

Visitor Perception and Attitude towards Ecotourism Development and Ecotourism Management – A Study of Great Himalayan National Park Kullu, India

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Abstract: Ecotourism has emerged as an important tool for socio-economic development for communities in natural areas around the world. It provides opportunities for visitors to experience the natural world and learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation. Ecotourism can also help preserve local cultures by providing an alternative to traditional forms of tourism that can often be disruptive. Ecotourism plays a vital role because it can create employment opportunities in remote regions that traditionally have benefitted less from economic development initiatives than more populated areas. Ecotourism is essential in terms of fostering the awareness and appreciation of nature and the ecosystem, which is one of its objectives. The present research addresses concentrating on the different aspects such as analyses of visitor's demographic profiles and their characteristic of visit; Visitors perceptions and attitude on ecotourism resource and ecotourism management. The objective of current study analyses the perception and attitude of visitors in the Great Himalayan National Parks district Kullu Himachal Pradesh. To gather the visitor's opinion the current study we had conducted survey of 250 visitors by using a structured questionnaire. Statistical techniques percentage analysis, mean, and standard deviation and inferential statistical tools such as independent sample t-test and ANOVA were employed to analyse the collected data. The study found that the visitors have positively revealed all the ecotourism attributes. The results provide the useful insight and implications on ecotourism resources management in the park. It will possibly helps in ecotourism management and ecotourism resources in the park.

Keywords: Visitor Perception, Ecotourism management, Socio- Economic Development, Environment conservation

Introduction

Ecotourism has been called a "panacea" because of all the ways it is said to help preserve the environment and fund research and conservation worldwide. It can also be beneficial to local communities, promoting development in less developed countries while educating and sensitizing tourists to different cultures and ecosystems. Some even claim that ecotourism could help build world peace. Ecotourism is a type of low impact tourism that takes place in natural or undisturbed areas. It is different from traditional tourism because it allows travellers to learn about the area - both in terms of its physical landscape and cultural characteristics. Ecotourism often provides funds for conservation and benefits the economic development of places that are frequently impoverished. The term 'ecotourism' was first used in 1965 by Hetzer, who defined it as tourism that minimizes environmental impacts, respects host cultures, and maximizes benefits to local people and tourist satisfaction. Ecotourism is therefore a form of responsible tourism that seeks to minimize its negative impact on the environment and local communities while maximizing its positive contributions. Other early references to ecotourism are found in (Miller's, 1978) work on national park planning for eco-development in Latin America, and documentation produced by Environment Canada in relation to a set of road-based 'ecotours' they developed from the mid - 1979s through to the early 1980s. The ecotourism has become prevalent concept since the mid - 1980s and it has witnessed the fastest development of all sub sectors in the tourism industry. The popularity indicates proofs of a shift in tourist's perspectives, increasing environment preservation, and a desire to explore natural environments. Nature tourism, nature travel minimal impact tourism green tourism, soft tourism, bio tourism, ecologically responsible tourism and other have been used in literature; however they are not identical with ecotourism. Ecotourism is the most popular and fastest-growing segment in the tourism industry. This surge in popularity indicates that people are showing more interest in nature and the environment. This is backed up by other research, such as (Eagles and Higgins, 1998). Ecotourism has the potential to play a vital role in sustainable development and generate income through effective monitoring of market trends (Wood, 2002). Ecotourism is a sustainable tourism strategy that benefits both conservation efforts and local communities in and around protected areas. It can generate much-needed revenues for protected area management, provide local employment opportunities, and help develop a sense of community ownership and responsibility for conservation (Jalani, 2012).

The worship of nature and the conservation of ethical values have been an inseparable part of Indian thought and tradition for centuries. Traces of this can be found in the ancient civilizations of India, when people used to nurture the philosophy of the oneness of life. The Indian tradition has always taught that humankind is a part of nature and one should look upon all creation with eyes of love and respect. It is tragic that over the past few decades, the quest for material gain and economic progress has led to the exploitation of nature. Today, the world is facing a deep crisis and is in danger of being destroyed. Rich forest areas and biological diversity have been relentlessly depleted to make way for concrete structures. The continuous destruction of forest reserves has led

to global warming and greenhouse effects. Fortunately, this has led to some realization, and now the world has awakened for new beginnings about human responsibility towards nature.

