

Socio-Economic development through Ecotourism: A Case Study of Kitam Village, South Sikkim

Miss. Dawa Doma Sherpa¹ & Dr. Sunita Kharel ²

¹. Research Scholar, School Of Tourism and Hospitality Service Management, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India,

². Associate Professor, Department of History, Nar Bahadur Bhandari Degree College, Tadong, Sikkim, India.

Abstract

Ecotourism is the most feasible industry of Sikkim that manages both conservation and economic development. Community based ecotourism has been largely practiced in the state of Sikkim. Participation of local community in ecotourism raises awareness in protection of natural and cultural resources at any destinations. Local community has been identified the key agent for successful ecotourism development. Kitam village has been identified as an Ecotourism Zone by Directorate of Ecotourism, Sikkim Forest Department. Tourists visiting 'Kitam Bird Sanctuary' has been viewed the core feature in ecotourism development of this village. Therefore, the present study made an attempt to understand the impact of ecotourism in view of environmental and socio-economic development in the village of Kitam, South Sikkim. The finding of this study shows that participation of local community in ecotourism has made significant contributions in providing alternate livelihood. This study also tries to indicate some negative impact of ecotourism development in Kitam.

Keywords: Kitam, Ecotourism, Local Community participation, Socio-economic and Environmental Impact.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is an alternative tourism that leads to minimize negative impact of mass tourism. It has been observed that ecotourism raise the educational level of local people and travelers which is the important input for ecotourism development (Magray, 2018). The practices of Community based Ecotourism lead to maximum participation of local community in ecotourism development. The participation of local community approaches in planning, implementation and managing of various ecotourism developmental programmes (Afua, 2012). Ecotourism has great potential to generate economic opportunity in relation to promote rural products. Homestay programme is the activity of ecotourism which is managed by women participation at any ecotourism destinations. In addition, the operation of homestay is largely benefitted socio-economically to the rural community (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2016). Tourism development in the Himalayan region has helped in promoting livelihood opportunities for the local community. The employment created by tourism development has helped in reducing poverty level and leads to better living standards (Ghatani, 2018). Tourists are mostly attracted due to the natural scenic beauty of the Himalayan region including Sikkim. Hence, an amalgamation of natural and cultural resources has made Sikkim a unique ecotourism destination in the world.

Therefore, the objective of the present study is to understand the impact of ecotourism in view of environmental and socio-economic development in the village of Kitam, South Sikkim. Findings from both positive and negative impacts of ecotourism development have been presented.

