

A STUDY ON BEST PRACTICES IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN SIKKIM

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and an important source of foreign exchange and employment for many developing countries. Tourism, identified as one of the tools to increase the economic benefits to small isolated states with diverse natural beauty in India, through Sustainable tourism Development Goals. There is a close linkage of tourism to other sectors and its ability to create decent jobs and generate trade opportunities. Therefore, because of the reorganization that there is a need to support sustainable tourism activities and relevant capacity building that promote environmental awareness, conserve and protect the environment, respect wildlife, flora, biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural diversity, and improve the welfare and livelihoods of local communities. The sub-Himalayan Sikkim, smallest state in India, is endowed with impressive varieties of tourism products including nature and trekking based tourism, eco-tourism, wildlife tourism, wellness tourism etc. Owing to its multi-dimensional diversity tourists, arrivals have been increasing during the last decade. The main aim of the study is to understand and analyze the best practices of the sustainability of tourism practices in the state on the basis of four main criteria that is Conservation, Community, Culture, and Commerce, initiated by the state. Understand the practices initiated by the state that are mainly devoted to the promotion of sustainable human settlement development, the promotion of the formulation of sound and culturally sensitive tourism programmes are seen as a strategy for sustainable development of urban and rural settlements and as a way of decentralizing urban development and reducing discrepancies among regions. The important role of ecotourism as a tool to promote economic growth in respect of environment sustainability is a recurring theme in particular with reference to the protection of forests, mountain ecosystems, improvement of farm production and farming systems, sustainable conservation and use of living resources.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Environment Sustainability, Conservation, Community, Culture.

Introduction

Tourism is the sum total of relationships arising from the interaction of tourists, host governments and communities. George Young (1973) stated that a tourist is someone who travels away from home. Tourism simply means the movement of people away from the normal place of residence and work for a period of not less than 24 hours and not more than one year (WTO). Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and an important source of foreign exchange and employment for many developing countries. The Statistical study reveals that the tourism has become the world's second largest industry that offers a good scope for resource mobilization and increased productivity. With the help of Sustainable Tourism Development Goals (SDGS) tourism has increased the economic benefits to small isolated sub-Himalayan States with diverse natural beauty in India.

Sustainable Tourism, wing of sustainable development, is being well thought-out as an essential approach to achieve developing goals without depleting natural and cultural resources or degrading the environment. "Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It should be planned in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems" (UNEP, 1987).

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The main objective of Sustainable Tourism Development is to employ all round of Sustainable Development (ecology, economy, social issues, and cultural issues) in tourism. Sustainability in tourism can be depicted as pentagon pyramid: Enhanced to include the institutional dimension of networking between touristic sending regions and destinations and the political responsibility of higher levels of the political system, (Muller, 1999). The objective of sustainable tourism is to retain the economic and social advantages of tourism development while reducing or mitigating any undesirable impacts on the natural, historic, cultural or social environment. This is achieved by balancing the needs of tourists with those of the destination. There is a close linkage of tourism to other sectors and its ability to create decent jobs and generate trade opportunities. Therefore, because of the reorganization that there is a need to support sustainable tourism activities and relevant capacity building that promote environmental awareness, conserve and protect the environment, respect wildlife, flora, biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural diversity, and improve the welfare and livelihoods of local communities.

Objective of the Study

The main aim of the study is to understand and analyze the sustainable tourism practices in Sikkim on the basis of four main criteria that is Eco-Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Adventure Tourism and Community Based Tourism initiated by the state.

Methodology

The study is purely based on secondary data. The data has been collected from various sources like Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, Sikkim Tourism Policy. Ministry of Tourism, Government of Sikkim. The data has also been collected from reputed journals, books, articles and websites etc.

