Chapter 4

Identification and Assessment of Offbeat Destinations for Community-Based Ecotourism Development and Promotion in Uttarakhand, India

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ABSTRACT

Many developing countries have adopted ecotourism as a benign strategy to cope with the challenges related to the development of rural communities and protection of natural resources. Considering the vast potential for tourism development, Uttarakhand – a mountainous state located in the Indian Himalaya have identified some pristine locations for community-based ecotourism (CBET) development. Since these locations in the involvement stage of development, it is important to assess ecotourism potential, challenges, and attitudes of stakeholders towards tourism development. This qualitative investigation has assessed the ecotourism development opportunities and given voice to locals, tourists, and tourism planners. Findings reveal that identified offbeat destinations have enormous ecotourism products, and attitude of all the concerned stakeholders is positive towards tourism development. The study emphasizes the need for developing tourism facilities, education and training, involvement of residents in decision-making, and designing promotional strategies to promote CBET in these areas.

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INTRODUCTION
About 12 percent of the world’s human population live in the mountainous areas. Contributing almost 15-20% of annual global tourism, mountainous regions are second popular tourism destinations after coasts and islands (UNEP, 2007). Mountainous regions have become increasingly attractive as destinations because mountains are considered as spiritual centres, places of power, abodes of deities, places of worship, divine ancestors, and sources of blessings, inspirations, revelation and transformation (Bernbaum, 1997). Unfortunately, mountain areas in many developing countries typically offer many challenges to decision-makers such as marginal development, subsistence economies, poor conditions of traditional agriculture, pastoralism for livelihood, rampant poverty, inaccessibility, poor governance, fragile natural environments, great pressure on natural resources, and skewed income distribution pattern (Nepal, 2002; Sood, Lynch & Anastasiadou, 2017; Kala & Bagri, 2018). Apprehending these intricacies, tourism promotion is believed as an apparent choice and an effective way to achieve sustainable development of mountain regions. Since this form of tourism is a multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses economic as well as social, cultural, environmental, historical and psychological dimensions (Godde, Price and Zimmermann, 2000), decision-makers must manage these challenges by ensuring the proper balance between all the dimensions.

Tourism studies advocate that the active involvement of local community members is obligatory for the success of community-based tourism development in mountainous regions. Since community members are aware about potential tourism offerings, their cultural attributes and socio-economic conditions, they must take part in community-based tourism development (Tosun, 2006). These tourism promotion efforts help residents to monitor the tourism development, operate basic infrastructural facilities, control local resources, reduce the economic leakage, contribute to tourism-related strategies and encourage the willingness of locals to accept tourism development in the region (Tosun, 2000; Tosun & Timothy, 2003). In the Himalayan states, the various forms of tourism such as ecotourism, community-based tourism, alternative tourism, homestay tourism, nature tourism, mountain tourism, rural tourism and even sustainable tourism are often used interchangeably. These forms of tourism are at the emerging stage as tourists have started visiting these remote areas and searched for food and accommodation in villages. However, the present form of tourism development delivers benefits to tour-operators, camp-owners and hotels while community members have deprived of financial benefits of tourism. Locals have been disregarded and overlooked in tourism development efforts because of their less articulated characteristics.

Sustainable Ecotourism Development
Hector Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) introduced the term ‘ecotourism’ and defined it as “ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel, and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features-both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvements of local populations”. Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves environment and improves well-being of local people (The International Ecotourism Society, 1991). This alternative form of tourism conserves natural environment and promotes sociocultural and economic welfare of marginalized communities within a framework of balanced development and sustainability. Several researchers have supported the alternative approach to tourism development, highlighting the unfavorable effects of mass tourism. They believed contrary to mass tourism, alternative tourism is
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