainable development. In view of the perceived benefit of ecotourism in Darjeeling there are many challenges for the long-term success of this new venture of tourism. This paper aims to highlight those impediments that pose a severe threat to the future of ecotourism.

Ecotourism in Darjeeling Hill Area.

Darjeeling district a small paradise on earth is situated in northern most part in the state of West Bengal. Darjeeling the land of brave Gorkhas is popularly known as Queen of Hills. The crown of mighty Kanchenjunga shining with the first dawn of sunlight from Tiger hill rationalizes the title. Darjeeling hill area is lavishly endowed with nature's bounty.

Darjeeling Hill Area is characterized by its unusual natural settings, climate, magical brew (tea), heritage toy train, diverse culture, and multifarious ways of living. Its unique available natural resources, historical bind to the land, flora and fauna, wild life sanctuary, white orchids, rhododendrons and many medicinal plants however, makes Darjeeling magnetic. Darjeeling district is popularly lauded for triple Ts, Tea (internationally famous tourism product), Toy Train (cherished heritage product) and Timber. However, due to the extinct of timber it is now replaced by Tiger hill, hill top from where tourists can delight the panoramic view of mount Kanchenjunga followed by the beautiful sunrise.

Darjeeling a pleasant and beautiful dot settlement was established by captain Llyod and nurtured by Dr. A. Campbell, a summer place for the British to escape the scorching and perspiring heat of the plains. Darjeeling thus started as a sanatorium and a summer residence for the British (Rai, 2022). Darjeeling, a small paradise is a globally popular tourist destination. Darjeeling had the privilege for tourism, especially ecotourism. And to uphold and safeguard the nature's gift it requires an alternative path of social and economic development. Ecotourism is one such conventional option, the creative and effective alternative approach for "thinking globally and acting locally."

Darjeeling is immensely blessed with nature's beauty, historical resources, colonial rooted plantation, and cultural heritage that it makes it potential to provide ecotourism activities. The aspects of ecotourism in Darjeeling are discussed in the light of environmental, socio-economic, and cultural development.

Environmental Development

Ecotourism is a form of tourism based on the model of sustainable principles, environmentally conscious approach which held an objective of increasing the participation of the locals to be benefitted by the conservation of natural resources. Ecotourism enables and encourages the local people to produce ecotourism activities from the natural resources available and contribute significantly to environmental conservation. The specific contribution of ecotourism towards environmental development is it balances the resources use and resource availability.

It stands firm on the natural setting with an objective to generate revenue without negatively affecting the nature. The economic development of Darjeeling areas is dependent on the tourism activities it provides. The livelihood of most of the people in Hill depends on tourism. Tourism by nature is a demanding phenomenon and the unconscious surge of the tourism gave a shock to the environment. Both the surge and the shocks of the tourism industry led to an alternative thinking to generate revenue through those available natural resources without compromising their future involvement. Ecotourism appeared to be a creative approach for outsourcing their livelihoods. In Darjeeling areas like Takdha, Tinchulay, Lava and Lamahatta, ecotourism appeared to be a driving force for generating revenue and conserving the protected area.

Lamahatta, a famous eco park 23km away from Darjeeling, famous for the pine tree, holly Lake and a panoramic view of Kanchenjunga from the hill top. The locals being sensitized about the sustainable development act as the guardian of the biodiversity. And to protect the biodiversity of an area, from the environmental crisis Lamahatta creates revenue from the tourist fee charged at the point of entrance to ensure the maintenance of the vulnerable protected area for now and the future generation. Also, there are many shops and home stay around that tries to conserve the biodiversity of an area and justify the 'eco' tag.

Hence ecotourism encourages people to be fundamentally responsible to the environment they live in and take care of their life supporting system -ecosystem. Ecotourism is thus, one such activity that had been promising the balance between economic development and ecosystem.

Social and Cultural Development.

Darjeeling a land of the brave Gorkhas is blessed with nature's bounty and had many undisturbed and off beat destinations. Darjeeling also represents a colonial heritage, and have a diverse cultural and

many historical attractions. The shining assets of Darjeeling are its social and cultural diversity. It has diverse cultural past and present, language and ethics. All this makes Darjeeling a breath-taking escape. And every year lakhs of tourist flock to Darjeeling to find solace in pristine beauty and sanctity.

The curiosity of the people to travel to learn and understand the present and the past glories, experience the local ways of living of an area they visit facilitate both the tourist and the local population an educative service as it allows both the host and guest to meet different array of interesting people, learn and understand each other enlightening social and cultural values.