Sustainable Tourism Practices

Sikkim, The Land of Mystic Splendor, is one of the smallest states in India. Geo-physically it is a basin surrounded on three sides by precipitous mountain walls. The state is blessed with impressive varieties of tourism products including nature and trekking based tourism, eco-tourism, wild life tourism, adventure tourism, wellness tourism, pilgrimage tourism and heritage tourism. Besides the above Owing to its multidimensional diversity, tourist arrivals (both domestic and foreign tourist) have been increasing during the last decades. Tourist arrivals statistics (2005-2014) are presented in the subsequent pages. The gradual increase in the arrival of tourist has converted the state as a centre of mass tourism.

Table 1: Domestic Tourists Arrival in Sikkim

Year	Tourists Arrival	Annual Growth
2005	347650	21.26
2006	421943	21.37
2007	465204	10.25
2008	512373	10.13
2009	615628	20.15
2010	700011	13.7
2011	552453	-21.07
2011	552453	-21.07
2012	558538	1.1
2013	576749	3.26
2014	562418	3.07

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of Sikkim.

Table 2: Foreign Tourists Arrival in Sikkim

Year	Tourists Arrival	Annual Growth
2005	16518	22.1
2006	18049	9.6
2007	17837	-1.17
2008	19154	7.38
2009	17730	7.43
2010	20757	17.07
2011	23945	15.35
2012	26489	3.1
2013	31698	19.66
2014	49175	26.17

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India.

From the table -1 it has been observed that upto 2010 domestic tourists has increased at a progressive rate. But in the year 2011 due to earthquake number of tourists has been reduced significantly. So far as annual growth rate is concern upto 2010 on an average it has been increased but after that it has fluctuated at a considerable extent. But in case of foreign tourists there was an increasing trend throughout the period of study. (2005-2014) but annual growth rate has also fluctuated throughout the period under study like domestic tourists.

Analysis of tourists influx (both domestic and international) suggests favourable trends and progressive state of growth for the development of tourism in Sikkim. Though the positive influx of tourists would create employment opportunities and the foreign exchange earnings in the state, implications of the large turnout of tourists on the state's resources, infrastructure, cultural environment and eco-tourism would be significant.

The state's sustained tourist appeal depends on the preservation of its natural environment. It requires effective utilization and conservation of resources in order to maintain long term viability. This sustainability of tourism can be made possible by striking a balance the need for conservation of the rich bio-diversity and the need for socio-economic development through the best practices of community-based tourism, cultural tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism which are enumerated below:

Eco-Tourism

Eco-Tourism is responsible travel to natural area that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (TIES,1990). The basic aim of eco-tourism is to promote sustainable development through resource conservation, cultural revival, economic development and diversification. The fundamental function of the ecotourism is the protection of the natural and cultural resources as well as income generation, education, local participation and the capacity building. As per the fundamental principles, the ecotourism should be: (i) nature-friendly, (ii) Ecologically sustainable, (iii) environmentally educative and (iv) economically beneficial to the local community. It should also offer satisfaction to the tourists. Fundamentally, ecotourism means making as little environmental impact as possible and at the same time helping to sustain.

Ecotourism in Sikkim started in the year 1995-96 with trainings, awareness, changes in regulations to adapt to the mountainous terrain and entry of foreign tourists in many of restricted & protected areas. Gradual involvement of the people with village tourism activities has further enhanced the concept of ecotourism of Sikkim. Owing to its rich natural bio-diversity Sikkim has emerged as the favourite ecotourism destination in the Lonely Planet tourist magazine thereby giving Sikkim a global exposure as an ecotourism destination. Government of Sikkim had long set a goal of making Sikkim as the ultimate ecotourism destination.

The main moto of this initiative is to promote Sikkim as preferred destination for tourists and provides opportunities for Community Based Ecotourism (CBET) particularly using latest approaches of Participatory Management for sustainable development of the resources and thereby generates employment, income and revenue for the State. The involvement of local communities in the tourism will support their livelihood needs and consequently create their direct stake in conservation of local culture, ecology and environment. This kind of eco-tourism would be helpful for providing better income generation options to the rural people. Sikkim as an ultimate and unique ecotourism destination offering memorable and high-quality learning experiences to visitors, and to contribute to poverty alleviation as well as to promote nature conservation.

