

**ECO - TOURISM : CONSERVATION OR EXPLOITATION**

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**ABSTARCT :**

*Eco-tourism has emerged as one of the most important sectors of the international tourism industry. Eco – tourism means responsible travel to natural areas that safeguards the integrity of the ecosystem and produces economic benefits for local community that can encourage conservation. It is the creative way of marrying the goals of ecological conservation and economic development. Successful eco – tourism requires maximizing its environmental and economic benefits while minimizing ecological damage. But unfortunately all the eco - tourism projects are not completely successful in attaining their objectives. Environmental deterioration and inequitable development, many a times has been found as ill impacts of eco- tourism. So, the paper will explain that how eco – tourism is boosting conservation. But at the same time it will also explain that how eco-tourism is a potential threat to local community and ecosystem along with the suggestions regarding careful planning for eco – tourism.*

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## ECO – TOURISM : CONSERVATION OR EXPLOITATION

Eco - tourism today has become a topic of great interest in the tourism literature. The international eco-tourism society (TIES) defines eco-tourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well being of local people”. Fundamentally, eco-tourism means making as little environmental impact as possible and helping to sustain the indigenous population, thereby encouraging preservation of wildlife and habitat when visiting a place. Thus, it is something more than nature loving travel and recreation. So it can be said that saving the environment around you and preserving the natural luxuries and forest life-that’s what eco-tourism is all about. Successful eco-tourism requires maximizing its environmental and economic benefits while minimizing eco-logical damage. There is no doubt to the fact, that eco-tourism encourages and supports the diversified local economics for which tourism-related income is most important. With the support from tourists, local families can support themselves and tourist places can be more developed. Besides all this, revenue produced from tourism help and encourages government to find conservation projects and training programs. But honest accounting of this industry demands an examination of its negative impacts.

Unfortunately, many of the tourism projects are not able to meet their promises. It has been found that eco-tourism itself is actually damaging the environment which it strives to preserve. This damage is inflicted upon native flora, fauna indigenous culture and various ecological assets, either intentionally or unintentionally. Out of its two major objectives i.e. one to protect the environment from detrimental impact and second to promote enjoyable tourist experiences, the eco-tourism industry is concentrating on the latter objective more and ignoring the first. Eco-tourism today has become a buzz word to sell its variety of products as every term prefixed with ‘eco’ increases interest as well as sales. So the need today is to understand the exploitations caused in the name of eco-tourism.

Thus, eco-tourism on one side provides a number of benefits to local community but at the same time endangers the natural environment. The paper will explain make familiar with various benefits of eco-tourism boosting conservation. But at the same time it will more importantly explain how eco-tourism is a potential threat to local community and ecosystem. Also measures will be suggested which can improve careful planning of eco-tourism. If properly managed, eco-tourism can be compatible, complimentary and sustainable.

### **THE POTENTIAL OF ECO-TOURISM:**

As the world’s population increases, income rises, and the demand for travel and tourism increases. Tourism is the fastest-growing industry on earth. According to World Tourism Organization This industry contributes around 5% towards annual growth rate worldwide and 6% towards world’s GDP .Thus, this market is not be taken lightly.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO TOURISTS:** Though eco tourism, tourists seek out opportunities to experience undisturbed natural areas where they can enjoy unusual scenery, unique plants and animals, the cultural and historical features .It focuses on the wilderness adventures, personal growth and learning new ways to live on our vulnerable planet. The tourists can easily study the life cycle of nature through nature camps and organizing trekking trips towards unspoilt and inaccessible regions.

**BENEFITS OF LOCAL COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT:** Since the local communities understand the economic benefits of eco-tourism, they feel motivated to protect resources and adopt conservationist attitude. It provides a long term income source to them. Well established eco-tourism destinations are able to earn a lot from tourists. i.e.- in the form of park entrance fees, hotel rooms, rental cars, food etc. It has become a major source of attracting foreign capitals in their economies. Local communities survive on the basis of income generated from such tourists during the peak seasons. Moreover, the local residents are also benefited from environmental education than eco-tourism provides

This states that eco-tourism is not only an asset to local community but also has the potential to act as force to conserve natural resources. But eco-tourism actually is appearing as a vague concept. Today

most of the efforts have been towards advancing the economic objectives of tourism rather than conservation objectives. Is it really conserving or exploiting?

