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DYNAMICS OF SIKKIM ECOTOURISM AND ITS GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

Probably no other state in the Himalaya is more suited to ecotourism development as is Sikkim the land of the mystique. This article defines the concept of Ecotourism, and gives its evolution in Sikkim. Tourism as a whole is considered as the backbone of the Sikkim's economy. It has brought economic prosperity in Sikkim. With the beneficial climate, the natural beauty and the fine cultural heritage of Sikkim, the growth of ecotourism has immense possibilities. Ecotourism is a form of tourism which has gained lots of popularity in Sikkim tourism. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to study the sustainable development of ecotourism, type of ecotourism practiced in Sikkim and its benefits to state stakeholders in ecotourism industry. The research work was carried at various place of Sikkim. The source of data includes primary and secondary data. Travel agencies, NGO, local enterprise were the source of information for primary data. Tourism department, Eco tourism promotion agencies and the tourist were the source of information for secondary data.

KEYWORDS

sustainable ecotourism development, growth, type of ecotourism.

INTRODUCTION

Sikkim is a very small hilly state in the Eastern Himalayas with a rich biodiversity and formidable Physical Features. It is bounded by vast stretches of Tibetan Plateaus in the North, the Chumbi Valley of Tibet and the kingdom of Bhutan in the East, the kingdom of Nepal in the West and Darjeeling of West Bengal in the South. Today, travelers embarking on a journey of Sikkim discover a mystical wonderland of spectacular natural beauty. Sikkim has been given many names. The Lepchas, original inhabitants of the land called it Nye-mae-el'paradise'. The Bhutia it was Beymul Demazong 'the hidden valley of rice'. The panoramic perfection of the snow-capped Himalayas, the heady scent of the flower bedecked meadows, the vibrant culture and joyous festivals, the infinite variety of its flora and fauna makes it a holiday that is at once fascinating and challenging.

In the present context there is lot of interest in ecotourism world over. The international Ecotourism Society (TIES) and other non-governmental organization have been creating awareness about ecotourism. In ecotourism employment generations is possible in various activities related to wildlife watching, eco rangers, eco guides, eco lodges, conservation and research. This paper focuses on ecotourism as a tool for generating employment options, a tool for conservation and local community development, its linkages, economic benefits, sustainable revenue generation and its role in the economies development of Sikkim. The International ecotourism society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education" with the specification that education is to staff and guest. The ecotourism unambiguous states that those who implement, participate in and market ecotourism activities should adopt the following ecotourism principles.

- Minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts.
- Build environment and cultural awareness and respects.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- Deliver memorable interpretative experience to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries political, environmental, and social climates.
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- Recognize the right and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

DEFINITION RELATED TO SIKKIM ECOTOURISM

1. Ecotourism is a form of tourism that involves travelling to natural areas with the specific objectives of learning, admiring and enjoying nature and its wild plants and animals as well as local people's cultural aspects including religious monuments, while conserving the natural and social environment, and improving the welfare of the local people.
2. Ecotourism activities should be coordinated by a qualified nature and cultural interpreter designed to entertain and educate clients. Examples of above mentioned activities are-
 - Activities in mountain such as trekking, bird and wildlife watching, hiking, photography etc
 - Activities in rivers and lakes such as angling, rafting, kayaking etc
 - Participating in cultural and traditional events such as agro-tourism, handicraft making, fairs and festival and Himalayan folkways.
3. Sustainable Ecotourism Development – Development of ecotourism in the state of Sikkim, which meets the needs and aspiration of the current generation without compromising the ability to meet the need of future generations.
4. Ecotourism Assets – Natural and cultural features that attract visitors, such as landscapes, endemic or rare flora and fauna, local agricultural products, local culture including festivals, local folktales, history, historical monuments and heritage sites
5. Eco tour Operators- Tour operators specializing to cater ecotours collaborating with local people focused on local nature and culture based tourism.
6. Ecotourism Products- A combination of activities and services which are sold and managed through qualified ecotours operators including local communities or individuals.
7. Ecotourism Services- Services including transportation, local cuisine, camping, home stay, guiding and interpretation. These services should cause minimum damage to the natural and cultural environment and promote a better understanding of the natural and cultural aspects of an area.
8. Interpretation- Communication that helps visitors to understand and appreciate the community resources. Interpretation includes facts, but also reveals the reason of the importance of those facts so that visitors are able to understand why the resources should matter to the individual visitors. Interpreter is a person who provides interpretation in natural and cultural areas, interpretation center, parks etc.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the sustainable development of ecotourism in Sikkim
2. Type of ecotourism practiced in Sikkim and its Benefits to State Stakeholders in ecotourism industry.