Socially, ecotourism enables the local inhabitant to participate in ecotourism activities. Ecotourism encourages the local inhabitant to take ownership of ecotourism process and be benefitted from the ecotourism initiatives. Another definite social development of ecotourism is that it had strengthened solidarity among the local inhabitant to manage ecosystem in such a way that benefitted them without compromising the future evolution of those available natural resources. Ecotourism thus contributes to the enhancement of social sustainability of the community participating in the ecotourism initiatives.

Culturally, ecotourism provides an opportunity to the local communities to allocate and integrate value to the cultural tradition. The direct cultural contribution of ecotourism is that, with a objective to attract the tourist the majority of the home stays owner's tries to maintain traditional small home values, serving authentic local and organic food and exhibiting their respective cultural dress. Ecotourism encourages the locals to be conscious and make genuine effort to understand maintain and preserve their specificities and cultural values, exhibiting a sense of pride for their own traditions and culture.

Darjeeling tourism department had also taken initiative to organize different cultural and open tourist festivals, poetry and musical concert, art and crafts, photography etc. to demonstrate the local's culture and folk way. These initiatives encourage the local to expand their insight and respect for nature and appreciation for different culture and the ways of living.

Economic Development

Ecotourism comes with the definitional promise of maximizing economic development and enhance the economic welfare of the local population. Ecotourism in terms of economic category in Darjeeling area it provides economic profit by generating new opportunities and employment. The local residents, thousands of unemployed and the educated youths are employed as tour guides operator, camp ground operator, crafts, and food producers. Ecotourism appeared to be a new encouraging avenue especially

for the unemployed educated youth who migrates to Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore and other foreign countries to earn their daily bread and to protect the food security of their family dependent on them. Ecotourism is thus considered to be an effective tool in bringing economic prosperity.

Ecotourism in Darjeeling hill area had evolved as lifeline. Ecotourism conserves the vulnerable and still existing natural resource and the cultural values thereby uplifting the well-being of the local community. Darjeeling the land of the scenic landscape occupies an exceptional place in a global tourism map. However, beneath the colonial romantic conception and natural explanation of what makes Darjeeling there lays a complex web of impediments that revolves around the politic and the preservation of flourishing ecotourism.

Impediments to Eco-tourism in Darjeeling Hill Areas

Darjeeling Hill Areas is an ecotourism destination. Despite, ecotourism in Hill Areas of Darjeeling significantly contribute to the environmental and socio-economic development of the region. Darjeeling excels in ecotourism but much of its vast potential still awaits exploration. The area is however ecologically fragile and under severe pressure due to the demands made on natural resource (Bhutia, 2015). There are challenges that persist or may continue to increase instability for ecotourism.

Darjeeling is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Eastern Himalayas. And it is also the most vulnerable unit (Bhattacharya, 2019). To start with; the rapid growth of population has been the most serious development constraints in Darjeeling Hill Areas. This large population pressure had immensely disturbed the biodiversity and the ecological wealth on which ecotourism stand. The following factors contribute to the suffering of ecotourism:

- Mushrooming of concrete building along every bend of roads and river fronts are covering the scenic beauty of the hill.
- Unplanned and random development practices are causing a threat to the land and particularly increasing the chances of land slide.
- Unconscious or overuse of vulnerable natural resource.
- Water scarcity.
- Overflowing sewage lines and burst pipe lines, improper disposal of waste.

The deficiencies of Darjeeling Hill Area in this regard, is a lack of effective administrative and management design, absence of systematic policies and planning--tourism master plan, regional plan

and area plan. The absence of ecotourism management strategies and policies presents the fearful scenario of the future of ecotourism in Darjeeling.

The fundamental impediment of ecotourism in Darjeeling Hill Areas also includes lack of coordination between government agencies like forest department, public work department, the district administration, and the municipality. Except some hill-based resort and homestays and ecotourism spots of Darjeeling Hill Areas are forest based.

And the tourism department remains completely indifferent about those forest-based tourist spots which slow down their journey. Thus, the serious vacuum is the lack of coordination among the concerned participants or the departments associated in tourism. This lack of coordination among the producers of tourism practices and systems that is the governments and tourism industry figures area adding extra threat to ecotourism sector in hill areas.