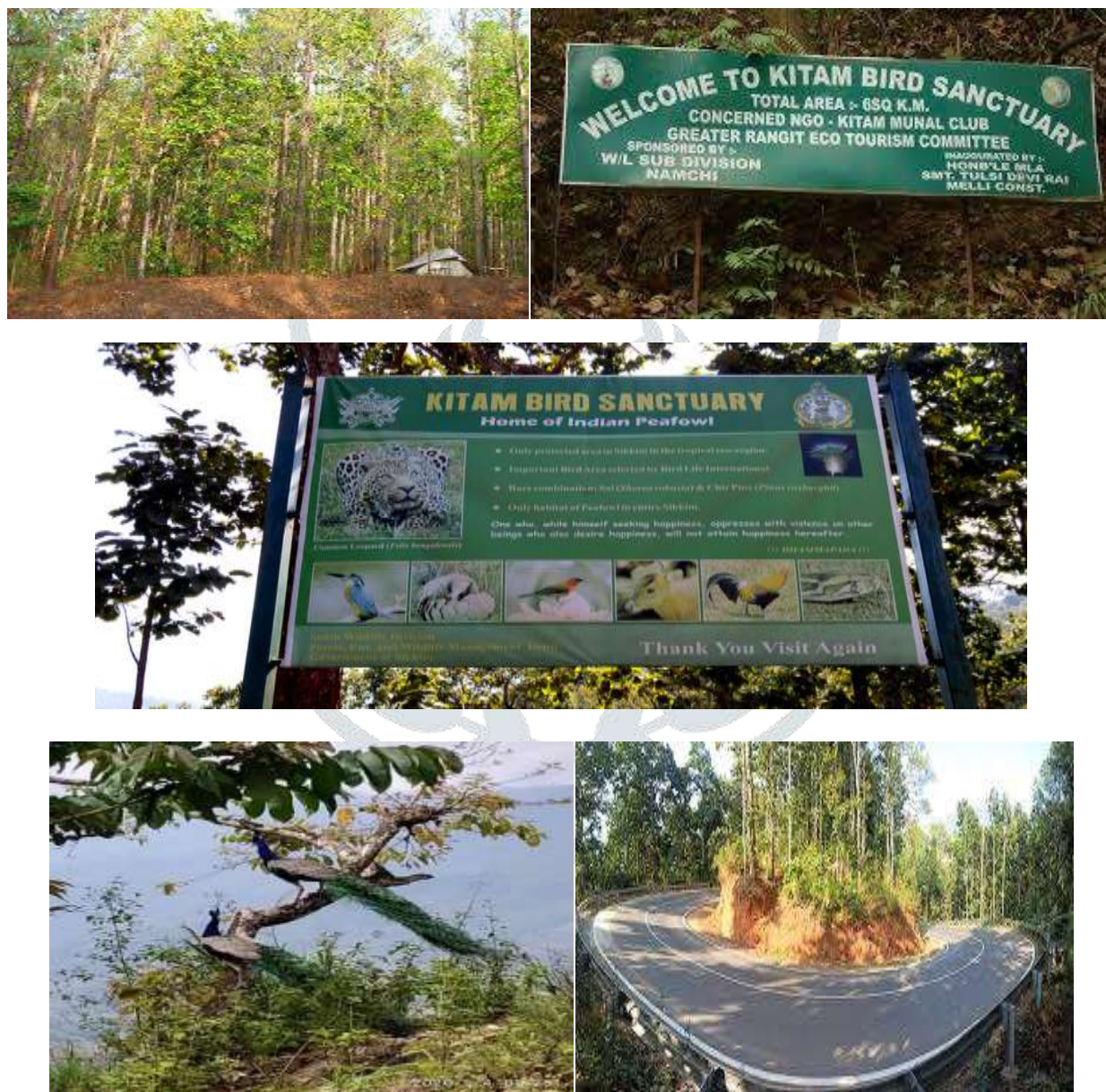
2. KITAM- at glance

Kitam is a beautiful village located in the fringes of renowned 'Kitam Bird Sanctuary', the smallest protected area in tropical eco region that occurs below 1200 msl in Sikkim. Kitam village is located in Namchi Tehsil of south district in Sikkim which is situated 15km away from Namchi, which is both district & sub-district headquarter of Kitam. The Gram Panchayat Unit wise distributions of Kitam village are: Lower Kitam, Upper Kitam and Belbotay. The Lower Kitam village is situated in the south-eastern boundary of the Kitam Bird Sanctuary and the Upper Kitam village is situated in the northern side of the sanctuary and the Belbotay village is situated in the north-western boundary of the sanctuary (Pradhan, 2018).

The declaration of Bird Sanctuary in the year 2005 by Sikkim Forest Department has marked the transformation of this remotest village into unique ecotourism destination. The Sanctuary has been extended between 27° 06' to 27° 07' N Latitude and 88° 20' to 88° 22' E Longitude. The total area is 6 sq.km

and the total perimeter is 10 km. Kitam Bird Sanctuary is selected for conservation of lowland birds that attracts bird lovers from different part of the country and globally. “The Sanctuary was declared considering geomorphologic and avifauna importance of the area and is the home of 125 species of birds, of which 60% are migratory”. The sanctuary has been included in the Important Bird Area by Bird Life International (Dewan, Chettri, Sharma, & Acharya, 2019). The various species of birds are found in the sanctuary such as Chestnut - breasted Partridge (*Arborophila mandellii*), White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), Slender-billed Vulture (*Gyps tenuirostris*), Ward's Trogon (*Harpactes wardi*), Rufous necked Hornbill (*Aceros nipalensis*), Grey-crowned Prinia (*Prinia cinereocapilla*), Yellow vented Warbler (*Phylloscopus cantator*), Rufous-throated Wren babbler (*Spelaornis caudatus*), Wedge - billed Wren - babbler (*Sphenocichla humei*), Slender billed Babbler (*Turdoides longirostris*), White-naped Yuhina (*Yuhina bakeri*) Black-breasted Parrot bill (*Paradoxornis flavirostris*), Beautiful Nuthatch (*Sitta formosa*), Rusty-bellied Short wing (*Brachypteryx hyperythra*).