### **ECO TOURISM OR ECO-EXPLOITATION?:**

Ecotourism is travelling relatively to undisturbed areas with specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying scenery; its plants and animals; existing cultural manifestations found in areas including hiking, canoeing, camping, photography etc. It not only demands for conservation of eco-tourism but also respecting the integrity of local community. But eco-tourism today has emerged more as a threat to such areas. It's exploiting not only the environment, local communities but even the visiting tourists. Thus, Ecotourism's exploitations can be studied under there aspects.

- Exploitation of visiting tourists
- Exploitation to environment
- Exploitation to local community

**ECOTOURISM EXPLOITING TOURISTS:** - Ecotourism has proved itself as eco-exploitation. It has been rightly said that 'green' sells .Prefixing of term 'green' or 'eco' with tourism or using words eco-tour , eco-travel, eco-vacation, eco-adventure, eco-cruise, eco-safari etc. are sometimes used just to misguide the people. Eco-tourism is just a fashionable ploy right now. It is misunderstood and used for exploitation. The word eco-tourism is just used as promotional material for a package of tour to attract the tourists which may be similar to any other scenic tour. Moreover in the name of providing the tourists with an eco – tour, they are fooled by the travel companies to which they pay a large sum of money.

**ECOTOURISM EXPLOITING ENVIRONMENT/ECOSYSTEM :** Eco-tourism is destructing the eco- system through excessive entry into protected areas when combined with high-impact activities such as hiking or camping. It not only impacts the areas where travellers visit but it takes energy in form of airplane fuel, bus/ automobiles fuel or boat fuel to reach remote areas. This energy consumption is least taken into consideration when looking at affects of eco-tourism. So ecotourism can be considered wasteful.

Some eco-tourists want to observe the nature from close. Tours for such travellers are scheduled to coincide with breeding or hunting season. This could be disruptive to natural cycle of nature.

Sometimes to meet the innumerable demands of tourists, natural area is converted into hotel or a resort. The parts of this opportunity cost include number of ecological functions such as dwindling habitat, declining wildlife population, increasing rate of extinction etc.

Tourist sometimes damages the living resources which eco-tourism is intended to preserve i.e. harassment of species like polar bear, whales or cheetahs' etc. Sea turtles are also distracted by electric lights at shore side tourist facilities. Another major threat eco-tourism poses is that some of the ecosystems where ecotourists travel are extremely fragile. Small group of people who strive to be as careful as possible can still have a negative impact which can upset the local ecosystem.

The other exploitations are in term of change in animal behaviour due to human interference, destruction of unique fauna, deterioration of water, deforestation from firewood harvesting, camping, construction, pollution, problem of soil erosion due to poorly designed roads that do not allow natural contours, off-road traffic to view unique wildlife or resource features, garbage thrown here & there by tourists etc.

**EXPLOITATION TO LOCAL COMMUNITY:** Tourists can have a significant impact on the communities' cultural & economic integrity.

Eco-tourism sometimes acts as a '*land grabber*'. It has become a land hungry industry. Local community often is removed from their homes for construction of hotels, resorts, golf courses, marinas and water parks to attract eco-tourists. Such developments usually take place in unspoilt locations along coastlines or rivers for enjoying panoramic views. Land of local communities is commonly appropriated for creation and extension of wildlife tourism and conservation as tourists don't want to see local people blotting the landscape of their safari. Thus beautification' is used as an excuse to demolish homes or replace them with tourist activities. For example In April 2006, 7000 people were evicted from their homes in Digya national park, an island on lake Volta as government had plans to develop areas as a golf course for tourists.

*Water shortages* are already an issue in many places with low rainfall and same places are attractive destinations for tourists. Less rainfall means increased waste scarcity and this scarcity is faced by local communities. As the cost of maintaining water supplies goes up the local communities are threatened. The scarce water resource are diverted from communal supplies to provide for tourists who expect bath, shower, swimming pools, well tended lawns and golf courses. They not only create water scarcity but also create more contamination. Tourists consume far more water than locals and far more than they do at home.

Sometimes tourism even has a direct impact on the *health of local people*. Working conditions in low status tourism jobs are often detrimental to health due to long hours and hard physical work without rest. The poorly equipped porters who carry luggage and equipments for trekkers in the Himalayas, in Peru, up the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro can lead to frost bite, altitude sickness and even death. Nepalese porters suffer four times more accidents and illness than trekkers Neither they are being paid enough to match the physical efforts put in nor they are provided with equipments like sleeping bag ,water proofs etc. Thus they are treated as if they are not humans.

