



Ecotourism in Gaurishankar Conservation Area: Source of Income, Satisfaction and Perception of Local People

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Abstract: Ecotourism is nature-based tourism having the dual objectives of nature conservation and livelihood improvement. Although local people are at the limelight of ecotourism, past researchers in Nepalese context are mainly focused on the tourist perspective and satisfaction. This research was carried out with the objective of analyzing the source of income, satisfaction of local people and their perception about ecotourism in Gaurishankar Conservation Area. Data were randomly collected from 65 residents from Gaurishankar Conservation Area using questionnaire survey. Tourism was identified as the vital source of income of local people together with other sources of income. Local people are satisfied with ecotourism and its associated business in the area. Perceptions analysis disclosed contrast views of hoteliers and non-hotelier on impacts of ecotourism. This research recommends concerned authority for enhancing positive impacts and reducing negative impacts of ecotourism in the locality. Further, comprehensive researches on perspective of local people about the ecotourism are recommended for researchers.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Satisfaction, Impacts, Local people, Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity conservation in Nepal officially started after the enactment of the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act (NPWCA) in 1973. Conservation was based on command and control model during 1970s which gradually transformed to participatory and landscape level conservation [1]. The traditional concept of biodiversity conservation through Protected Area is criticized for its resultant of relocation and ban on use of natural resources by the local people [2, 3]. This posed threat to the biodiversity conservation from the negligence and lack of ownership from local people. Concerned agencies prioritized livelihood of local people realizing that conservation would not be succeed without addressing them. The fourth amendment of the NPWCA in 1992 included the concept of the buffer zone. Conservation area was also devised as a new form of protected area to meet the dual objectives of biodiversity conservation and livelihood improvement of local people. In this regards ecotourism and other integrated conservation approach and development programs were applied to create linkage between community and biodiversity conservation [4]. In recent years protected areas of Nepal are regarded as prime ecotourism destinations and records show flourishing ecotourism. In order to accommodate flourishing ecotourism highland protected areas are primarily established for promoting ecotourism and protecting the fragile landscape [5].

The international eco-tourism society (TIES) defined ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people and involves interpretation and education [6]. Other various organizations have also provided their own definition of the eco-tourism with the central concept of nature-based tourism having both environmental and social objectives of nature protection and livelihood improvement. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) defined ecotourism as a small segment of nature-tourism, which is understood as travel to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas [7]. Ecotourism has certain principles *viz.* ecotourism is non-consumptive/non-extractive, creates an ecological conscience and holds eco-centric values and ethics in relation to nature [6]. Despite the lack of clarity on the concept itself a broad set of ecotourism

principles are developed by scholars including the environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community participation, economic benefits and empowerment of vulnerable groups [8]. In fact ecotourism is helpful to benefit local people but it is not the panacea for the poverty reduction and sustainable development [9]

Lai and Nepal [10] reported that local people are willing to participate in ecotourism but this will depend on local environment, political and socio-economic conditions and therefore the issues of community empowerment, relation between local communities and government and the value creates conflict in benefit sharing of ecotourism. Thus, these needs should be addressed to ensure effective participation of local community. Previous studies were focused on the satisfaction of the tourist [11–13] but the satisfaction of the local people on the ecotourism is equally important for successful ecotourism through active participation and support of local people. In fact, local people do not participate in conservation activities unless they are benefitted from conservation. When conservation area was declared, people residing within conservation area lost their traditional rights. The declaration also caused an increase in human wildlife conflict resulting in loss of property including agricultural products and human injury and loss. In this context, this research aims to analyze the contribution of ecotourism in local livelihoods and other associated perceptions of local people.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study Area

This study was conducted in the Gaurishankar Conservation Area (GCA). Government of Nepal declared Gaurishankar region as a “Conservation Area” in January 2010. It extends between 85°46.8' to 86°34.8' east longitude and 27°34.2' to 28°10' north latitude with an area of 2179 square kilometers. It acts as biological corridor between the Sagarmatha National Park in the east and Langtang National Park in the west. GCA has three physiographic zones of high Himalaya, High Mountain and Middle Mountain. It includes three districts, viz. Sindhupalchok, Dolakha and Ramechhap. Forest and bushes covers 44.5% while cultivation land covers 8.8%, grasslands accounts 8.6%, glaciers accounts for 2.8% and barren land and others covers 35.3% of the total area. It harbors 565 species of plants, 35 species of mammals, 16 species of fishes, 9 species of amphibians, 22 species of reptiles and 235 species of birds [14].