Literature review

“Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and improving the well-being of local people” (TIES, 1991). The definition of TIES was created with six key principles in mind: 1) To reduce impact; 2) To increase awareness and respect for the environment and culture; 3) To create positive experiences for visitors and hosts; 4) To provide financial aid specifically for conservation; 5) Create financial opportunities and empowerment for locals; and 6) To raise travelers’ sensitivity to the host countries’ political, environmental, and social climates. The nature-based tourism range of activities is relatively undeveloped, including landscapes, terraces, waterways, vegetation, wildlife and cultural heritage (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Ecotourism is defined as “as a form of tourism that fosters learning experiences and appreciation of the natural environment or some component thereof, within its associated cultural context preferably in a way that enhances the natural and cultural resources” (Weaver, 2001: 15). “ecotourism is tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified objectives of studying, and enjoying nature and its wild plants and animals, as well as existing cultural aspects (both the past and present) focus in these areas” (UNWTO, 2002). Ecotourism is a type of travel that involves visits to natural areas that are still relatively unspoiled and untainted by humans. The goal of ecotourism is to appreciate nature, learn about the local environment, and contribute to the community in some way (Chan and Baum, 2007; Haig and McIntyre, 2002; Rigatti, 2016; Walker and Moscardo, 2014). Ecotourism is a sub-set of sustainable tourism that seeks to balance economic growth, social benefits and environmental conservation (Walker and Moscardo, 2014). Ecotourism travel experiences offer a wide range of economic benefits related to nature-based activities, such as seeing wildlife, bird watching, hiking, climbing, trekking, nature education/walks, canoeing, sea kayaking, scuba or snorkel diving, and cave exploration (Sangpikul, 2017).

Tourist Perception and related Studies in Ecotourism

Perception is the cognitive process of interpreting sensory information to form a mental representation of the world (Rangkuti, 2009). Perception is how we experience the world around us through our senses. It's the process of recognizing environmental stimuli and reacting to them. We use perception to gather information about the things we need to survive. Not only does perception create our experience of the world; it allows us to take action within it (Cherry K 2012). It is important to understand how tourists perceive the places they visit, as this can impact how successful a tourism destination is. Tourist perception is a significant topic in the tourism industry because tourists base their destination choices on their senses and past experiences. What tourists see, consume, or are exposed to at the destinations helps to create a meaningful understanding of their holiday trips. By better understanding tourist perception, businesses in the tourism industry can provide a more memorable and enjoyable experience for their customers (Gnanapala, 2015). Understanding tourists' perceptions of the destination environment can give destination authorities the information they need to manage the destination effectively (Barnes, 2015; Gnanapala, 2015). To gain a better understanding of how tourists perceive their holiday experiences at different destinations, scholars often measure tourist perceptions. This could be in terms of trip satisfaction or tourist opinions/attitudes toward the destination environment (Barnes, 2015; Gnanapala, 2015). Studies of tourist perceptions provide destination authorities with information about the implications for tourism management at both the macro and micro levels (e.g., destinations, cities, or tourism businesses).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are to:

1. To explore and analyze how visitors perceive ecotourism development and management in the study area.
2. To study the differences in perception of visitors towards ecotourism with respect to their demographic profile.