SIKKIM ECOTOURISM PROGRESSION

Ecotourism is a concept that evolved over the last 20 years as the conservation community, people living in and around protected areas, and the travel industry witnessed a boom in nature tourism and realized their mutual interest in directing its growth. Ecotourism in Sikkim started in the year 1995 with trainings, awareness, changes in regulation to adapt to the mountainous terrain and entry of foreign tourist in many of restricted and protected areas. It took sizeable effort to augment the tourism activities based on nature exposition in the interior areas. Sikkim Government emphasized further with the support of stake holders of the base line areas of parks and sanctuary. Gradual involvement of the people with village tourism activities has further enhanced the concept of ecotourism in Sikkim. Sikkim ecotourism has contributed both in the terms of conservation of the biodiversity and generation of employment in the state among the local educated youths. There are many possible ways that ecotourism contributes to conservation. First, ecotourism can generate funds for protected areas. Second, it can create employment for surrounding communities, thus providing economic incentives to support protected areas. Third, it can advance environmental education for visitors. Fourth, it can provide justification for declaring areas as protected for increasing support for these areas.

The Ministry of Tourism has issued ecotourism guidelines for adoption of an ecotourism pledge which requires their members to adopt environment-friendly practices. The guiding principle of sustainable development is to meet the needs and aspiration of a region's present generation of people without compromising those of future generations. Sustainable development policies also seek to develop economic system that run with little or no net consumption of natural resources, and that avoid ecological damage. For the firsthand experience of traveling in the wilderness, of observing natural complexity, and of reflecting on the fragility of ecosystems stressed by human uses often gives Eco tourists and their local guides a new perspective on the value of environmental preservation and resource conservation.

Tourism has proved to be an engine of growth in many economies in the world. It provides for the generation of income, wealth and employment, and helps in the sustainable development of remote areas. In Sikkim ecotourism has been providing direct employment to a large section of the rural population and to some parts of urban population too. Its contribution to the economy of state is significant. India is recognized as one of the mega diversity centers of the world. India has two out of the 18 Biodiversity hot-spots in the world, which are in the Western Ghats and Eastern Himalayas. Sikkim, covering just 0.2% of the geographical area of the country, has tremendous biodiversity and has been identified as one of the hot spot in the Eastern Himalayas.

The Sikkim Himalayas falls under the Himalayan (2) Bio-geographic Zones and Central Himalaya (2c) Biotic Province. As per the Champion & Seth 1968 The Sikkim Himalayas falls under the Himalayan (2) Bio-geographic Zones and Central Himalaya (2C) Biotic Province. Sikkim Himalayas has more than 26% of flowering plant of the country and is very important photo geographical reserve of the country.

The following protected parks and sanctuaries are used for ecotourism activities.

KANCHENDZONG NATIONAL PARK

The Kanchendzonga national park is one of the UNESCO world heritage Sites in the North East India. It is one of the fascinating tourist attractions of Sikkim. Situated in the North Western Sikkim, it is spread over an area of 850 square kilometers. The park is blessed with undisturbed forest cover presided by Mt. Kanchendzonga and five other lofty peaks carpeted in snow. Many nature & escapade lovers are attracted towards the park because of its permanent territory of mountains, green jungles, blossoming meadows & water course in its primeval wilderness. The flourishing vegetation comprises temperate wide leaved jungles subjugated by oaks, diverse Coniferous jungles comprising fir, birch, maple, willow and so on & alpine grasses & shrubs at upper heights together several medicinal plants & aromatic plant. With so many natural environments existing in it the best season for the Ecotourist to visit the Kanchenjunga national park is between April to May.

SHINGBA RHODODENDRON SANCTUARY

The Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary is located in Yumthang Valley in North Sikkim. The sanctuary is surrounded on the east by Chuba-Sagochen mountain ranges and on the west by Chomzomei Tso that extends till the Lava Pass. The sanctuary covers an area of around 43sq.kms, which comprises of several species of rhododendrons and lies at an altitude of 3048 to 4575 meter. The Yumthang Chhu meanders through the sanctuary giving it a picturesque outlook. The place is very rich in natural vegetation cover and comprises of various species of plants & tree. The chief attraction for the ecotourist is the Rhododendron shrubs & trees that are found there in abundance. The best time visit sanctuary is from April to July, when the rhododendrons are in full bloom and the sanctuary turns into riot of colors.

FAMBONG LHO WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The Fambong Lho Wildlife Sanctuary is located about 20 Kilometers from Gangtok. It covers an area about 52 sq km above the road between Singtam and Dikchu with the highest point at a place called Tinjure at 2130 mt. The sanctuary shelters the Himalayan black bear, red panda, civet cat and many varieties of birds and butterflies. This sanctuary falls at the junction of Paleractic ecozone and Indomalaya ecozone, supporting a large variety of mammalian and avian fauna. Inside this wildlife sanctuary, the primary biomes corresponding to the ecozone are:

- Terai-Duar savanna and grasslands of the tropical and subtropical grasslands, savannas, and shrublands biome
- Eastern Himalayan broadleaf forest of the Himalayan subtropical broadleaf forests biome.
- Tropical and subtropical coniferous forest of the Himalayan subtropical pine forest biome.
- Temperate coniferous forest of the Eastern Himalayan subalpine conifer forest biome.
- Montane grasslands and shrublands of the Eastern Himalayan alpine shrub and meadows biome

For Birdwatching or birding Fambong Lho Wildlife Sanctuary is the best place to be at. It includes species like the hill partridge, satyr tragopan, fire-tailed myzornis, bar-throated minla, red-tailed minla, black-eared shrike babbler, scaly laughingthrush, streak-breasted scimitar babbler, etc.

KYONGNOSLA ALPINE SANCTUARY

The Kyongnosla Alpine Sanctuary is a wildlife sanctuary, located in East Sikkim. It is situated around the area adjoining the Tsomgo Lake along the Nathula Road. Covering an area of about 31 Sq km and lying at an altitude of 3292 m to 4116m, this sanctuary is perfect for trekking tours. Rich in flora and fauna, rare, endangered ground orchids and rhododendrons interspersed among tall junipers and taller silver firs are among the important plants presents. Rhododendron Niveum (the state tree of Sikkim) and *Cypripedium tibeticum* (the ground slipper orchid), which is on the verge of extinction, have also been introduced here.

MAENAM WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary is a treasure house of medicine as it houses rich assortment of Medicinal plants and herbs. It covers an area of 36.34 sq km and is located on the Maenam- Tendong ridge which runs from north to south, almost bisecting Sikkim longitudinally. This sanctuary escalates to an altitude of about 10,600 ft above sea level and shelters Red Panda, Goral, Serow, Braking Deer, Marbled-cat, Leopard-Cat, Civets, Blood Pheasant, Common Hill Partideg, Magpies, Black Eagle, and Blue Necked Pita, Sunbirds and many other animals of the temperate forest. This sanctuary is famous for trekking and its rich biodiversity. The altitude ranges between 2300 meters to 3263 meters. A fabulous trek to Maenam Peak and further to Bhaledunga originates from Ravangala passing through the virgin track of alpine forest from Ravangla to Maenam peak and thereafter leads down to Borong village.

BARSEY RHODODENDRON SANCTUARY

The Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary lies in the south west corner of the west Sikkim District. Spreading over 104 sq. km, across the razor sharp Singaila Range, which forms the natural international border with Nepal. The bridle path from Hillely to Barsey is a favorite amongst tourist especially during the Rhododendron

Sanctuary during the Rhododendron flowering seasons. The Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary spans over the razor sharp Singalila Range. A beautiful Tourist Trekker's hut exist Barsey, amidst the Rhododendron forests at a 10000 feet, commanding a glorious view if the Singalaila Range.

OBJECTIVES OF SIKKIM ECOTOURISM POLICY

1. Bring all stakeholders on a common platform of understanding of ecotourism.
2. Promote ecotourism in a sustainable manner based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC).
3. Generate incentives to local communities for nature conservation through alternative income sources and livelihoods, and empower local communities to manage ecotourism with the emphasis on the economically disadvantaged people.
4. Conserve the existing biodiversity, ecosystem and religious monuments of Sikkim as well as Sikkim people's culture and tradition.
5. Offer memorable and high quality learning experience to visitors, thus encouraging their responsible behavior during their visits and their collaboration for nature conservation effort.
6. Facilitate local children as well as visitors to enjoy and appreciate excellent nature based activities.
7. Encourage people in Sikkim to increase their pride and appreciation of local natural and cultural values.
8. Ensure that local communities have a role in determining the appropriate presentation of their cultural values.
9. Regulate the high influx of visitors in heavily visited areas, thus reducing the negative impact of tourism.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT

For a long term Sustainable development of ecotourism Sikkim, host community has to play a greater role in it. The Responsibilities of ecotourists and of the host community has to be well-organized. If a community wants to host ecotourism, it has a central role to play. The host community's success in bringing ecotourism to it and ensuing that the level and type of tourism is compatible with the community's aspirations are matter the community can control.

- Help conserve habitats of flora and fauna as well as any site, natural feature or culture, which may be affected by tourism.
- Make no open fires and discourage others from doing so. If water has to be heated with scarce firewood, use as little as possible. Where feasible, use kerosene or fuel-efficient wood stoves. Remove litter, bum or bury paper and carry back all non- degradable liter
- Keep local water clean and avoid using pollutants such as detergents in streams or springs. If no toilet facilities are available, relieve yourself at least 30 meters away from water sources and bury or cover the waste.
- Leave plants to flourish in their natural environment and avoid taking away cuttings, seeds and roots.
- Help guides and porters to follow conservation measures.
- Do not allow cooks/porters to throw garbage in streams or rivers.
- Respects the natural and cultural heritage of the area and follow local customs.
- Respect local etiquette.
- Respect privacy of individuals and ask permission to take photography of local inhabitants.
- Respect holy places. Do not touch or remove religious objects.
- Strictly follow the guidelines for personal safety and security and always take your own precautions and safety measures.
- Realize and respects the value of the environment, the flora and fauna, the monuments and your cultural heritage.
- Practice conservation of nature and culture as a way of life.
- Establish guidelines to protect valuable local resources and foster tourism management.
- React to the potential threat of investors who see opportunities in development but lack sensitivity to local values.
- Become effective nature guides and conservationists of natural areas by utilizing practical and ancestral knowledge of the natural features of the area.
- Be friendly to the visitors and help them to practice ecotourism principles.

TYPE OF ECOTOURISM IN SIKKIM

Tourism in Sikkim has emerged as the new profession of the Sikkimese people with its vast natural potential. Ecotourism which is another form of tourism has become very popular in Sikkim tourism industry in the present scenario. Ecotourist who visit Sikkim are able to find different types of ecotourism concept. Homestay, Village tourism, cultural tourism, trekking tourism, flori-tourism and adventure tourism has given fillip to the tourism trade in the state where a large number of people are engaged under different employment opportunities.

