

Exploring the Role of Rural Tourism in Achieving Sustainable Rural Development

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of rural tourism in facilitating sustainable rural development, with a specific focus on Ghandruk region situated in Kaski district of Nepal. Employing a case study methodology, the researchers collected data through in-depth interviews conducted with a diverse range of stakeholders, including homestay owners, hotel owners, foreign tourists, local leaders, NGOs, government representatives, and farmers. The study findings highlight the positive impact of rural tourism activities on the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development within the study region. The research sheds light on the potential of rural tourism in improving the standard of living for rural residents while also preserving local culture and resources. The findings contribute to the existing literature on rural tourism and offer insights for policymakers and stakeholders in leveraging rural tourism as a catalyst for sustainable rural development.

Key words: rural tourism, raising the level of living, sustainable rural development

Introduction

Tourism plays an important role in transforming economy. As per the World Travel and Tourism Council, tourism contributes to 12% of the total global gross domestic product and provides employment opportunities for approximately 200 million individuals across the globe. It is projected that the number of tourists visiting various destinations will reach one billion by 2010 and 1.6 billion by 2020 on a global scale (WTTC, 2015).

Nepal, especially Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) is a top tourism destination over the world (Kapri, 2021). ACA has high biodiversity, internationally renowned peaks of over 7000 m, and well-known trekking routes such as the Annapurna Circuit trail. The Gurung, Magar, Thakali, Manange, and Loba ethnic people live in the area, along with Brahmins and Chhetris, resulting in diverse ethnic cultures, languages, and religious values, as well as Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples. As a result, ACA is listed as one of the top 10 tourism destinations of the world. (Prajapati, 2020).

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The term "Tourism" is highly recognized in present times and is derived from the French term "Tourisme" that emerged in the 19th century. Although it gained popularity in the 1930s, its true significance was not fully understood until today, as "Tourism" now encompasses a broader scope and holds greater importance (Satyal, 1999). Tourism is a study of man away from his usual habitat (Jafari, 1977). In addition, tourism is the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal place of work and residences, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs (Mathieson, 1982).

Nepal, a small yet exceptionally affluent nation in terms of biodiversity, stands out due to its distinctive geographic location and varying altitudes. This country is renowned as one of the finest destinations worldwide for religious, cultural, and natural exploration. With its remarkable fusion of art, culture, and tradition, coupled with its abundant natural beauty, Nepal has immense potential to captivate tourists of all kinds from around the globe (Bhattarai, 2071 BS).

Development of Tourism in Nepal

Tourism, as a human activity promoting international brotherhood and understanding, holds great significance for nations worldwide. In Nepal, the concept of modern tourism is relatively new. Prior to the unification of Nepal under King Prithivi Narayan Shah, tourism was intricately connected to religion, politics, and business. Many visitors, especially from neighboring countries like China, India, and Tibet, visited Nepal for religious purposes. Notable individuals like "Manjushree" played a key role in making the valley habitable for humans. During the reign of the Lichhavi dynasty, renowned travelers such as Huich-Tsang from China and Chinese envoys Li-Y-Pio and Wang Hiuentse visited Nepal along with their companions. After Nepal's unification, British visitors arrived with political motives, including figures like Knox, Hamilton, and Captain Kirkpatrick. During this period, Nepal restricted access to outsiders, particularly Europeans, to preserve unity and independence. A significant milestone in Nepal's history was the emergence of the "RANA" regime, lasting 104 years until 1950, during which successive kings held symbolic roles with limited power and authority. Nepal effectively became a forbidden land for foreigners, except for a few small traders and Indian pilgrims (Himalayaban, 2011).

Currently, the Nepalese community is reaping the rewards of past efforts in tourism development and promotion. Thus far, our focus has primarily been on traditional forms of tourism, such as trekking, rafting, and mountaineering. Many individuals and businesses are entering the industry, providing similar touring, travel, and trekking services, and employing conventional promotional strategies. Unfortunately, the Nepalese tourism sector is lacking investment in research, product development, and innovation. The

industry continues to offer outdated tourism products without introducing fresh and inventive ideas. It is essential to recognize that tourism is a dynamic and ongoing process, demanding foresight and vision for sustainable growth (Rai, 2020).

