

## Effectiveness of Ecotourism: A case of Chitwan National Park

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### ABSTRACT

*Ecotourism is the fast growing industry in the world. In Nepal also it is growing consistently since late 1980s. Various ecotourism programs have been initiated in different natural destinations in the country since then. But the research studies to find out the effectiveness of these programs have been rarely conducted. Very few studies have been conducted to know whether these programs are yielding desired results or not. This study aims to conduct one such research to find out the impact of a ecotourism program. The study is to be conducted in Chitwan National Park. The focus of the study is the buffer zone program of Chitwan National Park. Where the study aims to assess the impacts of community development activities of the buffer zone program. For that proposed conceptual frame work of the study is also presented below.*

### KEYWORDS

Community Development, Ecotourism, Sustainable tourism, Conservation, Buffer Zone

### INTRODUCTION

Nepal is the country of ecotourism. It is among a few ecotourism destinations in the world since 80% of its tourism is nature tourism. Its landscape, unique biodiversity and wildlife make it a natural ecotourism destination in the world like Costa Rica and South Africa. It has a number of world class ecotourism destinations like Annapurna region, Chitwan National Park, Bardia National park, along the middle hills are the Khaptad and Rara National Parks and its Sagarmatha (Mt Everest) is the highest peak on earth. Ecotourism is the new discipline in tourism arena developed during the decade of 1980s and extended worldwide by 1990s when UN General Assembly endorsed it in 1992. Nepal adopted ecotourism after 1992 when Nepal signed the resolution in UN to endorse ecotourism. Nepal was the signatories of that resolution, along with 182 countries to implement ecotourism in their respective countries. Thus it can be said that ecotourism activities initiated in Nepal after 1992 only.

Despite being the world class ecotourism destination, Nepal has yet to do a lot for the promotion of ecotourism in the country. Ecotourism is yet to be implemented in its true spirit in the country. It is still to be implemented in a number of its world class ecotourism destinations like Rara and Khaptad. Consequently ecotourism implementation has been limited to few destinations

along central Nepal only and these are Annapurna and Chitwan mainly. In these destinations too researches (particularly major researches) to find out the impacts of ecotourism programs are lacking. Due to which there is lack of information whether these programs are effective or not. Effective here means; simply, whether they are giving desired results or not and how ecotourism programs are being implemented in these destinations too to achieve the desired results.

Chitwan is selected to study because the studies have done so far have been also concentrated to Annapurna mainly and major studies in Chitwan are lacking. That's why Chitwan National Park is selected for this study.

## OBJECTIVES

This study assesses the effectiveness of ecotourism in Chitwan National Park.

The study assesses the effectiveness in the community development activities of the Buffer Zone Program (BZP) of Chitwan National Park.

Specific objective of the study:

1. To investigate the involvement of communities in the program,
2. To find out the role (participation) of committee members in planning and implementation,
3. To identify the socio economic changes (benefits) to communities.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecotourism is related with various theories. However main theories attached with ecotourism are *sustainable tourism theory*, *sustainability theory* and *theory of Sustainable Development*. However the earlier theory being attached with ecotourism is the theory of sustainability. The concept of sustainability came into discussion in tourism arena since early 1960s when the mass tourism was coming under severe criticism. Discussions started worldwide about the negative impacts of mass tourism visible that time. Since then the positive impacts of tourism like *smokeless industry*, *medium of foreign exchange*, *redistribution of wealth from north to south used to come under the public* discussion. But by the latter half of 1960s negative impacts of mass tourism began to be surfaced out. As its negative impacts like depletion of natural resources worldwide and negative impacts on the culture of developing countries became apparent. Mass tourism was being defamed due to its negative impacts on the environment and indigenous cultures of developing countries. By this time as Lascurain says "tourism itself has earned bad name and it was being realized among tourism stakeholders and experts too that tourism itself may be unstable if that condition persisted for longer period" (Lascurain, 1996). Therefore tourism stakeholders, experts and philosophers began to think of new form of tourism that could be sustainable for future. Discussions among concerned parties and philosophers started to develop new form of tourism that may be sustainable and alternative to mass tourism. After wide discussions philosophers also came to the conclusion that the new form of tourism should come into existence and that should be sustainable too. But the philosophers at that time could not be able to define sustainability explicitly and were not be able to explain that how tourism could be sustainable and what do they mean by sustainability? The issue of sustainability remained ill defined till the latter half of 1980 and the term sustainability

later on defined precisely by the end of decade of 1980s only when the concept of sustainable development brought to prominence with the publication of ‘Our Common Future’ the report of World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The commission was set up by U.N. General Assembly in 1983 with G.H. Brundtland its Chairman (Dresner, 2008, p.34). The term Sustainable Development came into appearance just after the release of Brundtland Report 1987. The WCED defined sustainability more precisely, the term which had been alluded too much earlier in tourism literature. After the release of Brundtland Report the concept of sustainable development was popularized (Dresner, 2008). After the declaration of Brundtland Report 1987, theory of sustainable development came into existence and was endorsed by U. N. General Assembly in 1992. This is the period, a list of the principles of sustainability and guide lines prepared. Guidelines prepared by Tourism Concern (1991) in association with World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is a guideline for sustainable tourism that shows the nearness of sustainable tourism with ecotourism (Agenda 21). It is because two sustainability principles that are commonly highlighted in the ecotourism context are that ecotourism should (i) support local economies (ii) support conservation are also the part of principles of sustainable tourism developed by Tourism Concern and WWF in 1991 (Bhatt, 2016, pp.29-30, cites Tourism Concern 1992). Thus the developments since 1960s-1990s shows that ecotourism is near to sustainable tourism and sustainable tourism itself is the derivative of sustainable development (Bhatt, 2016, p.29) which shows that ecotourism is directly related with these three theories.