Tourism also act as *culture Vulture*. Tourist sometimes upset the cultural norms of local people which lead to change in their dress and behaviour. Traditional art, such as dance, are modified to suit the taste of tourists. As tourists penetrate even remoter part of the world many indigenous people are experiencing strangers in their communities for the first time. Tourists often take pictures of local people without seeking permission, a practice which can lead to tensions between host and visitors.

When the environmental sustainability of a destination is threatened by unregulated tourism development , so too are the *rights of the child*. In Kenya, children do not have access to schooling because of parental poverty and are more likely to work in tourist industry. Around 13-19 million children work as tourism work force in the world. Children in some areas are even sexually exploited and harassed by tourists.

In many countries tourism is largest single provider of job. However, employment in the industry is often characterized by *low pay, long hours and poor working conditions* as well as seasonal periods of unemployment. Natural disasters, tourist threats and global economic crisis means the tourist can suddenly stop coming, leaving employees laid off without notice or compensation. Also, sometimes due to successful eco - tourism initiative, it draws migrants into the area in search of food, putting additional strain on local infrastructure and the environment. Many a times seasonal nature of tourism can conflict with labour needs for crop planting and harvesting.

Lastly, the economic benefits arising from eco-tourism are also uncertain to them. Most of the profits from tourism flow back to industrialized nations and people in destination who offer their natural, social and cultural resources , to make the tourism product successful, receives an unfairly low return or suffer from deterioration of their livelihood as a result of negative environmental, social and cultural effects from tourism activity.

From these above written points, it can be made clear that there exploitations will go on increasing with the increase in size of this industry which no doubt is expanding on a very high pace. So, time now is to have mutually supporting partnership among three key elements: the natural environment, the local community and tourism system. The government should take serious steps to minimize the negative impacts of eco-tourism by building environmental awareness and respect, providing positive experiences to both visitors and hosts, providing financial benefits for empowerment of local people, raising sensitivity to host country's political environment and social climate. Certain guidelines need to be followed to conserve the tourist places for future:

- Ecotourism should be based on national tourism plan and protected area management plan, which should be used in catalyzing soundly designed programs. This plan can be used as guide to establish regulations, policies, responsibilities for tour operators and other user.
- Limited number of tourists should be allowed in an area which can help to maintain integrally and vitality of site so that it can continue to draw tourists for years to come. Make use of Renewable sources of energy such as wind, solar or water which are more cost efficient and has less strain on local resources. Tourist facilities should be conducted on the outskirts of park boundaries to minimize deleterious environmental impacts.
- Involving local people as consultants of eco-tourism projects can help ensure community support. If they lack the necessary skill to participate in eco-tourism industry or interact with foreign tourists, the government may provide them with required training and education.
- Govt. must take steps to ensure revenue retention by regulating foreign investment and employment in lodging, guide services and other ventures.
- Govt. officials and eco-tourism operators should seek assistance from conservation group and non-governmental organizations. Such group can start up funding, training and technical assistance that can lend both legitimacy and sustainability to a project.
- Apart from this, it is the responsibility of the tourists enjoying eco-tourism to get themselves aware of 'Green Laws' i.e. the law making people aware of how man and environment can live symbiotically for more time. The tourists should
  - Carry back all non-degradable litter such as empty bottles, tins, plastic bags etc. It should be disposed off in municipal dustbins, only rather than to be buried.
  - Observe respect for holy sites, temples and local cultures.
  - Avoid noise pollution by not making use of loud radios, tape recorders, electronic entertainment equipments in natural resorts, sanctuaries and wildlife parks.
  - Respect people's privacy while taking photographs. Ask for their prior permission.
  - Do not maltreat local community people by making a boss- servant relationship.
  - Do not take away flora and fauna in forms of cutting, seeds or roots. It is illegal.
  - Avoid using wood as fuel to cook food at campsite and do not leave cigarettes or make open fires in forests.
  - Do not tempt locals especially children by offering them foodstuffs or sweets. Respect local traditions.

- Its better to learn about the destination before moving there through guidebooks, histories etc. So that one can learn about the local communities behaviours. Being sensitive to these customs will increase local acceptance of you as a tourist.
- Support local business during eco-travels to ensure maximum community and conservation benefits from your spending.

If all such measures will be adopted, it is sure that eco-tourism will prove itself to be a best measure of *conservation rather than exploitation*.

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