

IMPACT OF ECOTOURISM ON VILLAGE ECONOMY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF SIKKIM

Dr.Binu Thomas Chandy M.Phil ,Ph.D
Head of the Department
Department of Sociology
Sikkim Government College
Burtuk ,Gangtok

Abstract: 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.

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. 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 ecotourism 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. 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. 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. Tourism in ecologically sensitive areas needs close monitoring. Ecotourism could be a tool for environmental conservation, local empowerment, poverty alleviation and so on.

Index item - Ecotourism, economic aspect, environment, nature conservation, Social aspect

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is an exciting new venture, which combines the pleasure of discovering spectacular flora and fauna, and understanding their values with an opportunity to contribute to their protection. By harbouring environmental, both among local people and visitors, and by linking tourism to social and economic development, it is possible to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of an area, and to improve the living standards of host region inhabitants. Various studies conducted on the subject justifies the fact that how socio-economic development and nature conservation is interlinked leading towards economic development of people involved. Government and communities both recognize reasonable, rational and alternative option for economic development and preservation of environment. (Mohanlal, 2007; Batra and Chawla, 1994)). Sikkim is a state full of rich and pristine biodiversity and other natural resources. In the regions which lack land asset and are not feasible for large scale industrialization, mechanized farming and other types of tourism, ecotourism provide a nature friendly occupation and means for nature conservation. Without outmigration of population, the economic incentives of organised ecotourism are enormous in changing lives of people involved with this. Sikkim, a tiny Himalayan state of India has shown tremendous development in ecotourism from notifying the first ecotourism state policy to developing tourist amenities, improved infrastructure and nature based ecotourism destinations

Socioeconomic parameters.

Sikkim has many ethnic communities because different groups migrated into the State at different times throughout its past. Most villages and towns have mixed social groups and therefore multi-cultural in character but some groups are concentrated in certain parts of the State, for instance the Lepchas and Bhutias in North district and the Subbas in West district. The main urban centres like Gangtok, Singtam, Rangpo, Jorethang, Namchi, Geyzing, Naya Bazar have also witnessed the migration of traders and businessmen from the other States of India and so have a sizable population of in-migrants apart from local groups.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The increasing economic importance of tourism has captured the attention of most countries. However, the global growth of tourism poses a significant threat to cultural and biological diversity. Ecotourism in Sikkim, which has a forest cover of more than 46% of the geographical area with its exquisite flora and fauna apart from scenic values of its landscapes, must therefore impact on the village economy, as villagers provide the support mechanisms for ecotourism. It must also have impact on the indigenous social elements in so much as there will be a socio-cultural invasion and therefore infusion of an alien culture into the local settings. In this context the present study has the following objectives:

1. To understand the importance of ecotourism as an alternative livelihood in rural Sikkim.
2. To gauge the impact of ecotourism on village economy.
3. To measure the extent of the impact of ecotourism on village society.
4. To understand the role of ecotourism in the conservation of environment

III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Sikkim state has developed number of ecotourism destination, however for the purpose of the study West, East and South districts were selected. A questionnaire was so designed as to elicit information on the following:

- a) Economic benefits of nature-based tourism in the selected tourist spots in comparison to benefits incurred from agricultural or other rural-based activities;
- b) Occupation of service providers and others involved in ecotourism and type of ecotourism activity conducted, average income from ecotourism and other activities;

c) Quality of life of the service providers and others involved in ecotourism before and after their participation in ecotourism. . The objective of this case study is to examine the economic and social impact of ecotourism on the environment and local communities located in four prominent regions in the state of Sikkim. The impact of ecotourism in enhancing the economic status of the people in Sikkim is gradually increasing over the years. This study provides an insight into the impact of ecotourism related activities in the four case study areas of Sikkim, namely Yuksom, Aritar, Kewzing and Darap. The detailed analysis of various attributes pertaining to measuring the impact of ecotourism in the four areas are: age group of respondents, types of occupation involved, income earned through ecotourism and other occupations, income earned before and after entering into ecotourism, duration of the occupations, availability of basic amenities, livestock and vehicles.