Hypothesis of the Study

H0: There is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of visitors towards ecotourism with respect to their demographic profile.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted in the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) a UNESCO World Heritage Site from April to June 2021 in order to gain a qualitative understanding of visitor perceptions and attitudes towards ecotourism in the research area. The purpose of this research is to understand and describe the perception and attitudes of ecotourism among visitors. This study used a qualitative research approach, which consists of several stages: preparation, field observation and investigation, data collection, data analysis, and writing the final report. The data's validity was checked using source triangulation. This means that different sources of data were compared with each other, including observations from the field, results from interviews, and related documents. Using triangulation of sources helped researchers to identify which data sources were most useful for collecting the required information. To obtain direct explanations and more accurate information from the respondents about the ecotourism development and ecotourism management, several questions were asked to the informants during the interview process. The Likert scale is used to measure the level of agreement or disagreement of a particular question. The Five point Likert scale is the most common scale used in research questionnaires. The term (Likert-type scale) is often used interchangeably with rating scale, although there are other types of rating scales. A total of 250 visitors were surveyed via questionnaire in order to gauge their perceptions of current ecotourism development and management practices. The data was collected within three months' worth of visits (April - June 2020). The respondents were interviewed using accidental sampling, which means that the respondent was interviewed by chance (Hendriyani 2018). Sampling was taken every day at 09:00 a.m.-12: 00 p.m. and 3: 00 p.m.-5: 00 p.m. for three months, from April to June 2021. The timing of the data collection is based on the average number of visits in the morning and evening. Overall, the number of visits on a weekday is far less than the number of visits on the weekend. Other criteria observed by researchers are tourists profile their characteristics to visits, visitor’s attitudes and perception towards ecotourism.

Results and Discussion

The primary data was collected through a questionnaire survey with personal interviews. The questionnaire comprised of two main sections. The first section was developed to identify the tourists' demographics variables and travelling related characteristics. The second section was employed to identify the tourists' perception and attitude towards the ecotourism development and ecotourism management with the five-point Likert Scale (1= Strongly Agree to 5= Strongly Disagree). In order to gain insight into tourists' perceptions of ecotourism, interviews were conducted with tourists. The questions focused on topics such as the meaning and concepts of ecotourism, ecotourism management and development, learning, natural environment, local people participation and cultural appreciation. The data gathered from the questionnaires were then analyzed and organized into tables and graphs. The analysis looked at tourist perceptions towards ecotourism management of the area and the attractions. The results of the study showed that most tourists had positive perceptions.

Reliability Analysis

The reliability of a construct is the measure of its internal consistency in a study. A construct is considered reliable if its alpha value is greater than .70 (Hair et al., 2013). The reliability of this research construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The results revealed that the authentic scale with all items had an alpha of .853.

Demographic Profiling of the Visitors

Table 1. Characteristics of the population Sample (N=250).

Variables	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	156	62.4
Female	94	37.4
Age Group		
Under – 30	77	30.8
31-40	79	31.6
41-50	44	17.6
51- 60	33	13.2
Above -61	17	6.8
Educational levels		
Matriculation	30	12.0
Higher Secondary	42	16.8
Graduate	116	46.4
Post Graduate	56	22.4
Others	6	2.4
Employment Status		
Full Time Employed	78	31.2
Unemployed	21	8.4
Self Employed	98	39.2
Students	32	12.8
Retired	21	8.4
Monthly Income		
Below Rs. 10000	61	24.4
Rs. 10001- 20000	48	19.2
Rs. 20001 – 50000	81	32.4
Above - 50000	60	24.0

Source: Calculation based on field survey, 2020.

In the sample, 62.4% of respondents were male, while the remaining 37.6% were female. The ages of respondents were grouped into cohorts: less than 30 years, 31-40 years, and 41- 50 years, 51 – 60 years and 61 or above years. The largest number of respondents were in the 31-40 years age group (31.6%), followed by those below 30 years (30.8%), 41-50 years (17.6%), 51 –60 years (13.2%) and 61 or above (6.8%). In this survey, respondents were asked to disclose their highest level of education attained. The data showed that 46.4% of the respondents had graduated from college, 22.4% had a post-graduate degree, 16.8% had completed high school, and 12% had only completed high school level education. The respondents were asked to choose their main occupation from the following: full time employed, unemployed, self employed, students and retired. The main occupation among the respondents was self employed or own business (39.2%), followed by full time employed (31.2%), students (12.8%), retired (8.4%) and unemployed (8.4%). The monthly income cohorts were categorized as: below Rs. 10000, more than Rs. 10000 but less than Rs. 20000, more than 20000 but less than Rs. 50000, and above 50000. The largest cohort according to monthly income was in the category of more than Rs. 20000 (32.4%) but less than Rs. 50000, followed by below or less than Rs. 10000 (24.4%), and 50000 or more than (24.0%). Accordingly, nearly 19.2% of respondents had monthly income of 10000 but less than 20000.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Variables related to Visitors Perception and Attitudes towards Ecotourism

