Eco-Tourism Potential and Economic Opportunities in the Bundelkhand Region

Kuldeep Khare[1*] | Dr. Ashish Kumar Pachauri[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Commerce, Shri Krishna University, Chhatarpur, M.P., India.
[2]Supervisor & Assistant Professor, Shri Krishna University, Chhatarpur, M.P., India.

*Corresponding Author: kuldeepkhare509@gmail.com II DOI: 10.62823/IJEMMASSS/7.2(IV).7859

ABSTRACT

Bundelkhand region, covering parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, is known for its rich cultural heritage, distinctive natural landscape, and notable biodiversity. Although the region is endowed with rich resources, it has been plagued by socio-economic issues in the past, such as poverty, out-migration, and slow industrialization. In recent years, eco-tourism has developed as a sustainable development option with the potential to promote conservation of the environment and economic opportunities at the same time. This research analyzes the potential of Bundelkhand to be an eco-tourism destination and assesses its ability to support economic development in the region. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary data based on government reports, scholarly work, and travel statistics with primary data gathered using field surveys and interviews with stakeholders. The research recognizes various fundamental eco-tourism destinations, such as the natural scenery of the Panna Tiger Reserve, Ken Gharial Sanctuary, and Dhubela Museum, and heritage sites like Orchha, Khajuraho, and Chitrakoot. These places provide a specialized combination of wildlife experiences, religious tourism, and cultural heritage that adhere to the theme of eco-tourism. The results show that development of eco-tourism can bring a huge economic dividend to Bundelkhand by creating jobs in hospitality, transport, handicrafts, and local cuisine, as well as promoting community-based enterprises. Eco-tourism can also be crucial for the revival of traditional crafts and indigenous culture, thereby conserving the cultural heritage of the region. In addition, the research underlines the need for infrastructure expansion, human capacity development, as well as policy intervention to maximally exploit the economic benefits of eco-tourism. Issues like poor transportation infrastructure, insufficient trained guides, seasonal flows, as well as environmental degradation need to be curbed in order to promote sustainability. By integrating natural and cultural resources with sustainable tourism activities, eco-tourism in Bundelkhand can lead the region towards becoming a more inclusive and resilient economy. Based on the study, strategic planning, public-private alliances, and active participation from the community are key to making Bundelkhand India's leading eco-tourism destination. The findings of this research can guide policymakers, investors, and local communities in creating programs that bridge conservation and economic growth.

***Keywords**: Eco-Tourism, Bundelkhand Region, Sustainable Development, Economic Opportunities, Community-Based Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Biodiversity Conservation, Rural Economy, Tourism Infrastructure, Local Entrepreneurship.*

Introduction

The Bundelkhand region, spanning across the Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh states, is one that abounds in cultural heritage, natural beauty, and biodiversity. Blessed with historical forts, temples, wildlife parks, and traditional handicrafts, Bundelkhand has the potential to emerge as an eco-tourism destination. Eco-tourism, which focuses on environmentally responsible travel to natural destinations, conservation of the environment, and community involvement, provides a sustainable development route for areas with high natural and cultural resource endowments.

Over the last few decades, Bundelkhand has experienced economic inertia, low industrialization, water deficiency, and excessive rural out-migration. These socio-economic issues have generated an acute requirement for alternative livelihood options that are sustainable, inclusive, and environmentally friendly. Eco-tourism offers itself as a feasible option to counter these issues by using the region's natural splendor, cultural depth, and distinctive heritage. Places like Orchha, Khajuraho,

Panna Tiger Reserve, Ken Gharial Sanctuary, and Chitrakoot draw domestic and foreign visitors, but the entire economic potential of these sites is not exploited.

The present research examines the eco-tourism potential of Bundelkhand and its potential to create economic opportunities. It aims at the identification of natural and cultural resources where eco-tourism can be practiced, evaluation of current infrastructure and policy structures, and an examination of the socio-economic returns that can be achieved through sustainable tourism development. The research highlights the importance of people's participation, since the long-term viability of eco-tourism relies on participation by locals and the sharing of benefits.

The research paper also discusses issues like poor infrastructure, absence of trained tourism staff, seasonal tourist movements, and environmental degradation that might impede the growth of eco-tourism in the region. Through a holistic analysis, the research seeks to present proactive recommendations for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and local people to make Bundelkhand an emerging eco-tourism destination, and thereby promote economic resilience and environmental sustainability.