Thus, it is apparent that ecotourism is near to sustainable tourism and quite different from mass tourism since the birth of ecotourism has been considered to make tourism sustainable. It can be further seen explicitly if we compare it with mass tourism (Table-1). However ecotourism can be best understood by observing its basic concepts or fundamental principles. The fundamental principles of ecotourism envisage:

1. Nature conservation
2. Involvement of local community
3. Sustainable use of natural resources
4. Cultural preservation

These four basic concepts of ecotourism make it totally different from other forms of tourism (Dalem, 2000, cited by Bhatt, 2002)

<b>Mass tourism</b>	<b>Ecotourism</b>
Profit oriented	Environment oriented. Environment is its prime concern
Involves large number of tourists	It involves small groups. it insists quality rather quantity
It has negative impact on environment i.e. Environment degrading	It has low impact on environment i.e. Environment friendly
Benefits come comparatively in shorter period	Slow business ,yields benefits after long time, its sustainability decides profit

It needs less infrastructures	Needs a number. of basic infrastructure to be run smoothly
Infrastructures can be developed easily	It takes time to develop infrastructures

In this study effectiveness is dependent variable. Involvement of communities, participation of committees and committee members and community development activities are independent (cause) variables while benefits to communities are dependent (effect) variables. Benefits to communities improve quality of tourism in the destination that finally contributes to make tourism sustainable. The benefits (effects) if positive will provide desired results i.e. effective. Thus effectiveness depends on the benefits of community development activities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

With the review of literature at local level also, it has been observed that Buffer Zone Program (BZP) in CNP carries 4 activities under its annual programs (Ann Rep CNP, 2013). These are:

1. Conservation
2. Community development
3. Income generation and skill development
4. Conservation education

These activities of the buffer zone program are almost similar to the basic concepts of ecotourism. These programs resemble with the basic principles of ecotourism discussed above. Which shows the program is absolutely ecotourism based.

As far the operation of the program is concerned, the BZP is run by committee system. There is buffer zone program directory "*Madhyawartii Tschhetra Nirdeshika*" that is actually the guideline to operate BZP. There is the provision of committee system in the directory to operate programs. The committees have three strata:

1. Buffer Zone Management Committee(BZMC)
2. Users Committee (UC)
3. User Groups (UG)

At the top is the Buffer Zone Management Committee (BZMC) and at the grass root are users and User Groups (UG) while at the middle is User Committee (UC). BZMC is apex body of committee system. It distributes budget to UCs while UCs are the actual implementers of the program. There are 21 UCs in whole buffer zone. While the whole buffer zone is divided into four sectors; eastern, western, central and southern.

The committees are thoroughly responsible to formulate and implement the programs as well as the maintenance of the projects after hand over to users. In other words committee system is given sole responsibility to formulate and implement programs as well as repair and maintenance of the projects. The annual programs are run under four heads. These 4 heads are mandatory as per directory. Actually the program is conducted under these four heads as the annual reports show (Ann Rep CNP, 2013-2015).The programs are formulated for five years and are selected annually

for annual programs from five year plan inventory usually. The Budget for the program comes from the ministry. The source of budget is revenue generated by the park every year. Budget is sanctioned by Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation. That is generally 30% - 50% of revenue generated in the park annually. This allocation of budget coincides with the norms of ecotourism internationally. Since revenue back to the generating destination is the basic norm of ecotourism worldwide. It seems BZP follows that norm of ecotourism prevalent worldwide. The annually programs formulated by UCs and approved by BZMC are forwarded to ministry .However the programs should be under the budget ceiling fixed by ministry. Ministry fixes the annual budget ceiling for the program that is generally 30-50 percent of the revenue generated.

The planning is as it seems, there is bottom up planning system. The programs are designed by management committee as per local needs except it should be formulated under 4 heads frame as directed by directory. Since the programs are designed from grass root level i.e. assembling of users first to user group to user committee and finally recommended by BZMC. This shows the planning is bottom up. The programs are designed for five years and picked up every year for annual programs. (Program Directory clause 5.6). The selected programs are implemented UCs.

It has been revealed from the review of literature that buffer program in CNP is a basic ecotourism program that follows the basic norms of ecotourism e.g. return back part of revenue to destination for community development , follows bottom up planning and certain other mandatory provisions to promote ecotourism in the destination. But despite that certain drawbacks are also seen there in the annual programs .e.g. one such drawback is visible in activities included in the annual programs; that is the activities to be included in community development head are included in the conservation head and to be included in the income generation head are in the conservation head or community development head (Ann Rep CNP, 2013). Similarly conservation education head also needs to be better organized as per directory. However these weaknesses can be removed by giving ecotourism orientation/ trainings to committees. Since ecotourism needs much education and training at each level.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based upon the literature it is apparent that BZP in CNP is a community based ecotourism program. A few minor studies have attempted to evaluate the performance of management committees in CNP. But major studies to measure effectiveness could not be seen so far. This study prepares following research questions to be answered prepared by this researcher to measure the effectiveness of ecotourism presented in the figure below:



**Figure1: Proposed Conceptual Framework**

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