It emerged that ecotourism activities in Aritar was a secondary source of income for the people as a large number of the local populace were actively involved in cattle rearing and farming which provided them with a primary option for livelihood. Nonetheless, people from the younger generations were the ones who gained largely with the introduction of ecotourism as they were actively engaged in offering home stay services and they also doubled up as cooks, drivers, guides and managers in the home stay facilities. According to these members from the younger generation, ecotourism made a significant impact on their lives and the income from ecotourism activities is continuing to grow with each passing year. As a result, more people from the local community are now inclining towards adopting ecotourism to augment their income. Thus, ecotourism is gradually turning to be a prominent livelihood option for the people of Aritar and substantially impacts the overall economy (Barna *et al.*, 2011).

In Kewzing households with no income sources were able to sustain themselves in a fair manner while families who were already generating income from traditional activities were able to enhance their income considerably (Peaty, 2004). With the changing preferences of tourists who opted for eco-tourism rather than regular tourism, the scenario is set to improve further. As far as social impact is considered, the local communities were presented with an opportunity to interact with people from diverse cultures both national and international that helped them to gain a perspective on the varied cultures that exist in society. Moreover, this initiative was also instrumental in prompting the local residents to acquire new skills like learning new languages that facilitated smooth interaction with tourists. Overall, ecotourism as a concept has made a sizable impact on the socio-economic aspects of Kewzing (Travel Blog, 2014)

In Darap farming and cultivation formed a crux of their activities wherein villagers opted to cultivate rice, maize, millets and certain varieties of vegetables and spices. However, the produce was just enough to meet the local requirements and couldn't be

used for extensive trading. Thus, the economy in the region was insignificant. This is evident from the fact that almost ninety per cent of the meat and vegetables produced by the village is largely consumed by tourists. The increase in the number of tourists can be attributed to several marketing initiatives undertaken by the state government and word of mouth publicity by tourists who were satisfied with their experience at the village. As a result of the home stay service, these families were able to augment their income and ensure a decent lifestyle.

The impact of ecotourism in enhancing the economic status of the people in Sikkim is gradually increasing over the years. This study provides an insight into the impact of ecotourism related activities in the four case study areas of Sikkim, namely Yuksom, Aritar, Kewzing and Darap. 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. Ecotourism could be a tool for local empowerment, poverty alleviation and so on. This study revealed that ecotourism had a positive impact on the social aspects as it provided more and high quality services. The economic benefits of such an activity should accrue to the local population to ensure sustainability. Ecotourism enjoys a significant superiority over general tourism with regard to tourist arrivals and economic, social and environmental benefits.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study conducted in four tourism villages involving key respondents involved in ecotourism activities provides clear insights of economic advantages as depicted through tables

Table 1: Statistics of average income earned by the respondents in different scenarios

		Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Duration Engaged in Other Occupation	146	2 months	60 months	8.322
Average income from ecotourism per year	146	200	400000	31179.452
Average income from other occupation	146	300	100000	18850.0
Average income per year before commencing ecotourism	146	500	70000	23462.329

Figure 1: Statistics of average income earned by the respondents in different scenarios