Background of the Study

Bundelkhand, a plateau region that is semi-arid in nature, is characterized by its historical memorials, wildlife range, and religious places. In spite of these resources, the economy of the region is largely agrarian, with agriculture being at risk due to spasmodic rainfall, droughts, and poor irrigation facilities. Industrial development has been limited, leading to scarce employment avenues other than the agricultural sector. Therefore, numerous inhabitants move towards towns for livelihood.

Eco-tourism has gained international attention as a sustainable model of development that can combine environmental protection and socio-economic gain. In areas such as Bundelkhand, it can also serve as a driver of economic diversification, non-farm employment generation, and protection of cultural heritage. Some of Bundelkhand's known tourist attractions, like Khajuraho's UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Panna Tiger Reserve teeming with wildlife, and Chitrakoot's tranquil rivers, already attract tourists. But poor infrastructure, poor marketing, and a lack of cohesive development strategies hold back the industry's growth.

The Government of India and the state governments have launched several tourism promotion schemes but more focused attention is needed to implement eco-tourism in Bundelkhand. Ecotourism can stimulate local entrepreneurship, handicraft promotion, and hospitality and allied industry opportunities. It can help promote conservation of natural habitats and heritage buildings, ensuring economic benefits are harmonized with environmental objectives.

This context underscores the imperative to develop Bundelkhand's potential for eco-tourism in a systematic, sustainable, and community-based way to create long-term economic dividends.

Importance of the Study

- It brings to focus hitherto untapped eco-tourism opportunities in Bundelkhand.
- Offers a framework for sustainable tourism development.
- Fosters participation and skill development of the community.
- Facilitates policymakers in shaping area-specific tourism strategy.
- Promotes conservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage.
- Helps in local entrepreneurship and rural income generation.
- Pinpoints infrastructure and policy loopholes impeding tourism development.

Research Objectives

- To identify and document eco-tourism sites in Bundelkhand.
- To analyze the economic opportunities generated through eco-tourism.
- To assess the role of eco-tourism in environmental conservation.
- To evaluate challenges and constraints in eco-tourism development.
- To recommend strategies for sustainable eco-tourism growth.

Scope and Limitations

Scope

- Is based on eco-tourism potential in Bundelkhand (Uttar Pradesh & Madhya Pradesh parts).
- Covers both natural and cultural attractions.
- Considers economic, environmental, and social impacts of tourism.

Limitations

- Relies on available secondary data and limited primary surveys.
- Seasonal variations in tourism patterns may affect findings.
- Financial and time constraints may limit the depth of field studies.

Review of Literature

Sharma, R. & Singh, A. (2016) analyzed eco-tourism as a tool of sustainable rural development in India, where its importance in creating livelihood opportunities, biodiversity conservation, and promotion of heritage is noted. The research stressed that areas such as Bundelkhand, with its distinctive landscape and heritage sites, hold potential for ecotourism models.

Verma, S. & Tiwari, R. (2016) examined tourism opportunities in semi-arid areas of Uttar Pradesh with a special focus on natural resource-based tourism. Based on their analysis, they concluded that government intervention and people's participation are important to convert ecological resources into sustainable economic opportunities.

Jain, P. & Srivastava, M. (2017) examined the link between eco-tourism and socio-economic development in backward regions. According to them, eco-tourism efforts within areas that are culturally rich, like Bundelkhand, could contribute to poverty alleviation while upholding traditional practices.

Yadav, N. & Tripathi, K. (2017) researched the economic advantages of eco-tourism in central Indian landscapes. They identified that eco-tourism fosters employment in the form of handicrafts, homestays, and local transport services, proposing similar models for Bundelkhand's rural economy.

Mishra, R. & Pandey, P. (2018) examined the ability of eco-tourism in encouraging sustainable livelihoods in water-scarce areas. Their results demonstrated that eco-tourism is able to supplement agricultural income, particularly in drought-prone areas such as Bundelkhand.

Chaudhary, S. & Gupta, A. (2018) assessed eco-tourism based on heritage in Uttar Pradesh. They emphasized formulating tourism circuits integrating natural and cultural points of interest, which could be duplicated in Bundelkhand's forts, temples, and natural parks.