KITAM BIRD SANCTUARY



3. ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KITAM

Kitam is an emerging ecotourism destination of Sikkim. The Kitam Bird Sanctuary situated in this village is the core feature for ecotourism development due to which the naturalist and bird enthusiasts were attracted from all over the world. It has been observed that, Directorate of Ecotourism, Sikkim Forest and Environment Department plays an important role in promoting ecotourism in the village of Kitam. Therefore, in association with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) assisted project the Forest Department has declared this village as an Ecotourism Zone. Mayur Kitam Eco Development Committee (EDC) is the focal unit for ecotourism development that includes the local community as executive members in planning and decision making process.

The local NGO named 'Munal Club' is playing a significant role in developing ecotourism in Kitam. This club acts as ecotourism stakeholders to safeguard the biodiversity of this region. The member of 38 local people has formed this club 10 years ago with an aim to approach the government of Sikkim to demarcate the forest reserve area into the sanctuary which helps to stop deforestation and illegal trade of wildlife species. Hence, the club having members from Forest department initiated the various conservational activities such as plantation in the sanctuary and road side of the village, Cleanliness drive that has been carried out quarterly in a year with compulsion involvement of the local community. The Munal Club is the guardian of bird sanctuary in which they protect from forest fire and illegal activities.

In order to make huge participation of local community in ecotourism development, the forest department has organized exposure trip to Gorumara, Malbazar in West Bengal and Dzongu in North Sikkim to observe the practices of homestay operation. The women of the village were encouraged to participate in Cooking and Catering training organized by WWF at the initial stage of ecotourism development.

The Directorate of Ecotourism, Forest and Environment Department has come up with the concept of organizing Ecotourism festival in the potential villages for ecotourism development in Sikkim. Thus, the organization of 'Greater Rangit Ecotourism Festival' in 2016 at Lower Kitam with the theme 'Discover Kitam' has largely motivated the local community to involve in ecotourism related activities where Homestay is one of the mostly accepted activities after celebration of the festival. The motive of organizing ecotourism festival was to generate awareness about responsible travel to natural areas, environmental conservation, and improves the well-being of local community. This festival has created a platform to sustain the livelihood of local community and empowered them in encouraging the tourists to visit Kitam.

In addition, the seasonal pattern is being followed in tourists flow to Kitam, which is perhaps controlled by weather conditions and vacation pattern. Tourist arrival in Kitam has been found during the month of March to May and in the month of October, November and December. Table below shows the tourist inflow in Kitam from 2015 to 2019. The reason of downfall of tourist during 2017 and 2018 was the poor road condition due to broadening of highway.

Table I: Tourist Inflow in 2015- 2019

Sl. No.	Year	No. of Tourists		Total
		Indian	Foreigner	
1.	2015	98	6	104
2.	2016	107	-	107
3.	2017	02	-	02
4.	2018	05	-	05
5.	2019	36	-	36

Source: Data collected from one entry point: Forest Check post, Upper Kitam

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ecotourism development in Kitam has created livelihood opportunity to the local community and encourages the environmental conservation activities. This section highlighted the environmental and socio-economic impact of ecotourism.

4.1 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT:

The environmental impact of ecotourism depends on the management of conservation and developmental activities. Therefore, the growth of ecotourism in this village resulted in the protection of surrounding environment and Kitam Bird Sanctuary. The importance of ecotourism has created a strong relationship between the forest staff and the local communities so far. It has been observed that, the joint collaboration of Eco Development Committee (EDC) members, local community and forest staffs usually plan various developmental activities related to environment protection where they organizes plantation and cleanliness drive programme in the roadside of village and within the sanctuary, plantation of animal and bird fodder, contributed to financial assistance for maintenance of trekking trail, birdwatching tower and canopy trail, construction of pond and fencing boundary of the sanctuary.