Sikkim Ecotourism Policy (2011) provides broad policy guidelines to all the stakeholders. The Policy intends to ensure smooth conduct of tourism as a major service sector industry in the State and at the same time protect and promote its abundant natural resources and unique cultural heritage. The Sikkim Government recognized ecotourism as the most viable and none polluting economic instrument for some years now. Eco-tourism Service Sector today contributes handsomely towards the GSDP ratio and provides huge avenues for self-employment for our educated pool of human capital.

Sikkim being a mountainous region has some 28 major mountain peaks including Mount Kanchendzonga the third highest peak in the world and Sinolchu one of the most graceful peak in the world. These snow clad mountain peaks are the feeder for two major rivers of Sikkim, Teesta and Rangit along with various tributaries. 180 lakes in Alpine and Sub-Alpine as well some in the temperate zone are other contributor to the bio-diversity of Sikkim.39 species of Rhododendron, 558 Orchid species, nearly 600 species of birds, more than 2000 species of moths, 658 species butterflies and roughly 4000 species of flowering plants, numerous medicinal plants make Sikkim a unique destination of Ecotourism.

Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism can be defined as “The practice of travelling to experience historic and cultural attraction to learn about a community’s culture in an educational and enjoyable way (Choudhuri T, 2012). Owing to its wide variety of customs and traditions, indigenous knowledge, folklores etc. Sikkim has tremendous potential for offering tourists a multidimensional cultural experience. The culture that developed in Sikkim is the outcome of three distinctive societies and two great religions. The mixing of indigenous Lepcha, Limbu customs with those of Buddhist Tibetan and Hindu traditions has given rise to a distinct culture that is precisely Sikkimese. Sikkim has a colorful mix of culture which is reflected in a rich array of traditional festivals and rituals that take place throughout the year.

In Sikkim near about 200 monasteries which can be symbol of cultural heritage and lifestyle of the people, where they practice ancient ethnic rituals. Some of the important monasteries are Pemayangtse Monastery, Rumtek Monastery, Tashiding Monastery, Khechopari Monastery, Do-drul Chorten (Buddhist Stupa) which are evaluated as monasteries of extraordinary and great importance and scattered different parts of Sikkim. Sikkim has its unique experience food habits, life styles which they can sell to the whole world.

In every year large number of fairs and festivals are organized by all the ethnic communities (Lepchas, Bhutias, Limbus and Nepalese) in some parts of the Sikkim. Tourism department of Sikkim promote these festivals to highlight the rich culture of different communities to the domestic as well as foreign tourists. In west Sikkim since 2005, the ‘Hee Barmiok’ Tourism Development and Heritage Conservation Society’ organizes heritage festival every year in the month of May. The features of the festival are – exhibition of traditional items of domestic use, multi ethnic cultural dances by all ethnic communities, exhibition of traditional huts, traditional of dh (traditional wooden husking machine), Jhato (stone grinder) traditional sugar extracting machine ‘Kol’, exhibition of traditional grain storage system, etc.

The Hee-Barmiok village in west Sikkim has become a model village for cultural tourism for many tourists. Though the Sikkim has a unique cultural heritage but till the date the state could not project properly its rich culture to the world. For the success of cultural tourism fairs and festivals should be spread throughout the year.

With the proper promotion of culture and heritage, number of tourists obviously will increase and will also increases foreign exchange earning capacity and create employment opportunity. But at the same time that would affect the natural resources as well as tourism carrying capacity of the state.

The intelligent tourism management can contribute in large manner to the protection and development of the physical environment and cultural resources of the region. It is therefore advisable that tourism development and sound environmental management should be integral concerns of Sikkim tourism Developmental policies which would lead towards the sustainable environment.

Adventure Tourism

Sikkim with its astonishing mountains, gorges and valleys, glaciers, snows, lakes and rivers, forests and altitudinal and topographical diversity, has significant potential for development of adventure tourism which would also be in alignment with the tourism policy goals of bringing in high value tourists to the state.