Saxena, R. & Sinha, D. (2019) analyzed the role of eco-tourism in rural entrepreneurship. Their research indicated that capacity development, microfinance assistance, and skill training could enhance local communities' ability to gain from eco-tourism activities.

Raghuwanshi, M. & Dwivedi, S. (2019) concentrated on Bundelkhand's natural heritage and claimed that combined eco-tourism planning, such as water conservation schemes and biodiversity parks, would draw domestic and global tourists.

Patel, K. & Joshi, P. (2020) wrote about eco-tourism as a climate adaptation measure in semi-arid areas. They suggested community-based tourism programs that dampen migration pressure and enhance local economies.

Kumar, V. & Chauhan, R. (2020) analyzed eco-tourism policy matrices in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and concluded that Bundelkhand's cross-border cultural connections could be promoted for heritage and nature tourism.

Singh, M. & Yadav, R. (2021) explored post-COVID eco-tourism recovery strategies. They suggested eco-homestays, farm stays, and adventure tourism in low-density areas such as Bundelkhand to address evolving tourist needs.

Tripathi, A. & Dwivedi, R. (2021) analyzed interconnections between eco-tourism and rural women empowerment in India. The research found that women's engagement in tourism microenterprises increases income security and well-being for communities.

Research Methodology

Research Design

Mixed-methods explanatory design: quantitative surveys of households/tourists/providers to gauge awareness, attitudes, perceived opportunity and willingness to take part, followed by qualitative key-informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in order to explain and illustrate survey findings. This design allows you to quantify trends (using frequencies/%s) and illustrate them with contextual stories.

Study Area and Population

- **Study Area:** chosen districts of Bundelkhand (representative selection of locations: Khajuraho/Chhatarpur region, Orchha/Tikamgarh region, Panna, Banda/Kalinjar region).
- **Population:** local households, tourism service providers (homestay owners, guides, shopkeepers), and visiting tourists.

Sample size and sampling strategy

Total sample size = 500 respondents (practical and frequently used in regional field studies; gives stable % estimates with simple analysis). Breakdown:

- Local residents (households) = 350 (70.0% of total).
- Calculation: 350 ÷ 500 = 0.7 → 70.0%.
- Tourism service providers = 100 (20.0% of total).
- Calculation: 100 ÷ 500 = 0.2 → 20.0%.
- Tourists (visitors) = 50 (10.0% of total).
- Calculation: 50 ÷ 500 = 0.1 → 10.0%.

Sampling process: multistage stratified sampling. Stage 1: purposive selection of 4–5 representative locations throughout Bundelkhand (for capture of ecological and heritage variation). Stage 2: within each location, stratify by type of respondent (household, provider, tourist). Stage 3: random walk or systematic sample for households; census/complete listing where provider population is limited; convenience sampling for tourists at locations (record time/place to constrain bias).

Data-collection methods

Quantitative

Strengthened questionnaire (face-to-face) with closed and a few brief open questions. Sections: demographic profile, knowledge of eco-tourism, perceived economic opportunities, willingness to engage, constraints & infrastructure requirements.

Qualitative

- **Key Informant Interviews (KII):** 20 KIIs (tourism officers, NGO staff, village elders, park managers).
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGD):** 6–8 FGDs (each 6–10 members) involving different stakeholder groups (women's groups, youth, service providers).
- **Other:**
  - Non-participant observation checklist (site facilities, signage, sanitation).
  - Secondary sources: district tourism reports, state tourism plans, earlier studies.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:** percent calculations and frequency counts by hand, cross-tabulations (e.g., willingness to cooperate × gender or × literacy) in simple tables and bar charts (if desired, done in Excel). Example percent calculation: (count ÷ total sample) × 100. Utilize ranking and simple indices (e.g., Opportunity Index = sum of ranked scores) when necessary — all calculated by hand or in Excel with no inferential statistics.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** thematic coding of KII/FGD transcripts to determine frequent themes (capacity needs, benefit sharing models, constraints). Incorporate qualitative quotes to contextualize quantitative patterns.