The country has witnessed an increase in tourist arrivals to approximately one million per year, indicating successful promotion efforts. This growth in global awareness has stimulated domestic tourist activities, processes, and destinations, creating a favorable environment for sustainable tourism development in Nepal. As Nepal can tap into the world market, particularly the sizable populations of neighboring countries, it is expected that both tourist arrivals and the duration of their stay will continue to rise. In the fiscal year 2018/2019, tourist arrivals reached 1.197 million, contributing 2.7 percent to the GDP. This influx of tourists also resulted in direct employment for 200,000 people, with an average daily expenditure of USD 48 per person and an average length of stay of 12.7 days (NPC, 2019/20-2023/24).

Concept of Rural Tourism

In the past few years, the rural areas have blossomed with fresh opportunities. Rural tourism has emerged as a rich and diverse activity, extending far beyond traditional farm or agriculture-based experiences. It encompasses a wide range of offerings, from delightful farm-based holidays to captivating nature getaways and ecotourism adventures. Whether it's exploring picturesque landscapes on foot, embarking on thrilling climbing and riding escapades, seeking exhilaration through adventure and sports, prioritizing health and wellness, indulging in hunting and angling pursuits, engaging in educational travel, immersing in arts and heritage experiences, or exploring the cultural and ethnic tapestry of specific regions, rural tourism has something special for everyone (Paudyal, 2017).

The charm of rural tourism, agro tourism, and village tourism often intertwines, as these terms are frequently used interchangeably by experts and developers. This phenomenon can be attributed to the wide range of activities available in these areas. The warmth of countryside hospitality is intricately linked to the world of agribusiness, offering a delightful package of accommodation services, delectable catering options, and a plethora of leisure activities to indulge in (Kovács, 2002).

Rural tourism is a tourism product that is built for introducing rural regions, and to utilize other attractions and provide diversified services. Tourism provides authentic special emotions for the tourists, alternative income, and the preservation of local natural values and culture for the local inhabitants. Homestay is a major form of rural tourism that permits a visitor to charge a room from a local family in a residential setting. It is sometimes used for improving language skills and getting familiar with the local lifestyle. This word was

first time introduced in 1956 AD in globe, but, in Nepal, it is a new concept of tourism, which is playing a significant role in rural development process.

Concept of Sustainable Rural Development

Sustainable rural development involves a holistic approach where daily basic needs of rural population must be covered by reliable public utilities combined with technical, socioeconomic, and environmental conditions to support regional economies and urban-rural linkages (Iatu, 2020).

Sustainable rural development is vital to the economic, social and environmental viability of nations. It is essential for poverty eradication since global poverty is overwhelmingly rural. The manifestation of poverty goes beyond the urban-rural divide; it has sub-regional and regional contexts. It is therefore critical, and there is great value to be gained, by coordinating rural development initiatives that contribute to sustainable livelihoods through efforts at the global, regional, national and local levels, as appropriate. Strategies to deal with rural development should take into consideration the remoteness and potentials in rural areas and provide targeted differentiated approaches (UN, 2022).

Sustainable rural development covers agriculture, processing and marketing of products, trade-industry-construction-crafts, infrastructure-service industry, structure of the population-age-employment, culture-local history-leisure tourism, water industry, forestry, devastating effect on the soil, agro-ecology, conservation-landscape care, settlement structure, natural resources and conditions (Merzolov, 2012).

Rural Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development

Rural tourism is an activity that contributes directly and indirectly to the development of rural areas. But this development needs to be sustainable. For this, appropriate policies that positively influence these areas from an economic, social and environmental point of view must be instrumented and implemented in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals. This study analyzed the contribution of role of rural tourism to promote sustainable rural development that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products. The variables that significantly influence sustainable rural development through rural tourism are local products, tourist behavior, motivation, the destination image, and the satisfaction obtained by the tourist have been analyzed.