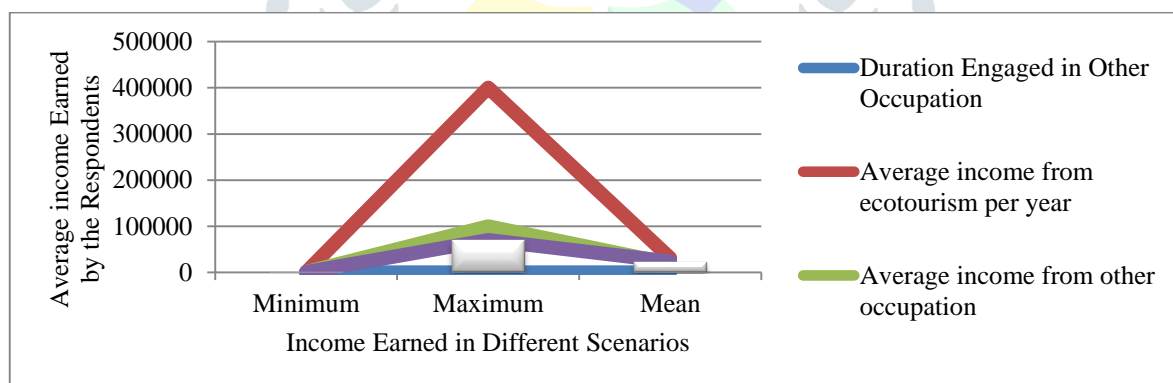
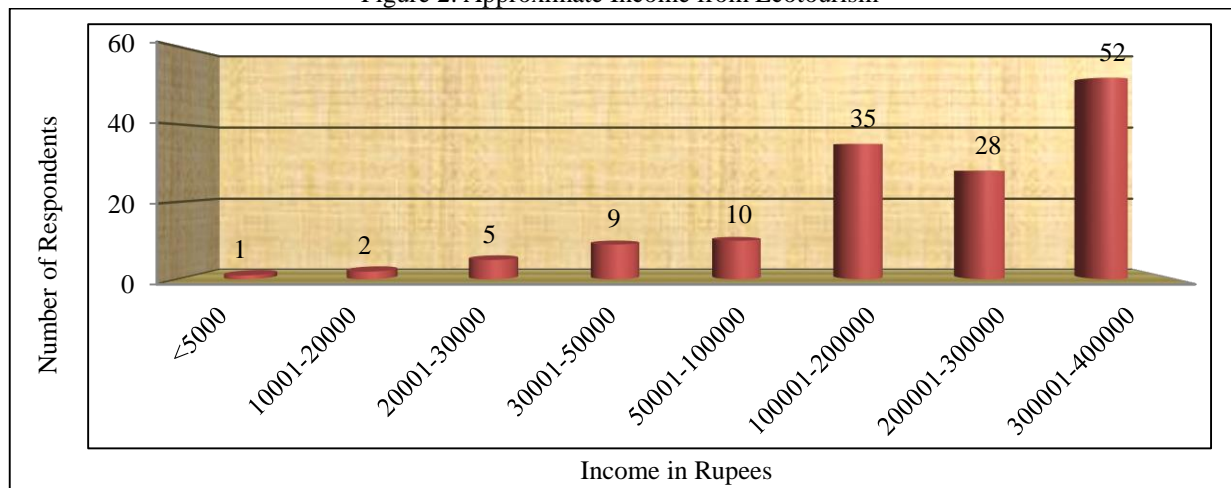


Table 1 provides figures of the diverse attributes contributing to the income of the respondents. The data display a considerable increase in income of the respondents after they ventured into ecotourism.

Table 2: Approximate income from ecotourism per year

Income in Rupees	Respondents	Percent
<5000	1	0.68
5001-10000	4	2.74
10001-20000	2	1.37
20001-30000	5	3.42
30001-50000	9	6.16
50001-100000	10	6.85
100001-200000	35	23.97
200001-300000	28	19.18
300001-400000	52	35.62
Total	146	100.00

Figure 2: Approximate Income from Ecotourism

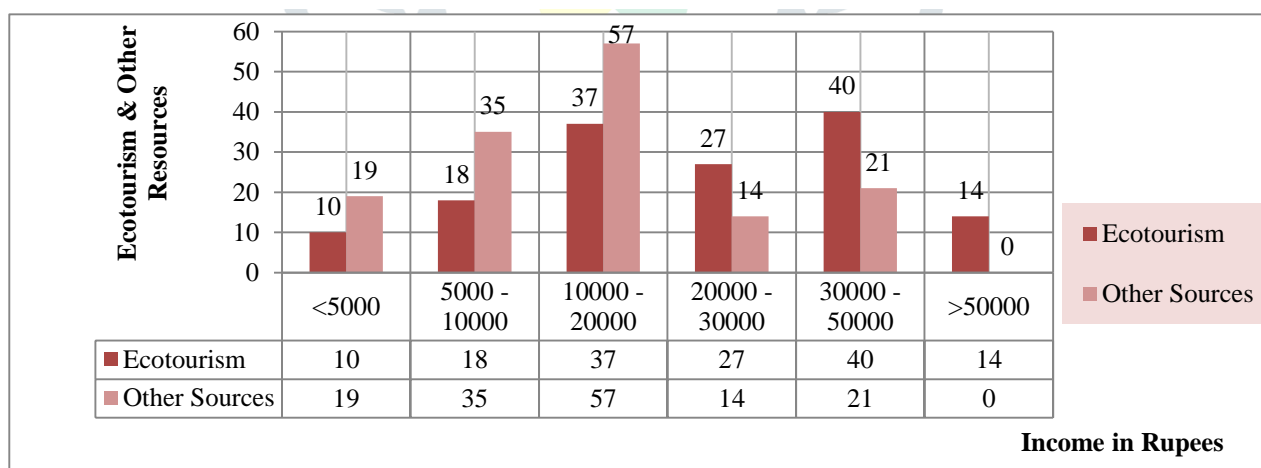


Ecotourism has made visible differences in the income and livelihood pattern in Sikkim. It generates earnings and presents the people with a variety of income sources.. This obviously had positive impact on the life of the respondents in particular and on the region in general. Table 4 and figure 4 display the respondents’ approximate annual income earned through ecotourism. A considerable increase in income of the respondents after involvement in ecotourism was clearly visualized.