The built environment (building, streets, parks, public transportation, and communication infrastructure) has a major impact on the quality of the tourism experience, especially concerning its safety, convenience, efficiency and enjoyment aspect (Felicia, 2011). The quickly and unplanned construction of tourist spot has made the hill towns overcrowded with concrete buildings covering the spectacular view of Himalayan range. The failure of tourism to integrate its structure with the natural features and indigenous architecture of the destination is another challenge in the success of ecotourism.

The carrying capacity assessment and sustainability of tourism form the basis of future development (Bhattacharya, 2019). The failure to determine the carrying capacity for finite space example buildings, and the lack of land use planning and building regulation in Darjeeling Hill Areas has covered all the scenic view converting major tourist attraction routes narrow bearing the traffic jam. The mushrooming up of illegal construction all over the hill town has also damaged the charisma of the hill. This reflects the insufficient integration of planning and development of built environment in Darjeeling hill areas.

Tourism an important fast-growing industry of Darjeeling Hill Areas plays a vital role in the economic transformation of a region. Though tourism offers great scope, tourism in Darjeeling Hill Area has a high degree of seasonality. This short tourist season also add an adverse effect on both the tourism and ecotourism industry in the Hill Areas of Darjeeling.

Seasonality means that tourism planet is used for only a limited part of a year. In Darjeeling the tourist season prevails only from the month of April, May, August, September, October and November. Beside

these the other months are off season and there are no alternative means to compensate this seasonality of tourism in Darjeeling Hill Areas and therefore remains uneconomic during this other month of off season. Because of this seasonal character of tourism activity, the need to meet the high expectations of the tourist also crafts an additional pressure on local resources like energy- electricity cuts, food, drinking water, accommodation and other raw material.

Greater extraction and transport of these resources have worsened or aggravated the physical impact associated with their exploitation. Not only this during the high peak tourist season the region are overcrowded causing waste generation, noise pollution and air pollution as in addition to the increased number of the vehicles in the region beyond the capacity of the roads as many of the tourist vehicles come from other states too.

The tourists during this peak season are also inconvenienced by social problems like dishonesty, cheating, violence crimes and inferiority complex as during the peak season the visitors are greatly unconvinced by the soaring price. Not only the essential commodities are in short supply but the tourist guides, operators, vendors, local drivers, shopkeepers, traders takes an opportunity to ascend the charges for providing any services to visitors. Thus, the tourists go with the bad impression. Consequently, seasonal usage and improper utilization of the abundance of socio-cultural and natural assets of ecotourism to adjust the output in terms of the service pose a grave threat to future of ecotourism.

Despite many local bodies have entered the tourism sector; taking an initiative at achieving sustainability in tourism. The various governments at the centre have made no organized and concerted effort to elevate ecotourism activities in Darjeeling hill areas. However, tiered less and determined the efforts put into by the local people and however glamorous be the attraction the major challenge is the woeful absent of basic facilities disabling the local people to project the most fascinating ecotourism product of the areas in all its reality.

In other words, the major challenge of ecotourism activities in Darjeeling hill areas is absence of appropriate policies and strategies as ecotourism is formed or require not just the local conditions; appropriate landscapes, water bodies and mountain ranges but it also calls for effective planning, strategies and policies for the successful fit of social goals, economic development and environment protection.

Conclusion

Ecotourism in Darjeeling hill areas acts as architect for overall sustainable prosperity. It acts as an investment vehicle which provides scope for revenue generation, increase employability, enhancement of money circulation and enriches the social environment. However, Ecotourism cannot prosper in isolation.

Looking at the impediments in the Darjeeling Hill Areas for sustainability and prosperity of eco-tourism, it is comprehensible that the whole region requires proper policies and planning for fullest and efficient development of the existing ecotourism. Evidently, it demands a specific ecotourism policy of encouragement. The proper development and management strategy, participation of varied stakeholders, including local communities' members, funding for ecotourism development, inter community organization, marketing of Darjeeling hill areas as an ecotourism hotspot, environmental monitoring and management of exception should be examined intelligently in a sustainable way for elevating ecotourism and growth of Darjeeling hill area.

Only then the balance between the supply side (conservation and socio-economic development) and demand (tourist contentment) can be achieved in Darjeeling. The development of tourism in hill areas is obligatory as 70% of local population depend on tourism for their livelihood but should not be placed at the cost of the ecological balance. Therefore "Development without Destruction" is the only way for sustainable solution of eco-tourism in Darjeeling Hill Areas.

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