

ECOTOURISM: A REALITY OR A GIMMICK.

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is being promoted as a form of tourism which leaves a less negative impact on the environment than the mainstream tourism. As per the definitions given by various authors, ecotourism involves travel to natural areas, elements of environmental conservation and upliftment of local communities. In other words, if we mix touristic travel with a pinch of environmental conservation and also add to this the element of local upliftment (direct or indirect) we produce a product called Ecotourism. But the question arises, does the concept of ecotourism that is being promulgated on papers mean the same thing when it comes to its practical applicability? Or does the theoretical concept of ecotourism have a practical acceptability? The main aim of this paper is to find answers to the above questions by going through the existing literature on the subject.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, Reality, Kashmir, Marketing Gimmick, Conservation, practical applicability, practical acceptability, systematic literature review.*

I INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is defined as

"Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015).

"Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples" (Eco-Trips and Travel, n.d.).

In the last two decades, the concept of ecotourism has been given huge publicity. Ecotourism is being promoted as a saviour to the environmental concerns caused by the main stream tourism. Lot many definitions have come up in the past to make people understand the concept of Ecotourism. But with each new definition, things tend to get complex as there are many authors who have interpreted 'ecotourism' in different ways. There is no universal definition for the concept "Ecotourism". Different scholars have a different interpretation of the subject. And there are scholars and academicians who challenge the core concept of ecotourism by saying that

concept of ecotourism looks good on papers but when it comes to practicality it behaves same as mainstream tourism. Also, there are scholars and academicians who are of the view that Ecotourism is just a marketing gimmick and is nothing different than the mainstream tourism.

So the question arises, that does the concept of ecotourism that is being promulgated on papers mean the same thing when it comes to its practical applicability? Or in other words, does the theoretical concept of ecotourism have a practical acceptability?

The main aim of this literature review is to find answers to the above questions by going through the existing literature on the subject.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental concerns within the developed nations has emerged as a major socio-political issue throughout the world during the past decade and the increased number of environment friendly or 'green' products has also been significant. 'Green' products have achieved substantial awareness among consumers and they are no longer regarded as a gimmick or a fad (Juwaheer, 2005). There has been a gradual shift of the interest of the tourism markets from luxuriousness and extravagance towards more responsible forms of tourism over the past few decades. This shift has brought the inevitable evolution in tourism i.e. the concept of Ecotourism. Ecotourism, if applied properly, has the potential to promote environmental consciousness, awareness and environmental education (Naziridis & Telopoulos, 2015). Ecotourism has become a popular word within the tourism & conservation fields. Significant economic and political resources have been committed to ecotourism on the supposition that it accomplishes conservation and development objectives (Lindberg, 1996).

Ecotourism seemingly would not exist, and certainly, would not exist in the shape it is present today, were it not for the dynamic involvement of the academic community. Academics and academia have played an important stewardship role in the conceptualization and operationalization of this activity, more so than any other type of tourism. Ecotourism has evolved and is still evolving through three stages i.e. the 'New Dawn' stage, the 'Crisis of Legitimacy' stage and the 'Sustainable Product Niche' stage. The 'New Dawn' stage is exemplified by idealism, hyperbole and hope. It is followed quickly by a 'Crisis of Legitimacy,' where faultfinders illustrate that the ecotourism largely fails to meet its social, financial and environmental standards that has not yet been resolved completely. At last, ecotourism reaches maturity when it achieves the "Sustainable Product Niche" stage where a reasonable understanding of what it can and cannot do, emerges (Mckercher, 2010).