Table 3: Comparative income from ecotourism and other sources

Income in Rupees		Ecotourism	%	Other Sources	%
<5000		10	6.8	19	13
5000 - 10000		18	12.3	35	24
10000 - 20000		37	25.3	57	39
20000 -30000		27	18.5	14	9.6
30000 -50000		40	27.4	21	14.4
>50000	14	9.6	0	0	
Total	146	100	146	100	

Figure 3: Comparative income from Ecotourism and other Sources



After commencing ecotourism, the income of the respondents has faced considerable increase. Almost majority of them have earned more than Rs.50000 which was four times more than the income earned previously.

The table 3 and figure 3 show the comparative income (approximate) from ecotourism and other sources. The data clearly show that income from ecotourism is on the higher side. No other sources provided an annual income of more than Rs. 50000.

V. Conclusion

From the above study it can be significantly concluded that ecotourism initiatives have made a tremendous impact in the lives of people situated in the four case study areas in Sikkim viz., Aritar, Kewzing, Darap and Yuksom. Not only has ecotourism

opened new avenues for people from these regions who had no big source of income earlier, it has also supplemented the income of people who were involved in traditional occupations like farming, cattle rearing etc. Ecotourism has helped many respondents to earn a decent livelihood. One noticeable feature is that, many people who did not own cultivable land before are now owners of their own land for cultivation. They could produce and offer home-grown food to their valued guests living in their home stays.

A key facet of ecotourism is to actively involve local communities with an objective to help them benefit from such conservation initiatives, facilitate economic growth and education. Though setting up parks and protected areas directly impact local residents, they also stand to gain significantly by the promotion of ecotourism in such areas. Involving local communities within the ambit of ecotourism not only help local communities to satiate their economic requirements but it also enables them to maintain and enhance the sense of place that is vital to ensure long-term conservation. Aiding local communities to nurture ecotourism is a robust manner that facilitates their growth since they are increasingly endowed with extensive local knowledge and truly appreciate their natural and cultural heritage.

Several academicians and authors are of the opinion that ecotourism not only enhances the economic growth of the region and provides alternative source of livelihood to local communities but it also goes a long way in conserving the natural resources and habitat. They have also indicated that the market for ecotourism has been developing since the past two decades and the market is poised to sustain the rate of growth in the coming years. The economic benefit of such an activity should accrue to the local population to ensure sustainability. Ecotourism enjoys a significant superiority over general tourism with regard to tourist arrivals and economic, social and environmental benefits. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that ecotourism development and protection of environment can be made possible with the careful planning and execution of projects by the government departments, tourist officials along with the co-operation of the public. In future, ecotourism will continue to grow in several parts of the world as a profitable way of life.

REFERENCE

- 1) Barna, C., Epura, M. & Vasilescu, R. (2011). Ecotourism-Conservation of the natural and Cultural Heritage. review of applied socio-economic research. [Online]. 1 (1). pp. 87-96. Available from: <ftp://ftp.repec.org/opt/ReDIF/RePEc/rse/wpaper/9.pdf>.
- 2) Batra, G.S & Chawla, A.S. :Tourism management-A Global perspective. Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi (1994) PP 10-40
- 3) Mohanlal K.G, "Ecotourism in Kerala. South Asian Journal of Socio-Political Studies (SAJOSPS), Vol.18, No.1 (July -Dec 2007) PP 104-105
- 4) Peaty, D. (2004). Community-Based Tourism in the Indian Himalaya: Homestays and Lodges. [Online]. Available from: http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/re/k-rsc/hss/book/pdf/vol02_04.pdf.
- 5) Travel Blog (2014). Community Based Tourism Development project in Kewzing, Sikkim. [Online]. 2014. Available from: <https://www.travelblog.org/Asia/India/Sikkim/blog-853684.html> [Accessed: 24 October 2017].