Rural tourism consists of activities in rural areas, rural environment, attractiveness of rural areas, sustainability of rural development, rural accommodation, and additional income of rural families, active leisure time activities in rural, rural culture and utilization of local resources (Könyves, 2001).

For (Polo, 2010), the development of the rural tourist activity is very suitable for improving the development of rural areas, likewise (Marzo-Navarro, 2017) stated that rural tourism promotes the development and economic growth of the destination areas, for which it is a priority to achieve the objectives of economic, sociocultural, and environmental sustainability. The (UNWTO, 2021) has recognized that “tourism is one of the driving forces of global economic growth and is currently responsible for the creation of 1 in 11 jobs.

There are various problems in context of tourism development in the rural areas of the country. Although there are many researches related to rural tourism, it has not been able to expose the environmental aspect along with the socio-economic aspect. Therefore, the sustainability of rural tourism has been taken as its main problem or focus area.

This study aims to explore socio-economic-environmental prosperity through rural tourism in the study area. Thus, how can rural tourism be changing economic status of local people in the project area? is the question to be investigated.

This research was conducted on the base of Smart Growth Model and Modernization theories. Smart growth models typically promote long-term economic development while preserving the natural environment (Ewing, 2010). These models can involve both building new infrastructure and revitalizing existing assets to promote the growth of vibrant rural communities. Smart growth addresses multiple social determinants of health (SDOH), including economic stability, transportation, and housing. And modernization encourages socio-cultural changes, as economic growth demands these changes as a foundational stage for further economic development (Rostow, 1960) (Inglehart, 1997). That directly linked with the research issue.

Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to investigate pivotal role played by rural tourism in attaining sustainable rural development with a specific focus on social advancement, economic transformation, and environmental preservation.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant academic value within the domain of sustainable rural development. Its focus lies in generating novel insights by delineating the various roles played by rural tourism in fostering sustainable rural development. The analysis of rural tourism's contributions to sustainable development in Nepal, particularly from social, economic, and environmental standpoints, remains largely understudied, rendering it a critical research area. The study provides a foundation and contextual backdrop for the subject matter, highlighting the absence of prior scholarly investigations in Nepal pertaining to this specific aspect. Thus, the current research endeavor is warranted to address this gap and fulfill the need for a comprehensive study in this field.

Research Methods

The present study was conducted within the framework of a case study research design, aiming to investigate the role of rural tourism in facilitating sustainable rural development in Ghandruk. A total of thirty participants were selected as samples for the study, comprising 10 homestay owners, five hotel owners, five tourists, three local leaders, three members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), two government officials, and two farmers. The selection of participants was based on the purpose of obtaining diverse perspectives and insights. Moreover, rural tourism sites and centers were chosen as the focal points for the observation phase.

Field surveys were carried out in December 2022 to collect socio-economic data. Initially, data were gathered through a targeted sampling method, followed by interviews and the completion of focus group discussions. The natural state of rural tourism was assessed through careful observation by the researchers. For the socio-economic survey, a simple random sampling technique was employed to select stakeholders and households. The selected households were representative of various socio-economic criteria, ethnic/caste backgrounds, levels of accessibility/remoteness, age groups of users, and resource availability.

Consequently, the variables to be measured were considered as the fundamental database for the analysis, with profit sharing and participation serving as key elements. The study employed a combination of group deliberations, observational analysis, and self-administered questionnaires to assess the contribution of rural tourism to local development.

Data Analysis

This research employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The quantitative data, comprising numerical values, were subjected to statistical analysis using established tools such as mean, median, and tabulation. In parallel, the qualitative data underwent a meticulous examination against the research objectives, employing techniques such as description and content analysis.

The examination of stakeholder access within the context of sustainable rural development served as the focal point of this study. The data collection process commenced after the completion of an interview schedule based on field observations. To ensure consistent analysis, the scales employed for each sample were standardized. Within this analytical phase, descriptive methods were employed to analyze the qualitative data.