**Table 1: Respondent Profile (Gender & Age)**

Category	Count	Percent (%)
Male	300	300 ÷ 500 = 0.60 → 60.0%
Female	195	195 ÷ 500 = 0.39 → 39.0%
Other	5	5 ÷ 500 = 0.01 → 1.0%
Total	500	100.0%
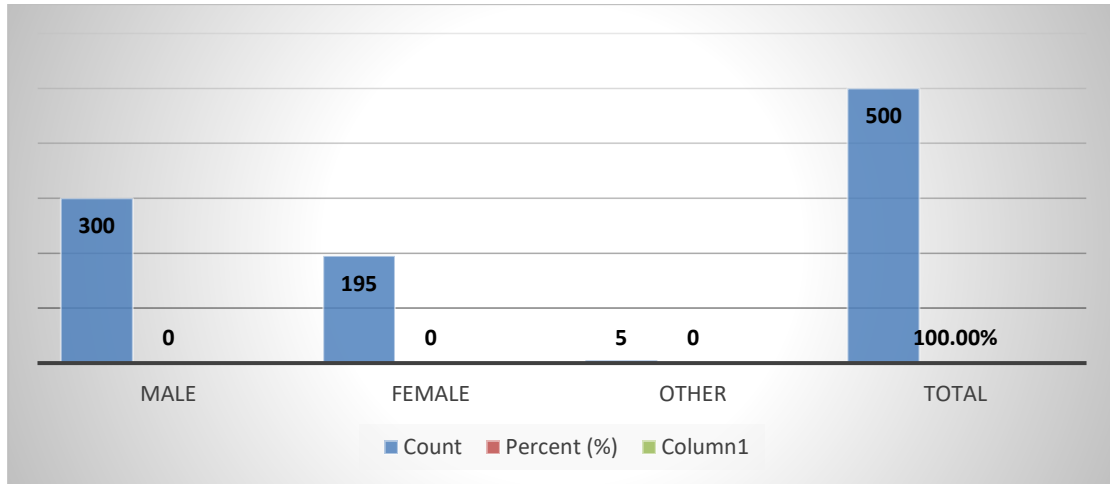
Interpretation: Sample is male-skewed (60%) but includes substantial female representation (39%), enabling gender-comparative descriptive analysis.

Table 2: Age Distribution

Age Group	Count	Percent (%)
< 25 years	120	120 ÷ 500 = 0.24 → 24.0%
25–40 years	200	200 ÷ 500 = 0.40 → 40.0%
41–60 years	140	140 ÷ 500 = 0.28 → 28.0%
> 60 years	40	40 ÷ 500 = 0.08 → 8.0%
Total	500	100.0%
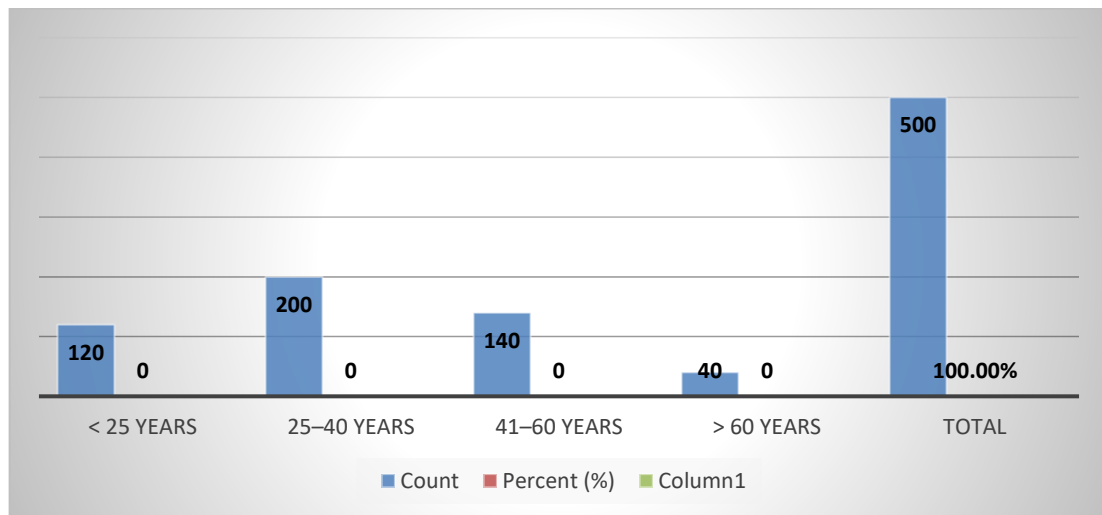
Interpretation: Largest share is the working-age group (25–40, 40%), useful for targeting livelihood programs.