In current times ecotourism is turning to be a hype word in the tourism industry. It has gained popularity because of two of its primary prongs i.e. economic incentives and conservation benefits, both to the locals and the destination. Ecotourism greatly relies on the wealth of natural heritage to lure in tourists (Abdullah, Weng & Som, 2011). Ecotourism is being promoted by many conservationists as a strategy to protect natural resources while also meeting human needs. Ecotourism is not only a financial "apparatus" for conservation, but rather additionally the reason for new values and social relations (Stronza, 2007). Ecotourism has developed as one of the quickest growing sectors of the tourism industry, affected primarily by public demand for all the more

environmentally responsible tourism. If planned properly, it has been asserted that ecotourism can accommodate conservation of biodiversity with socio-economic development of local communities. For the same reason, numerous government and non-government organizations are anxious to develop ecotourism in protected territories keeping in mind the end goal to augment these advantages. However, ecotourism can have critical negative effects when half-baked and poorly managed including extreme environmental degradation, negative cultural changes and decreased welfare of individuals or communities. Ecotourism ought not to be viewed as a panacea for harmonizing rural development with environmental conservation until its impact on developing nations has been analyzed thoroughly. The local communities adjoining protected regions are mostly not involved in the planning process of tourism development. Ecotourism as a component for accomplishing local conservation and development goals is more fruitful when projects prioritise local involvement and control (Matthews, 2002).

Two prevailing perspectives of ecotourism relate to conservation & marketing perspectives. But unfortunately, the marketing perspective through "eco-sell," often exploits growing consumer interest in "green" products. Ecotourism would benefit from product and performance standards and an ethics-based orientation. If managed properly, conservation and ecotourism can be compatible, complementary, and sustainable (Wight, 1993).

Ecotourism was created as the antidote to mass tourism's disregard or over exploitation of pristine destinations. But the term ecotourism is easily abused. Marketing, from product development to promotion, creates expectations for both hosts and guests. Procedures and oversight must be set up in a way which guarantees that ecotourism stays consistent with its intended purpose. Around the world, this is still a work in progress (McGahey, 2012). Ecotourism is not nature tourism, farm tourism or adventure tourism, but rather a unique tourism form that has turned out to be very popular due to the greening of markets, expanding learning of the fragility of the environment, and the acknowledgement that there is a strong & close relationship between ecology and economy. Although many definitions have come up for the concept 'Ecotourism', but one of the most central dimensions, co-operation, has not been included. Ecotourism should be sustainable and more importantly four groups of actors i.e. the local people, authorities, tourists and companies involved in tourism have to co-operate (Bjork, 2000).

Concepts such as ecotourism and sustainability have existed for a few decades as of now. However, the tourism business still feels that these definitions are misty and that they mystify and confuse both consumers and tourism businesses (Tuohino & Hynonen, 2001). Ecotourism is a popular term, but at the same time, the term ecotourism is ambiguous, misunderstood by tourists, tourism hosts and academics. It has been receiving attention since it has turned into the fastest growing sector in the tourism industry. Ecotourism literature that has been published has invested much time attempting to define the term and pinpoint precisely what ecotourism is, theoretically. Numerous definitions have been proposed, however, none have been universally acknowledged or accepted. Much literature likewise exists on ecotourism case studies, yet these remain imperfect since nobody can truly choose what ecotourism is or how it ought to look. There is a large gap between understanding and implementing true ecotourism, as well as understanding and experiencing what one believes to be ecotourism,

however, true ecotourism is inevitably an impossible reality to numerous cynics, both tourists and academics (Einarsdóttir, 2010)

The centre of ecotourism lies in "ecologically travelling" and "travelling in the ecological environment", however looking at the phenomenon of fake ecotourism products it is seen that the philosophy of ecotourism is not in practice at all (He-you, S. 2008). Ecotourism is broadly perceived as a nature-based anatomy of alternative tourism that includes the virtuous traits that mass tourism allegedly lacks. Henceforth, the idea of mass ecotourism is normally observed as a disagreement in wording or paradoxical expression. However, ecotourism as both a reality and an ideal can logically be conceived as a form of mass tourism, and not its opposite (Weaver, 2001).

