

Ecotourism in Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, India: Assessing Its Impact on Indigenous Communities and Conservation

Abstract

Ecotourism is a type of sustainable tourism that aims at conservation of the environment through maintaining a balance between conservation and development of indigenous communities. However, though ecotourism has become a popular phrase in tourism sector, the authenticity of ecotourism practice is a big question. The situation is grim for developing countries. The present study is an attempt to address the impact of ecotourism in Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary (BKWS), Odisha, which is the second largest mangrove ecosystem in India. Both primary and secondary data are used to address the objectives of the study. The study uses a variety of econometric techniques and case studies to examine the various factors that influence the participation of indigenous local communities' (living inside the sanctuary) in ecotourism, to examine the economic impact of ecotourism to the participants compared to the non-participants, the socio-cultural impact of ecotourism, costs to the locals for ecotourism policy, environmental impact of ecotourism, and finally the attitude of locals towards the policy. The study finds that ecotourism has come as an economic rescuer for the participants who did not have a wide avenue of earning and had to depend on natural resources for their livelihood. With the creation of employment opportunities, locals also have been made aware for participation in community development programs such as Eco development clubs, Self-help groups etc. However, these institutions have failed to empower the communities. Moreover a huge cost of ecotourism occurs to the locals in terms of man-animal conflict and the non-participants suffer mostly in terms of crop depredation, livestock depredation etc. The losses often result in aggravating poverty, food insecurity, additional expenses for investing on mitigating measures, additional expenses through repeated travel to report losses, inquire about payments and consequently diminished state of socio-economic wellbeing. Finally the study addresses the effectiveness of ecotourism policy in meeting the environmental objective and the attitude of the locals towards ecotourism. The study finds that there has been undoubtedly an increase in principal natural capital over time in BKWS as a result of ecotourism. The support of the locals is highly essential for successful conservation policy and it is found that regardless of the socio-economic circumstances villagers exhibit a positive attitude towards the ecotourism policy. Such positive attitude is a boon for policy makers as they can tap this positivity into conservation favorable behavior. Thus proper strategies need to be designed for an inclusive ecotourism approach in BKWS, one which is socio-economically effective, culturally advanced and environmentally sustainable.

Keywords: Ecotourism; economic impact; socio-cultural impact; environmental impact; Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary.