

ABSTRACT

TITLE : IMPACT OF ECOTOURISM ON VILLAGE ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN SIKKIM

Tourism has become one of the most prominent sectors of economic development all over the world during the last two decades and is also the fastest growing service industry in India. Among the various forms of tourism that have evolved over the years in different parts of the world, ecotourism is the one with the best potential for benefit to all its stakeholders. Sikkim, a small eastern Himalayan State with abundant natural resources and a small, but ethnically very diverse, population is one of the popular ecotourism destinations in India.

Ecotourism results in substantial benefits to the local community if it is conducted on a sustainable basis. It also leads to increased awareness of the value of the ecosystems in which ecotourism is conducted and thereby improved conservation action by both the government and the community. The Government of Sikkim has been consciously promoting ecotourism for more than a decade to take advantage of its unique selling property - nature – to provide avenues for employment to the local communities. A study was conducted to find out the impact of ecotourism on rural society, especially to assess the economic and environmental impacts to ascertain whether the commonly touted contention that ecotourism benefits the local communities is true in the case of Sikkim or not.

The present study was conducted in four research sites selected on the basis of government recognition of these as important tourist villages of Sikkim. The methodology used was mainly questionnaire survey administered on randomly selected sample in the four villages. The primary data was collected from the respondents using a questionnaire developed to elicit information on economic conditions of those involved in tourism. Group discussions were also conducted to collect the primary data about the socio economic conditions of the people. Apart from these methods, in depth case studies were also conducted as a supplement to find out the condition of the people living in these villages who are involved in the ecotourism activities. The secondary data for the present study was collected from books, journals, government reports and internet sources. The collected primary data

was coded and turned into tables using the SPSS programme. The table generated from the primary data was analysed using the deductive reasoning technique. The findings are represented in the forms of table analysis along with column, line, bar graphs and pie charts.

Results from the study showed that ecotourism has lately picked up as a major economic activity in those rural areas where the environment is suited to develop and sustain ecotourism. In such villages the major economic activity is still agriculture for a majority of the people but those who have been enterprising have made use of the opportunities to either supplement their income or in many cases outright switched over to ecotourism as a means of livelihood. Ecotourism has extensively contributed economic development in Sikkim. The various factors influencing eco-tourism development in Sikkim are state of village agro- economy, modernization of society, concern for conservation of the environment and demographic factors like age, sex and literacy. Those involved in ecotourism were engaged in running home stays, shops/restaurants, lodges, some worked as tourist guides, drivers and managers in hotels.

The study clearly reveals that the economic status of people engaged in ecotourism has improved after they had taken to ecotourism. All economic indicators showed that additional benefits accrued to people from ecotourism if they were only cultivating traditional crops. Even those in regular jobs in government or otherwise did not miss the opportunity to gain additional income through plying a taxi or opening a home stay. Majority of the respondents owned hotel services and the remaining respondents had a proportionate share on providing transportation services either through taxi or animal, tents, restaurant and others. Social welfare parameters also showed an improvement in those families that were doing ecotourism. People were able to afford better education and health facilities for their children as they had more money power. There was also a tendency among ecotourism providers to avoid menial or manual labour even working in schemes like MGNREGA was not an attractive proposition to most respondents. This showed that ecotourism had also helped people to improve their social standing. Increased awareness of environmental factors and that its values promote ecotourism has had a beneficial effect on the environment.

It is concluded that ecotourism has the potential to decrease the dependence of the local community on their natural habitat for their day to day sustenance. Ecotourism offers them with an alternative source of livelihood and engages them as active stakeholders in the overall process of development. Ecotourism has the capacity to deliver a lot of economic benefits to traditional cultures. However, whether those benefits are realized depends on how well the ecotourism is managed. There is an urgent need for improved analysis of ecotourism issues as part of the ecotourism planning and development process. The growth of tourism without proper control and supervision will endanger the environment. Tourism in ecologically sensitive areas needs close monitoring. Ecotourism could be a tool for environmental conservation, local empowerment, poverty alleviation and so on.