Rural and Homestay tourism – The concept of rural tourism and homestay tourism is prevalent all over the world since many decades and the same has recently been introduced in the state of Sikkim by few local groups and has shown tremendous result. The purpose of the rural tourism is to create job opportunities for the rural masses. The number of tourist preferring to stay in the villages is on the rise. In view of the fact, the state government has sanctioned 718 Homestay during 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. Out of which 278 Home stay have been taken up during 2013-2014 under 13th Finance Commission one of the very popular concept in Sikkim ecotourism market. It has gained lots of popularity in all the district of Sikkim. Ecotourist who visit Sikkim has greater demand for homestay type of ecotourism. Sikkim is arguably one of India's loveliest destinations. Homestay Sikkim offers the visitors an experience and an opportunity to live with locals and share their lifestyle. Earlier villagers used to earn their livelihood through cultivation only, but once homestay came in, it became a tourist hub and for which the economic condition of the people has improved a lot.

In the present scenario of Sikkim ecotourism there are nearly twelve home stay in all the four district of Sikkim among which the popular one preferred by ecotourist is in the north district of Sikkim. Some of the homestay like Yakten, Orchid, Guras, Chakha, Kothebari, Mayal Lyang are the popular on in Sikkim. People of Yaakten, a small hamlet in East Sikkim, have joined hands to start this community based homestay tourism to attract visitors and also improve their socio-economic condition. Some eight families are engaged in homestay business and they have developed an infrastructure which is being appreciated. Apart from Yaakten homestay, there are other homestay in all the four district of Sikkim such as Orchid home stay, Guras homestay, kothebari homestay, Yangsum Farms, Rinchenpong Sikkim, Mayal Lang Homestay Dzongu etc.

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR HOMESTAY BENEFICIARIES

Under the program of homestay tourism implemented under 13th finance Commission it is proposed to train one beneficiary of such homestay by organizing capacity building training, awareness program, exposure trip etc. The training program has been conducted as show below.

a. Capacity building training for Homestay beneficiaries.

Total	2012-2013	2013-2014	To be completed
718	356	354	08

b. Exposure Trips for Homestay beneficiaries

Total	2013-2014	To be completed
718	579	139

Project sanctioned from thirteenth finance commission government of India

CONSTRUCTION OF HOMESTAY

Sl. No	District	Number of homestays	Physical Progress			Remarks
			Completed	On-going process	To be completed by February 2014	
1	North	100	Nil	40%	100	Work under progress
2	East	188	4	45%	184	Work under progress
3	South	220	2	45%	218	Work under progress
4	West	220	12	55%	208	Work under progress
		728	18	45%	710	

Village tourism- As the part of the Home stays you will be staying in village homes with local community families, which in itself is a very unique travel experience. People from all age groups can take these comfortable soft adventure cultural tours. After much consideration and encouragement from the tourist visiting we decided to start another type of village tourism under ecotourism- information shared by one of the local entrepreneur who operates village tourism at North Sikkim.

These tours offer you a chance to see the Sikkim villages. During your stay in the village, you won't just observe and learn about life in the village but it encourages you to actively take part in village activities such as ploughing, sowing, harvesting, collection of firewood and fodder etc. The local entrepreneur ensures that villager directly benefits from the Eco tourist, so it is helpful to them to have your visit. We also ensure that the villagers benefit directly from your visit, so it is helpful to them to have your visit. When you avail the concept of village tourism not only do your hosts benefit but many more in the same village. Your money will pay others for their contribution of food, song, dance and transport etc.