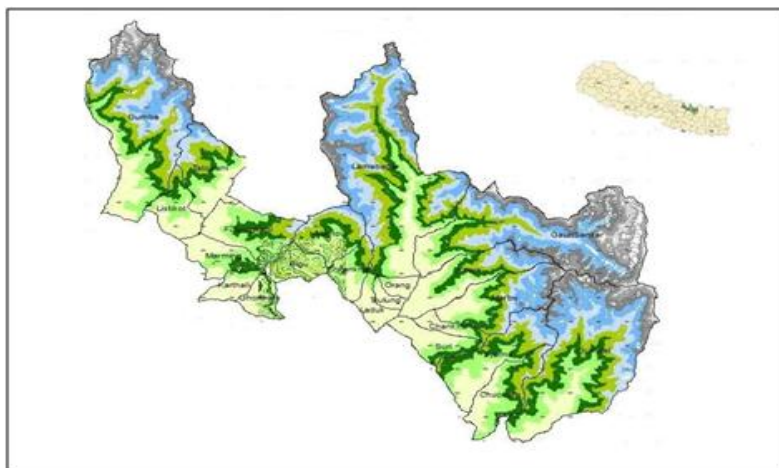


Figure1. Gaurishankar Conservation Area

Table1. Number of tourist in GCA since its establishment

S.N	Year	Number of Tourist
1	2010	141
2	2011	1006
3	2012	1894
4	2013	2488
5	2014	3121
6	2015	1833
7	2016	2495
8	2017	2744

The panoramic landscape is home for over 67,000 people male (50.4%) and female (49.50%) from several ethnic groups among which Janajatis claims highest population (72.59%) following Chetries (15.71%) and Dalits (8.01%). The rest are Brahmins, Thakuris, and Sanyasi. The high region settlement is dominated by ethnic groups of Tibetan origin like Sherpa and Yolmopa, while lower hilly area is dominated by Tamang, Thami, Sunuwar and some typical ethnic groups like Surel, Jirel. Buddhism and Hinduism are common religious beliefs practiced by people. The region is also rich in water resources and is catchment for Khimti, Bhotekoshi, Sunkoshi and Tamakoshi rivers which are source for some major hydro-power projects of the country. It has great potentiality for tourism with major destinations like valleys, lakes and monuments important from both scenic and religious significance. Gaurishankar, Melungtse and Jugal Himal, Rolwaling valley, Tso Rolpa lake, Bhairab Kunda, Dudh pokhari, Panch Pokhari, Numbur Cheese Circuit, Lapchi area, Tashi Naam etc are the major tourist attractions in GCA. Number of tourists visit in GCA is in increasing trend since its establishment. 141 tourists visited in 2010 has raised up to 2744 in 2017 which is promising for the concerned agencies [14].

2.2. Data Collection

Questionnaire survey was conducted randomly with the 65 respondents of the local area involving hoteliers and non-hoteliers. Close ended and open-ended questions included the income of local people, their satisfaction with ecotourism and their perception on impacts of ecotourism at the local area.

2.3. Data Analysis

Collected data were reviewed and fed into the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20. Extreme observations are regarded as the outliers and consultation with the field surveyor was done to verify the values. Later these values are truncated to the normal value as revealed by the field surveyor and then data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Chi-square test was conducted to test the association between the perception of the respondents and their occupation.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

The mean age of the respondents was 39.62 years with minimum 22 years and maximum 60 years old. Of total respondents 72.3% of respondents were male and remaining 27.7% were female. Likewise, 63.1% of the respondents were Hindu, 35.4% were Buddhist and 1.5% respondents were Christian. Regarding the education of the respondents 36.9% had primary education, 36.9% had secondary education, 18.5% had higher secondary education and only 7.7% had the bachelor level education. 66.2% respondents were local inhabitants and 33.8% of the respondents were migrated from other parts of Nepal attracted in tourism business.

3.2. Income Sources

The mean income of the respondents from the tourism was US\$393.08/year/household. Tourism was major source of income contributing about half (45%) of their total income. Other sources of the income were own business (28%), agriculture (12%), service (11%) and others (4%) (Figure 2).

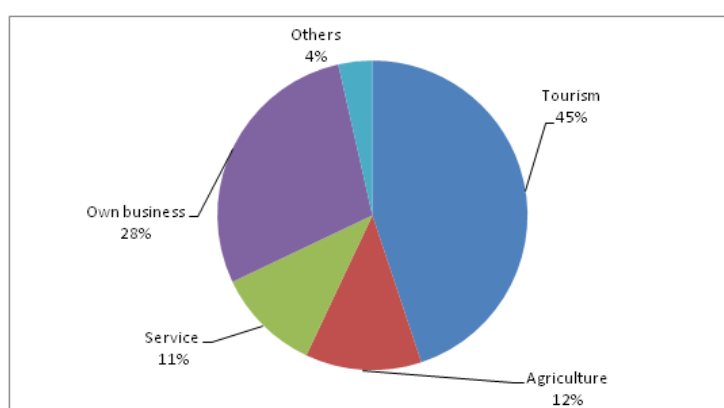


Figure 2. Income Source

3.3. Satisfaction

In this study we found that 70.8% of the respondents were satisfied with the ecotourism and its associated business. Likewise, 26.2% of the respondents had little satisfaction and only 3.1% of the respondents were dissatisfied. The reason for satisfaction and dissatisfaction from ecotourism were identified as presented in table 2.