The adeptness of ecotourism to protect both people and places is an unresolved and growing, concern. The commoditisation of host culture and environment is a widely reported social effect of tourism and spawns an array of implications regarding indigenous people's view of their places and themselves. The degree of impact from ecotourism development is related to the degree of market development within the indigenous community and their state of decline regarding natural resource scarcity. Pre-existing power differentials between local people and other groups may be exacerbated by ecotourism development. To protect both people and their places, native people's claim to control ought to be legitimized by governments and conservation agencies, especially indigenous people's role in the technical management of the protected regions. Regional and national government controls are accordant at the birth of ecotourism development, but ultimately should be reduced to one of infrastructure planning and coordination (King & Stewart, 1996).

Ecotourism is frequently positioned as an alternative option to mass tourism, however, the understanding and implementation of the abstraction have been riddled with uncertainty. The ideal balance of conservation & development at the same time is considered paradoxical not only for ecotourism but also for the related concepts like sustainability. Ecotourism has not accomplished the objective of integrating conservation of biodiversity and the socioeconomic development of adjacent communities. One explanation behind the existing implementation problems has been the concept itself and how it has been operationalised. Moreover, ecotourism in the developing nations has been tormented with issues identified with non-realization of promised benefits, none or weak development structures and absence of efficient governance and management. There must be a more noteworthy coordination between the stakeholders involved in ecotourism and of key intrigue, the support and participation of the government and the local community (Magio, Velarde, Santillan & Rios, 2013).

Ecotourism ought to endeavour to accomplish targets which result in "better" ecotourists and a better natural environment. It is perceived that what is viewed as better, or a more attractive type of ecotourism, is exceptionally subjective and perhaps disagreeable. All things considered, the wide assortment of meanings of the term ecotourism suggests that the argument over what ecotourism is, and what it ought to be, continues. An examination and presentation of these various definitions as a continuum permits the development of a contention that ecotourists ought to be encouraged, through the management procedure of the ecotourism

operation, to become active contributors to the health and viability of the natural environment. This contention is not a new one, however, the methods by which one can quantify the attractive quality of an ecotourism operation in accomplishing this more alluring state will help with the comparison of one ecotourism operation against another. Also, it can give a premise whereby the accomplishment of another management strategy can be tried (Cosmescu & Cosmescu, 2007).

As the most alluring choice for sustainable development of tourism industry, ecotourism still experiences the absence of an obvious and generally acknowledged definition, posturing many risks and threats in its practices. The objects of ecotourism ought to go past natural, pristine, or even only primitive natural areas to including cultural resources together with their natural context which also deserve preservation. Tourism operators have more influence compared to tourists and thus ought to shoulder more responsibilities for conservation. Ecotourism ought to fill in, as a principle, to guide tourism initiatives towards sustainability, rather than merely a special tour package (Meng, Jun & Zhengzheng, 2009).

The literature on ecotourism is mainly concerned around market segmentation, ecological impacts of wildlife viewing, and community-based ecotourism, yet there has been insignificant regard for areas such as quality control, the industry, external environments or institutions even as the components and parameters of ecotourism are being amplified. This unevenness, consolidated with the fragmentation and lack of integration within the literature, suggest that ecotourism, as a field of academic inquiry, is still in a condition of adolescence (Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

III CONCLUSION

A literature review of the topic suggests that the term ecotourism is confusing, misunderstood by tourists, tourism hosts, and academics as nobody can truly choose what ecotourism is or how it ought to look. Numerous definitions that have been proposed so far don't have universal acceptance. There is a large gap between understanding and implementing true ecotourism, as well as understanding and experiencing what one believes to be ecotourism. There is a strong need that various eminent authors, academicians, scholars and other stakeholders come together and revisit the concept of ecotourism. Ecotourism looks good on papers but when it comes to its practical acceptability or implementation, and then things start to behave abnormally. There has to be a universal definition for the concept "Ecotourism" in order to avoid confusion among academicians and other stakeholders. We need to broaden the scope of ecotourism and include within the concept of ecotourism other places such cultural and heritage sites in order to make things simple. And once a universal definition is drafted, it will become easy for various stakeholders to implement the concept without confusion.

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