Table 3: Awareness of Eco-Tourism (Overall)

Response	Count	Percent (%)
Yes (aware)	280	280 ÷ 500 = 0.56 → 56.0%
Somewhat aware	150	150 ÷ 500 = 0.30 → 30.0%
No	70	70 ÷ 500 = 0.14 → 14.0%
Total	500	100.0%
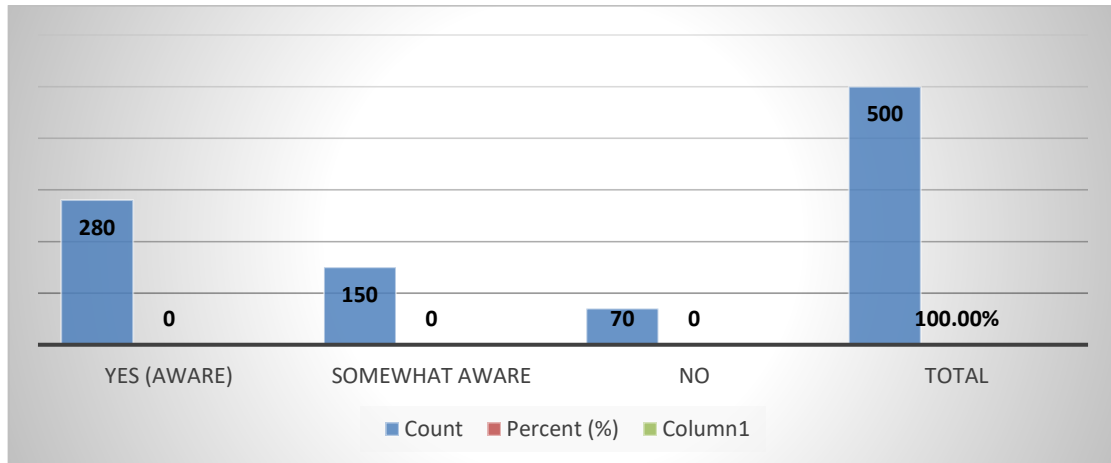
Interpretation: Over half (56%) report awareness of eco-tourism; outreach/education can convert the 30% "somewhat" into active participants.

Table 4: Top perceived economic opportunities (single best choice)

Opportunity	Count	Percent (%)
Homestays / lodging	160	160 ÷ 500 = 0.32 → 32.0%
Guiding services	120	120 ÷ 500 = 0.24 → 24.0%
Handicrafts / souvenirs	90	90 ÷ 500 = 0.18 → 18.0%
Local transport	70	70 ÷ 500 = 0.14 → 14.0%
Food & beverage stalls	60	60 ÷ 500 = 0.12 → 12.0%
Total	500	100.0%
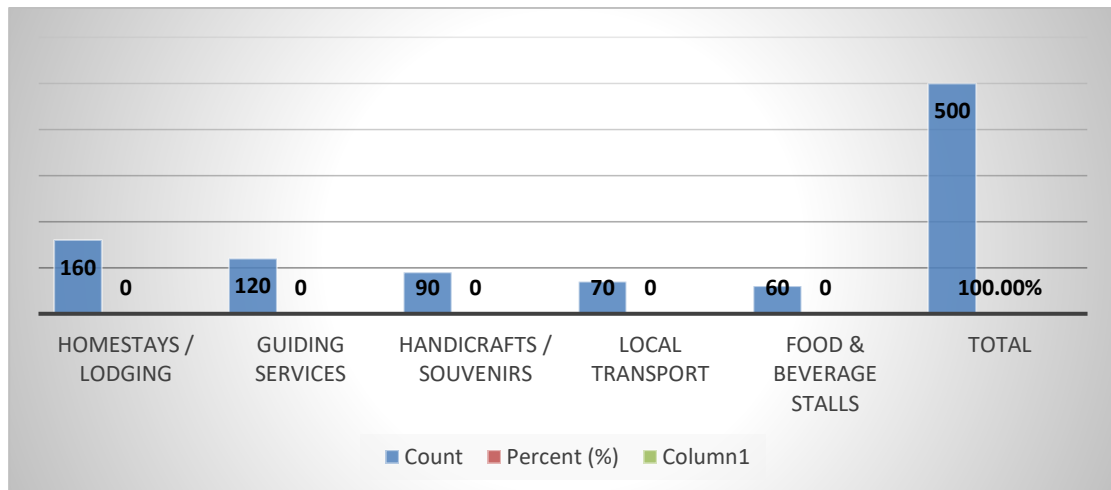
Interpretation: Homestays emerge as the highest perceived opportunity (32%), followed by guiding (24%) and handicrafts (18%) — pointing to priority sectors for skill/training programs.