Table2. *Reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction*

Satisfaction Reasons	Dissatisfaction reason
Increase in income opportunities	Not fair competition
Enhancing social asset	Increase of alcoholism and gambling
Easier for investment	Not equitable distribution of benefits
Development of physical infrastructure	Price hike

3.4. Impacts of Ecotourism

Potential positive and negative impacts of ecotourism were included in the questionnaire with the five-points scale ranging from 1 strongly agree to 5 strongly disagree. In an average, the mean response for the negative impacts was found lower than that of the positive impacts (Table 3).

Table3. *Perception on impacts of tourism*

Statements	Mean response	Occupation	
		χ^2 -value	p-value
Positive Impacts			
Tourism generates employment	2.91	25.288*	0.000
Tourism respect other values, culture and norms	2.43	1.148	0.887
Increased awareness of conservation of natural	3.22	6.269	0.18
Tourism led significant role to uplift the living standard of local people	2.49	10.168*	0.038
Tourism has been able to decrease local forest exploitation by providing them with alternative livelihood opportunities	2.05	12.642*	0.013
Tourism helps as a source of funding to invest in development activities	2.68	2.333	0.675
Tourism helps for the capacity building of the local communities	2.83	6.038	0.196
Tourism promotes cultural awareness and helps for the revival of the cultural heritage	2.91	7.923*	0.048
Tourism brings economic benefits to local	3.72	5.696	0.223
Negative Impacts			
The local people suffer price hike problem on daily consumer goods i.e. increasing cost of living	2.62	20.978*	0.000
High leakage of money outside the area due to lack of product diversification	2.22	2.791	0.593
Seasonal growth of tourism	3.31	5.77	0.217
Gambling, alcoholism and begging is increased through tourism	1.44	4.449	0.349
Labor shortage for traditional economic activities(agriculture) during peak seasons	1.33	14.158*	0.007
Tourism led to inequitable distribution of money	1.64	7.297	0.121
Tourism influenced traditional dressing pattern, food habit, family structure and traditional practices	1.47	5.023	0.285
Tourism causes the changes in behavior of the wild animals	1.66	5.259	0.262
Increased negative impacts on total environment	1.78	16.622*	0.002

*Significant at 0.05 level of significance

The response on three positive and three negative impacts was found associated ($p < 0.05$) with the occupation of the respondents at the 5% level of significance.

4. DISCUSSION

This study reported that significant amount of income has been generated from ecotourism, but this is not only the income source of local people as other source of income *viz.* agriculture, business, etc. This also showed that most of the local people are satisfied with ecotourism and associated business. Satisfaction of the local people regarding ecotourism is necessary in sustaining the ecotourism activities in the local area.

Perception regarding the employment generation is associated with the occupation of respondents. Respondents engaged in ecotourism related business viewed that ecotourism is important for employment generation while others viewed that it is not important for employment generation. Ecotourism was found to have positive impact on both the traditional economic development as well as the comprehensive economic development including the society's welfare [15]. People dependent on ecotourism perceived that it has significant role to uplift their living standard in contrast to those who don't receive such services are unaware about the role of ecotourism in living standard. Likewise, in the case of dependency on forest resources they have differed perceptions and the association between perception on this and occupation was found statistically significant. During the survey, hoteliers said that ecotourism reduce the dependency to the forest resources and other local people said that it has no role in reducing the dependency on forest resources.

Perception on the cultural awareness and revival of cultural heritage through tourism was also associated with the occupation. Hotelier expressed that tourism promoted local culture and cultural heritage while non-hoteliers had perception that tourism activity deteriorates their culture. Ecotourism has been promoted to reduce the negative environmental impact of traditional mass form of tourism and promote the sustainable tourism [16]. This has obviously less impact on environment than the traditional form of tourism which has been promoted without considering the environmental concerns.

Various potential negative impacts of eco-tourism were also identified during the discussion with the local people. The perception on the price hike and increasing living cost was associated with the occupation of local people. Hotel owners had the view that ecotourism does not because the price hike while others had the perception that ecotourism is responsible for hiking basic goods and services. Perception regarding the labor shortage for other economic activities and the increased negative impact on total environment is also found significantly different of the hotelier and other respondents. General local people had the view that it has negative impact on the total environment while the hoteliers said that ecotourism do not have negative impact on the environment as this form of tourism is nature responsible. Study conducted in Protected Forests of Nepal indicated that the management are partly realizing the need of focusing on environmental conservation along with the social and economic objectives [17].

5. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the source of income, satisfaction of local people and their perception about ecotourism in GCA. Tourism was found as the important source of income for local people but not only sole source of income and there were other sources of income as well. Most of the local people were found satisfied with the ecotourism and its associated business. This study identified various potential positive and negative impacts of ecotourism at the local level. Perceptions analysis of the respondents showed that hoteliers and non-hoteliers have contrast response to some impacts of ecotourism. Enhancing positive impacts and minimizing negative impacts is suggested for the GCA Project Office. Further researches on the local people perspective on the ecotourism are recommended for researchers. The positive impacts of ecotourism on local economy must be explored and promoted while negative impacts must be identified and minimized to develop ecotourism optimally.

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