Statements	Perception						
	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Deviation
Natural forests are the main components of ecotourism development.	64.0	25.2	6.4	4.4	0.0	1.51	.803
Ecotourism is traveling to naturally undisturbed areas.	46.8	43.2	5.2	4.8	0.0	1.68	.782

Ecotourism creates awareness and educates tourists about preserving culture and the environment.	44.0	45.2	5.2	5.6	0.0	1.72	.801
Eco-tourism' contributes to sustaining and supporting a natural environment.	27.2	52.0	12.8	8.0	0.0	2.02	.850
Eco-tourism poses fewer negative effects than mass tourism.	30.4	46.8	15.2	7.6	0.0	2.00	.874
Ecotourism is an effective way of sustainable tourism development while protecting the environment.	35.2	50.4	9.6	4.4	0.4	1.84	.799
Ecotourism provides well opportunities for the local people earning opportunities.	38.4	37.2	8.4	12.8	3.2	2.05	1.127
Local culture and folklore should be focused on the development of ecotourism.	26.8	46.4	17.6	9.2	0.0	2.09	.898
Locals can play an important role in the environmental planning and management committee.	38.0	47.6	8.4	6.0	0.0	1.82	.822
Ecotourism emphasized more locally produced items/products.	37.2	46.4	8.8	7.2	0.4	1.87	.878
A significant part of the profit from ecotourism should spend on the empowerment of the local community.	38.4	46.8	8.4	6.4	0.0	1.83	.835
Waste Disposal methods of factories, hotels, etc. that exist at tourist places should be continuously monitored.	63.2	26.8	6.4	3.6	0.0	1.50	.772
Construction at eco fragile areas should be allowed only if it adheres to the green building standards.	42.0	42.8	8.0	7.2	0.0	1.80	.868
The use of energy-efficient devices and techniques should be encouraged and publicized to generate awareness.	36.4	46.4	8.0	8.0	1.2	1.91	.932
Conservation agencies should create awareness about environmental issues among the people at all levels.	44.0	47.6	4.4	3.6	0.0	1.67	.726
Natural resource protection and tourism can be compatible.	46.0	46.4	3.6	4.0	0.0	1.66	.735
Protection of local heritage and tourism can be compatible.	55.2	39.2	2.8	2.8	0.0	1.53	.689
Well-managed attractions such as your Nature Parks, maintained in their natural state, are important to attract tourists.	67.2	27.6	1.6	3.6	0.0	1.42	.702

Note: SA*: Strongly Agree A*: Agree N*: Neutral D*: Disagree SD*: Strongly Disagree