Discussion

The study aimed to assess the sustainability of the profession within the chosen area. Furthermore, the study aimed to elucidate interconnections between community

participation, economic benefits, and living standards of local residents. The findings resulting from the investigation were thoroughly described and analyzed.

The research site selected for this study was the Annapurna Rural Municipality, specifically Ward No. 11 and 12, located in Ghandruk, Kaski. A sample size of thirty participants was chosen to fulfill the study's objectives. The survey employed a simple random sampling technique with a lottery method. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations, and focus group discussions.

To examine the accessibility of stakeholders within the community, the issue of sustainable rural development was analyzed. After completing the interview schedule during field observations, data collection commenced. Computer programs were utilized to standardize the scales for each sample, and basic statistical tools such as tables were employed for data analysis. Descriptive methods were employed to analyze qualitative data during this stage.

By utilizing the Smart Growth Model and Modernization theories to justify the role of rural tourism in achieving sustainable rural development, this study acknowledges the potential of tourism to facilitate positive transformations within rural communities. This approach underscores the significance of balancing economic growth with environmental preservation, cultural conservation, and community empowerment. Ultimately, this integrated approach can foster sustainable and inclusive development in rural areas.

Description of the study area

The study area is Annapurna Rural Municipality (ARM), which covers an area of 417.74 square kilometers with a population of 23,417. Located in the Kaski district of Nepal, it is known for its focus on agriculture, tourism, energy, and infrastructure. The rural municipality consists of 11 wards, including villages like Dhikurpokhri, Bhadauretmagi, Salyan, Lumle, Dangsing, and Ghandruk. Annapurna Rural Municipality shares borders with Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality to the east, Manang and Myagdi districts to the west, and Parvat and Pokhara-Lekhnath Metropolitan Municipality to the south. The key sectors driving the local economy are tourism, agriculture, and animal husbandry. Naudanda, Kande, Nyanpul, Birethanti, and Syauli serve as the primary market areas. The region is renowned for its tourist attractions, including Annapurna Base Camp, Machhapuchhre Base Camp, Ghodepani, Ghandruk, Panchase, Ishru, Hidne Tal, and Nasikhar. The total length of national roads in the area is 24 km, while district roads cover 58.52 km. The village-level roads add up to approximately 237.41 km (ARM, Profile, 2017).

Ghandruk, a village within Annapurna Rural Municipality, gained prominence in 1950 when French climber Maurice Herzog successfully climbed the Annapurna Himal. Since then, it has become a popular destination for tourists, especially those trekking in the

Annapurna region. Ghandruk offers stunning mountain views, historical and religious sites, such as Meshramwarah, Taujiwarah, Poz Nebwarah, Kotdanda, Gumba, and Nyowarah Lake. Visitors are captivated by the snow-capped peaks, picturesque landscapes, diverse cultures, and rural settlements. Ghandruk has attracted both domestic and international tourists, becoming a significant tourist destination in the region (ARM, Record, 2021).

Annapurna Rural Municipality's First Five-Year Plan (2076/77 — 2080/81)

The development of Annapurna Rural Municipality is centered on agriculture, tourism, and physical infrastructure. The Five-Year Plan focuses on energy, industry, human resources, and governance. The plan aims to achieve economic growth, improve health, water supply, sanitation, environment, and education, ensuring social security and good governance. The target is to increase the economic growth rate from 5.2% to 8.5% by 2080-81. The annual average economic growth rate of the municipality is 7%, and the per capita income is estimated to reach \$1,350 by the end of the plan period (ARM, 2076/77).

Table 1: ARM Plan (BS 2076-77-BS 2080-81)

SN	SECTOR	FY 076/77	FY 077/78	FY 078/79	FY 079/80	FY 080/81	Total Expenditure (Predicted)
		Rs. in Lakh	Rs. in Lakh	Rs. in Lakh	Rs. in Lakh	Rs. in Lakh	
1	Infrastructure Development	1130	1424	1724	2050	2365	
2	Economic Development	200	340	385	445	543	
3	Social Development	320	376	430	525	595	
4	Environment and Disaster Management	75	113	146	170	211	
5	Institutional Capacity Development	65	45	60	75	95	
	Total	1,790	2,289	2,745	3,265	3,809	15,581

Source: ARM, First Plan.