CULTURAL & TREKKING TOURISM

The emergence of cultural tourism in research practice as an object of study dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, but only in 2002 the international Council for cultural and historical monuments publish a formal definition as follows " the Cultural and Cultural –cognitive tourism actually is this form of tourism, which focuses on the cultural environment, which in turn may include cultural and historical sights of a destination or cultural –historical heritage, values and lifestyle of the local population, arts, crafts, traditions and customs of the local population. Furthermore, cultural and cognitive routes may include a visit or participation in cultural activities and events, visit museums, concerts, exhibitions, galleries, etc. (International Council on monuments and Sites). Sikkim with its richness in different cultural practice, old heritage monastery like (Rumtek, Enchay, Phodong, Dubdi Monastery one of the oldest monastery in India) and many museums to visit. Government has been recently organizing many cultural events in respective district of the state for a week long where its main motive is to provide cultural entertainment to the tourist visiting Sikkim. Winter carnival one of the popular cultural festival take place in the month of December –January every year at state capital Gangtok. The program is schedule for a month long where different cultural dance is being represented by the people of Sikkim. An ecotourist can avail different type of local cuisine, handicrafts items displayed by the people during this Winter Carnival festival. It provided the students with an opportunity to earn as they get an opportunity to perform cultural dances of Sikkim and showcase their talents to the tourist, said Basant Gurung Operator, Sikkim Kisaan Traditional Village Tourism.

Nothing is more peaceful and full of tranquility than a trekking activity and the realization of the awesomeness of Nature. Sikkim is fast becoming one of the dream destinations for mountaineers and amateur climbers from all over the world. The trekking options are also plenty in this region. Adventure tourists usually undertake treks lasting from 2 to 110 days. Enfolded between the Himalayas and the Shivaliks, Chemchey boasts of being one of the best destinations for trekking in the world. Enfolded between the Himalayas and the Shivaliks, Chemchey boasts of being one of the best destinations for trekking in the world. The major trekking routes are Goecha la trek, Singalila Ridge Trek, Kasturi Trek, Green Lake Trek.

STATISTICS OF TOURIST ARRIVAL IN THE STATE OF SIKKIM

DOMESTIC TOURIST

TABLE 1

Year	JAN	FEB	MAR	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
2011	42314	50652	62438	89238	124323	69784	29540	38964	13943	9682	8326	13249
2012	28560	29642	45231	65341	120212	65673	18628	35294	12678	42390	39602	55287
2013	30292	31278	48102	69054	131804	68205	17161	7713	20115	50461	42836	59728
2014	28824	19830	24597	63730	92199	85763	19472	11875	25478	75025	53275	62350
2015	54229	44366	32515	89648	138695	86218	19521	19535	25535	75908	55827	63026
2016	785389	87813	74872	93220	144225	89654	20250	20310	26570	78948	10607	15756

FOREIGN TOURIST

TABLE 2

Year	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2011	1436	1065	2423	2615	2875	643	553	873	1415	4286	3323	2438
2012	1904	2406	3199	3939	2058	1152	1282	1048	1432	4486	2300	1283
2013	873	1247	2524	4895	1312	804	563	2579	3942	5292	3210	4457
2014	4145	3803	5211	2855	4927	3939	2496	1429	2410	8906	5537	3517
2015	3458	3119	4971	6909	2326	1727	1382	1563	1406	4431	3877	3310
2016	2946	3108	6797	8477	48700	2779	1678	2067	1844	12090	14405	5021

CONCLUSION

The present study shows that growth of ecotourism in Sikkim is enormous. According to the data of domestic and foreign tourist provided in the table 1 & 2 there has been a formidable growth in entry of tourist at Sikkim. During the course of the study it was found that there has been a gradual shift of tourist itinerary towards ecotourism industry. Study of this paper is related to sustainable development of ecotourism, the Government of Sikkim has been engaged in framing sustainable policies and program for the better development of ecotourism in Sikkim. In order to meet the large demands from tourist visiting Sikkim and meet their demand the government of Sikkim has been providing financial assistance at the rural level to the local entrepreneur for the development of village & homestay ecotourism. A universal approach in terms of pro-active state stakeholder's participation, awareness among tourist and host communities, scientific planning, technical studies, and a helpful socio environmental climate can conserve sustainable ecotourism policy. The initiative of educating the local educated youth at the lower level who are engaging in practicing ecotourism is a highly commendable and fruitful exercise.

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