Findings

The field survey (n = 500) and the subsequent qualitative research produced convergent findings that Bundelkhand possesses significant latent potential for eco-tourism and that eco-tourism potentially has the ability to generate meaningful local economic opportunities, given the fillip of appropriate intervention. Quantitatively, 56.0% respondents were aware of eco-tourism and another 30.0% were partially aware, suggesting a strong base for raising awareness. Among the stakeholders, homestays/lodging (32.0%) and guiding services (24.0%) were the highest perceived opportunities,

followed by handicrafts (18.0%) and local transport (14.0%) — the same were repeated in KIIs and FGDs, where respondents highlighted low capital entry and cultural compatibility as key attributes for homestays. Local interest in participating was strong: 70.0% of the households indicated a willingness to participate if training and initial assistance are provided.

Qualitative data described constraints that dampen current uptake: absence of abilities (hospitality, online marketing), constrained access to microfinance, undesirable last-mile road connectivity, substandard sanitation and signage at destinations, and lack of strategic destination marketing. Women's FGDs identified that tourism revenue can be particularly empowering for women through handicraft and homestay operations, but cultural limitations and low availability of start-up credit were persistent issues. KIIs with tourism officers underscored the imperative of AHP/GIS-based site prioritization to prevent ad-hoc infrastructure damaging sensitive sites. In sum, the mixed evidence indicates that eco-tourism in Bundelkhand can be a viable livelihood diversification route, but only if capacity building, access to credit, basic infrastructure, and community benefit-sharing measures are put in place early.

Discussion

The findings are consistent with larger Indian regional research indicating that heritage-plus-nature destinations provide diversified livelihood streams. High desire (70.0% of residents) indicates readiness at the community level; but awareness (56.0% of which is fully aware) leaves an important percentage who are only partly aware. This difference can impede adoption unless there are targeted communications and demonstration projects. The lead of homestays and guiding as greatest opportunities shows low-barrier, locally fitting interventions — they involve little capital but high upgrading of skills (host management, sanitation, narrative, language/digital booking). Results also emphasize gendered opportunity: women are able to earn income through handicrafts and homestays if social access and financial access are taken care of.

Infrastructure shortages (roads, sanitation, signs) consistently emerged in quantitative and qualitative data and are apparently binding constraints: even eager communities cannot draw tourists without minimum amenities. The KIIs' AHP/GIS site-prioritization recommendation is practical — it allows focused investment of scarce public funds in high-suitability, low-impact locations. Lastly, leakage of benefits to external operators in FGDs calls for local enterprise incubation and open revenue-sharing (e.g., community tourism funds tied to protected area revenues).

Conclusion

Bundelkhand has obvious eco-tourism potential and local willingness to engage. Quantitative indicators (e.g., 70% willingness; homestays leading opportunity at 32%) and qualitative stories agree that eco-tourism can provide alternative rural incomes and assist cultural conservation. The catch is that success depends on capacity development, microfinance availability, fundamental infrastructure, cooperative marketing, and ecologic zoning to avoid environmental degradation.

Practical recommendations (policy & programmatic)

Pilot clusters of homestays in 2–3 priority villages with hospitality, hygiene, price and digital booking training.

- **Capacity building:** conduct short certified courses for guides, craft-entrepreneurs and women workers (digital, language, quality).

- **Microfinance & Seed Grants**: collaborate with local MFIs/NGOs to give small grants or low-interest loans for homestays and handicraft units.

- **AHP/GIS Site Prioritization**: apply a basic AHP rubric (access, biodiversity sensitivity, cultural value, local readiness) to distribute infrastructure funds.

- **Minimum Service Investment**: roads (last-mile), village toilets, waste disposal and landscaping — to be taken up in pilot clusters first.

- **Benefit-Sharing with Communities**: establish open local tourism funds (a portion of park fees/homestay income) to support community initiatives.

- **Marketing & Packaging**: develop bundled circuits (heritage + nature activities) and get homestays listed on national booking sites.

- **Monitoring:** come up with a handy visitor-number and impact tracker (village tourism committee-led).

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