Above table shows that Annapurna Rural Municipality priorities in various areas like; agriculture, livestock and fishery development, land management, cooperative sector, land conservation and bio-diversity, herbs development, environment protection, tourism, hydroelectricity, renewable energy, industry, mines development, commerce and supply, road development, irrigation, drinking water, building construction, information and communication, education, health and hygiene, population and migration, youth and sports, labour and employment, good governance, social security, mobilization of tax, etc.

Direct Tourism Services

People, in the study area were engaged in different occupation related tourism services. Likewise, highest 33.33% engaged in homestay services and lowest 6.66% in tea shop services, which details is presented below the table.

Table 2: Occupational Engagement

Occupation pattern	Frequency	Percentage
Homestay	10	33.33
Hotel	5	16.66
Foreign Tourist	5	16.66
Leaders	3	10
NGOs	3	10
Government	2	6.66
Farmers	2	6.66
Total	30	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Annual Income Before and After Tourism

One of the major impacts of rural tourism is change in level of income. Generally social status is determined by income level. Employment opportunity is created due to village tourism and by engaging themselves in income generation the respondents have been benefitted. The income levels due to before and after rural tourism as per the respondents are as follows:

Table 3: Annual Income Before and After Tourism

Income ratio	Before Frequency	After Frequency	Before Percent	After Percent
50,000-200,000	12	2	40	6.66
201,000-450,000	8	3	26.6	10
451,000-600,000	6	7	20	23.33
601,000-above	4	18	13.33	60
Total	30	30	100	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

According to the data presented, 40% of respondents in the study area earn between 50,000 and 2 lakhs per year from rural tourism. Furthermore, 26.6% have earned between 2 lakhs and 4.5 lakhs, 20% between 4.51 lakhs and 6 lakhs, and 13.33% earn up to 6 lakhs per year. The data indicates that the majority of people earn between 50,000 and 2 lakhs per year. However, after engaging in rural tourism activities, there has been an improvement, with 6.66%, 10%, 23.33%, and 60% respectively earning above 6,01,000 Rs yearly.

Supply of Local Rural Products

The present study area attracts a significant number of national and international tourists. The table presented illustrates the dominance of international tourists in purchasing local products.

Table 4: Supply of Local Rural Products

Statistics	Frequency/Percentage
Indigenous product for domestic tourist	14 (46.66%)
Indigenous product for international tourist	16 (53.33%)
Total	30 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

A field survey involving 30 respondents was conducted, with 56.1% of them belonging to the age group of 30-44 years. Despite 29.3% of the total population being female, they were found engaged in various income-generating activities. The majority of the settlement comprised Gurung, Chhetri, and Rai ethnicities, accounting for approximately 76.4%. About 46.3% of the respondents owned land ranging from 5-9 Ropani, while only 7.3% possessed 20 Ropani or more. The direct category consisted of 42.3% of the respondents, primarily involved in hotel business, while 57.7% fell under the indirect and non-beneficiary category, with farming and guide porter services being predominant. The supply of local or indigenous products to guests was relatively low. The average initial investment for opening a tourism-related business exceeded three lakhs, and the average annual income from the tourism sector was five times higher than that from non-tourism activities. Approximately 60.2% of the respondents had a bank account. Good road accessibility was highlighted as a significant requirement by 39% of the respondents, and women's participation in tourism-based services and products showed an increase. Furthermore, 88% of the respondents emphasized the need for motivating local youth and women to become direct beneficiaries of tourism, while over 90% stressed the importance of financial support to cultural institutions by the local government.