Inspite of adverse positive impact of ecotourism it cannot deny the negative impacts as well. Soon after the declaration of ecotourism zone, the government of Sikkim realizes the fact that, this village could be one of the mostly frequented visiting ecotourism destination of Sikkim due to which the government initiated with

the project based development. The project related work such as beautification and broadening of highway across the bird sanctuary lead to disturb the natural habitat and destroy the natural beauty of this region. Another important aspect that leads to natural disaster is due to the multiple entries and exit of Kitam Bird Sanctuary that created problem in polluting the sanctuary and makes tourists visits without entry fees. Such kind of entries polluted the sanctuary and increases the problem of garbage. However, women in the village have come up with the concept of waste management system through Self Help Group (government sponsored agency) which has been another important aspect in promoting ecotourism. In that case, women utilize the waste products and recycled into finished plastic products such as doormat, cushion, foot mat, shopping bag etc. Now, the local NGOs have kept waste bins along the roadside of the village to keep the surrounding clean. Such awareness leads to dispose and burn wastes in safe places. Therefore, ecotourism development has change the perception of local communities and develops concernment in preserving natural environment and the sanctuary.

4.2 SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT:

Ecotourism is viewed as the major source of earning after government job in Kitam village. Ecotourism has largely contributed in providing employment opportunity directly and indirectly to the local community. With regard to Kitam village, Community based ecotourism is gaining much importance. With the increasing inflow of tourists in Bird Sanctuary, the local community has started operating Homestay in the village and engaged as bird watcher guide to a larger extent.

The data has revealed that, 18 Homestay was established in the village but now 12 are running actively. Hence, the actively operating homestay owner had undergone training in homestay which makes them easy and comfort in serving tourists. Homestay tariff is divided into two categories: Rs 1000 for Vegetarian and Rs 1200 for Non-Vegetarian people which lead to produce more organic products and poultry farm in the village. Generally, the income earned through homestay is Rs 50,000 to 1 Lakhs per season. As mentioned in above paragraphs this zone follows seasonal pattern in attracting tourist. Homestay owner have direct booking system through word of mouth, Airbnb, Travel Agency, Kolkata, Siliguri, Gangtok. However, some homestay owners are unable to bring tourist that makes them discourage in operating homestay. Ecotourism benefits to the holder of government jobs which contribute in generating additional source of income as they were engaged in homestay as part time operator. Thus, the demand of additional construction of homestay from the government increases the number of tourists towards this zone. The local educated youths got an opportunity to earn their livelihood as birdwatching guide where they have been provided training to be more professional in such activity. There are three professional bird watching guides in the village who usually categorized into half day and full day packages: For half day it charges for Rs 700 and full day it is Rs 1000. The income earned through birdwatching activity is Rs 30,000 to Rs 50,000 per season.

Likewise, there are four trekking guide and six village guide available in the village. The fee for such activities is Rs 500 to Rs 700 per day and the income earned in per season is between Rs 20, 000 to Rs 40,000. The increasing tourist inflow in the village has created an opportunity for local drivers in pick and drop service to tourists that makes them to earn doubled to their normal income.

In addition, the local communities indirectly engaged in ecotourism are also benefitted economically. They got a marketing opportunity to sell their locally grown organic products, poultry and dairy to the homestay owners and earned in between Rs 10,000 to 20,000 per season which helps them to sustain better living standards to some extent. The living style of local community has changed with the growing tourist stay at homestay in the village which lead to develop concernment in cleanliness of house and surrounding environment as well as to groom themselves in serving tourists. Ecotourism development not only contributes in preservation of natural resources but also support largely in preservation of local cultures and traditions. During the stay of tourists in village, the local community organizes cultural programmes in order to entertain and promote local traditions. Even the tourist got an opportunity to exchange their cultures which makes huge participation of local community. The homestay owners have fixed certain amount to the cultural performers of Rs 500 each at one time performance which makes an income of Rs 2000 to Rs 5000 per season. Such cultural activities make women participation to a larger extent.

Hence, the growth and development of ecotourism contributed to uplift socio-economic condition of the local community in the village of Kitam.

5. CONCLUSION

Ecotourism presents a huge scope of development in terms of environmental and socio-economic. Through the practice of ecotourism in Kitam it has become possible in preservation of Kitam Bird Sanctuary and the surrounding natural environment. It also enables the livelihood opportunity to the local communities that

makes them to uplift socio-economic condition. Even the cultural activity has been promoted with the practices of community based ecotourism. Further, constant support is needed from the concerned department in order to promote successful ecotourism in the village.

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