With the establishment of the Indian Himalayan Centre for Adventure & Ecotourism (IHCAE) at Chemchey, there is an excellent opportunity to develop high class training and certification within the state. The adventure tourism of Sikkim is mainly confined to trekking, white-water rafting, and mountaineering. In mountaineering three new peaks Frey’s Peak, Lama Angden and Byrmkhangse were opened for Alpine expeditions in 2005 in addition to Mount Jopuno and Tinchenkhang. With its immense biodiversity wealth, the state is also attracting a growing band of nature lovers, and many young local youth are aspiring to take up professional guiding in these activities. With all these ventures, Sikkim’s success in tourism has brought the state as a centre of mass tourism.

But of late adventure-based tourism of Sikkim is dominated by unprofessional and unhealthy competition that is undermining the quality of services and lowering revenues.

For the promotion and the development of adventure tourism, Sikkim Association of Adventure Tour Operators (SAATO) was established to protect the interest of adventure tour operators and develop partnership among various tourism principals. It operates in line with Adventure Tour Operator Association of India (ATOAI) to develop and promote adventure tourism. In

addition, it establishes liaison with Travel Agents Association of Sikkim (TAAS), Indian River Runners Association (IRRA) and other regional/ national and international organizations. The mother objective of SAATO is to develop strategic partnership and linkage with other organizations in the greater interest of tourism and adventure in Sikkim. For the sake of implementation of sustainable development philosophy in the area of adventure tourism optimum participation of and consultation with local community should be given paramount priority.

Community Based Tourism

Community Based Tourism (CBT) is a type of sustainable tourism which improves pro-poor strategies in a community setting. Its objective is to involve local people in the smooth management of small tourism projects for reducing poverty and providing an alternative income source for community members. It gives respect for local traditions, culture and natural heritage. Community Based Tourism in developing countries “tends to inevitably be located in rural areas” (Equation, 2008). Many rural tourism initiatives are being conceived within the framework of Community Based Tourism, which combines aspects of community development, poverty alleviation, cultural heritage and conservation. In community Based Tourism, the hosts play a pivotal role in determining the form and process of tourism development (Timothy 2002). Community Based Tourism is the other popular alternative offered to traditional tourism development styles and it can be defined as tourism based on negotiation and participation with key stakeholders in the destination (Saarinen 2006).

Suggestions and Conclusion

Sikkim has wide basket of tourism products like eco-tourism, wildlife tourism, wellness tourism, Cultural tourism, heritage tourism, adventure tourism etc. The State have the power to capture significantly Indian and foreign market provided that sustainable site management practices and principles are adopted and applied in letter and spirit. The above sustainable tourism practices initiated by the state that are mainly devoted to the promotion of sustainable human settlement development, the promotion of the formulation of sound and culturally sensitive tourism programmes are seen as a strategy for sustainable development of urban and rural settlements and as a way of decentralizing urban development and reducing discrepancies among regions.

In order to ensure sustainability of tourism in the state an optimal symbiotic relationship between tourism and environment should be of utmost consideration. For the proper implementation of sustainable tourism development in Sikkim, the following important guidelines would be suggested:

- The conservation and utilisation of natural, social and cultural resources should be of sustainable basis.
- Participation of local people in the management of tourism should be encouraged and supported.
- Proper development of transportation and communication system should be needed.
- Infrastructural development should be given paramount priority.
- Tourism should be planned and managed within environmental limits with due regard for the long-term use of natural and human resources.
- Environmental awareness programmes would be organised in a regular basis.
- All stake holders within tourism sectors should be properly trained, motivated and educated about the need to develop more sustainable forms of tourism.
- Tourism should highlight the local economic activities by taking environmental costs and benefits into account.
- In order to promote adventure-based tourism in Sikkim, long-term comprehensive planning, high quality infra-structure, encouragement of local stakeholders, improvement of standards and training with strict regulation and aggressive marketing in adventure sports should be given paramount priority.
- Last but not least various programmes like work shop, seminar and conference should be conducted at a regular basis to discuss the problems and prospect of Sikkim’s sustainable tourism development practices at the local, national and international level.

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