The mean and standard deviation of all 18 ecotourism perception and attitude items were calculated. The results indicate that the average mean of all 18 items that are related to ecotourism perception and attitude is 1.77. This indicates that respondents generally have a positive attitude towards ecotourism. In contrast the variables such as 'Eco-tourism' contribute to sustaining and supporting a natural environment the mean = 2.02, SD= .850. Eco-tourism poses fewer negative effects than mass tourism the mean = 2.00, SD= .874 Ecotourism is an effective way of sustainable tourism development while protecting the environment the mean = 1.84, SD= .799, Ecotourism provides well opportunities for the local people earning and employment opportunities the mean is 2.05 SD= 1.127, Local culture and folklore should be focused on the development of ecotourism the mean is 2.09, SD= .898, Locals can play an important role in the environmental planning and management committee the mean = 1.82, SD= .822, ecotourism emphasized more locally produced items/products the mean = 1.87, .878 , a significant part of the profit from ecotourism should spend on the empowerment of the local community the mean is 1.83, SD= .835, construction at tourist destinations and eco fragile areas should be allowed only if it adheres to the green building standards the mean is 1.80, SD= .868, the use of energy-efficient devices and techniques should be encouraged and publicized to generate awareness the mean is 1.91, SD= .932, The statements that have the highest mean value are: natural forests are the main components of ecotourism development the mean is 1.51, SD= .803, ecotourism is traveling to naturally undisturbed areas the mean is 1.68, .782, ecotourism creates awareness and educates tourists about preserving culture and the environment the mean is 1.72, SD= .801, waste disposal methods of factories, hotels, etc. that exist at tourist places should be continuously monitored the mean is 1.50, SD= .772, conservation agencies should create awareness about environmental issues among the people at all levels the mean is 1.67, SD= .726, natural resource protection and tourism can be compatible the mean is 1.66, SD= .735, protection of local heritage and tourism can be compatible the mean is 1.53, SD= .689, well-managed attractions such as your Nature Parks, maintained in their natural state, are important to attract tourists the mean is 1.42, SD= .702.

Table 3. Gender wise Comparison of Mean Score of Male and Female Respondents**Group Statistics**

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	154	1.69	.770	.062
Female	96	1.73	.732	.075

Source: Calculation based on field survey, 2021.

Table 4. Results of independent Sample t-test

Visitor Perception	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.071	.790	-.350	248	.727	-.034	.098	-.228	.159
Equal variances not assumed			-.354	209.267	.724	-.034	.097	-.226	.157

Source: Calculation based on field survey, 2021.

As evident from Table above the p-value is 0.790 which is not significant at the 0.05 level with 248 df. This means that the mean score of perception for male and female respondents did not differ significantly. In this context, the null hypothesis "There is no significant difference in mean score of ecotourism perception of male and female visitors" is not rejected.

Table 5. Educational levels with regards to ecotourism perception to visitors**Group Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Matriculation	30	2.07	1.081	.197
Higher secondary	42	1.69	.643	.099
Graduate	114	1.59	.663	.062
Post graduate	56	1.77	.738	.099
Other	7	1.71	.951	.360
Total	249	1.71	.756	.048

Source: Calculation based on field survey, 2021.

Table 6. Results of ANOVA

Educational Groups	ANOVA				
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.722	4	1.431	2.569	.039
Within Groups	135.876	244	.557		
Total	141.598	248			

Source: Calculation based on field survey, 2021.

Since the p value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at 5 percent level of significance. Hence, we may conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between among education levels with respect to visitor's ecotourism perception.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the visitors' perceptions and attitudes towards ecotourism development and management in Great Himalayan National Park. Results showed that visitors have different interpretations of ecotourism based on factors such as the environment, local people participation, local art and culture. Most visitors want to develop ecotourism because they are optimistic about its prospects. The following attributes or statements were positively revealed by respondents as being important to them: nature and environment, local people involvement in ecotourism, environment education skills capability to protect the environment, protection of local art and heritage, well managed attractions and parks, sustainable infrastructural development. Visitors' adaptation efforts in respect to each Sex class, regional class, and level of education may have an influence on the appeal of ecotourism. The results of the inferential statistics also show that there is no significant difference in visitors' perceptions of ecotourism based on their demographics variables like gender, though the results also indicate that visitors have different level of their perception on the basis of their educational qualification, it means visitors perception differs with their education level. The

study concludes that visitors have positive attitudes and perceptions of their knowledge about the chosen location. By educating tourists about conservation and infusing awareness in them, we can help support ecotourism. The government should also take positive steps through proper monitoring and evaluation of ecotourism sites. Proper management of the sites at each level - economic, social and environmental - will also help in long term conservation. Thus, we hope to see a positive shift in the visitors' and local people's attitudes towards ecotourism.

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