Case 1

An important feature of tourism in Ghandruk is community-based tourism. Leader Kisam Gurung, 50 years old, believes that the tourism business here has taken a leap due to the relationship between the tourism professionals here and the local community. He says, "The good relationship between the tourism professionals here and the local community has made everyone feel that the tourists who come to Ghandruk are their own guests." (sic)

The same rate has been fixed for the service facilities of all the hotels here. Any tourist who reaches Ghandruk can get services and facilities of his choice. "We have maintained the same menu of service facilities here, we change it collectively every year" - Leader Gurung said.

To reach Ghandruk at an altitude of 6,700 feet, you have to walk for about five hours after reaching Nayapul in Kaski and getting off the car. Many tourists are eager to reach Ghandruk by walking through this route. Tourists who reach Ghandruk in this month can also see the charm of nightingales in the forests, Chairman Gurung said.

Gurung Said, "After the development of rural tourism, people have been changing their living standard and getting more income. We did not know that there will be so much development in the social, cultural, economic and environmental fields that rural tourism has given us. We are happy and have created an environment for the next generation."

Case 2

Bikram Gurung, 34, who runs a hotel business in Ghandruk, says that business is also being conducted by Nepalis so as to support the foreign tourists who come here. According to Gurung, the arrival of domestic tourists is increasing here after the armed conflict and covid-19.

When the sun rises there are scattering bright rays. One can visualize the wonderful wave of the snow chain, which looks like gold reflected from the ground. The attraction of this region is to observe more than 20 snow peaks belonging to the mountain range of Manaslu, Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, which are more than eight thousand meters high, Gurung said.

He believes that all of the changes in education, trekking trails, income, level of awareness, cultural preservation are the outcomes of rural tourism

Case 3

Kamal Thapa Magar, 48, owner of Hotel Samipyra said that the hotels and lodges operating here are regularly monitored by the local society, so the price is almost the same. Cultural programs are also shown to tourists in Ghandruk, which is a model village for rural tourism. In the months of February and Chaitra, you can see the blooming of red gourds all over the path on this footpath. Everyone's heart is happy when they see the red rose blossoming in the dense forest. He said, there is an income of "50,000 a day even if there is no business. That is good."

He said that, now a days minimum 200 tourist arrive Ghandruk but on Friday and Saturday there 1000 tourists. He added, "Now even those who do not earn here are earning up to three lakhs and those who used to earn now earn 15 lakhs annually."

Due to rural tourism, social development has helped in health, sanitation, covid vaccination, environmental awareness and action, program to stop deforestation, and disaster preparedness. Ward no 10 and 11 are active for rural tourism, Thapa said.

Conclusion

Rural tourism is a concept that can serve as a foundation for sustainable development in certain contexts. It operates on a demand-driven strategy and can be managed independently, focusing on promoting local stakeholders and benefiting domestic entrepreneurs and urban residents. In Nepal, rural tourism has proven to be a significant contributor to the wellbeing of rural inhabitants, reducing out-migration and fostering the development of rural areas. While it cannot be the sole driving force of the region, it can synergize with other sectors of the local economy. Ghandruk serves as a notable example of successful rural tourism, showcasing the positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes it can bring. The development of rural tourism in this area has created employment opportunities, new businesses, cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and enhanced community livelihoods. This highlights the substantial impact of rural tourism on sustainable rural development.

Recommendations

The study findings offer several recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and individuals involved in tourism and tourism marketing in the study area. Firstly, there is a need for adequate resource mobilization to uplift the rural population. Implementing programs like "One family one product" and promoting local products can attract the youth and stimulate economic growth. The local financial institution should provide effective support to Homestay owners, while proper waste and road management is crucial for attracting tourists. Government bodies such as the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Nepal Tourism Board, and other tourism-related organizations should actively contribute to tourism development. Promoting agro-based rural markets can greatly support rural development, and increasing tourism education locally can foster the locality. Finally, it is important for owners, stakeholders, and tourists to adhere to the Homestay rules of 2067 (Nepali calendar) responsibly. These recommendations aim to foster sustainable rural development and maximize the benefits of rural tourism in the study area.

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