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Towards A More Desirable Form of Ecotourism (Word Count: 3648)

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Abstract: Ecotourism is a responsible form of tourism which leaves less negative impact on environment than the main stream tourism. Ecotourism is a mix of Tourism and Conservation. According to the definitions given by various authors ecotourism involves travel to natural areas, intended to support conservation efforts. Ecotourism also aims for theupliftment of local communities. In other words, if we mix touristic travel with environmental conservation and also add to it the element of local upliftment (direct or indirect), we produce a product called Ecotourism. No doubt the theoretical definition of ecotourism gives a positive impression but our main concern is its practical applicability. This study aims to find the relation between theory and practice of ecotourism.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Reality, Kashmir, Marketing Gimmick, Conservation, practical applicability, practical acceptability, systematic literature review.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the tourism industry holds much economic promise for developing countries, its positive outcomes come with some unfortunate side effects to the local and ecological inhabitants of the community. It is because of the hardship that tourism brings to native people and their culture that environmentalists emphasize the importance of ecotourism; tourism revolved around a location's natural and pollution free environment. While it's true that ecotourism is not a new concept, yet there is still much to learn about its results and overall prospects.

Amid the most recent two decades, the idea of ecotourism has been given enormous publicity. Ecotourism is being promoted as a savior to the environmental concerns brought on by the main stream tourism. Numerous definitions have come up in the past to make people understand the idea of Ecotourism. However, with each new definition, things tend to get complex as there are many authors who have deciphered "ecotourism" in somewhat different ways. What's more, there are researchers and academicians who challenge the core concept of ecotourism by saying that concept of ecotourism looks good on papers however when it comes to its practical applicability it behaves same as mainstream tourism. Likewise, there are researchers and academicians who are of the view that Ecotourism is only a marketing gimmick and is nothing different than the mainstream tourism.

So the question emerges, that does the concept of ecotourism that is being promulgated on papers means the same thing when it comes to its practical applicability? Or in other words, does the theoretical concept of ecotourism have a practical acceptability?

The main aim of this study is to try to find answers to the above questions by going through the existing literature on the subject.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1980, the World Conservation Strategy put emphasis on eco-development and was the time when the term 'ecotourism' was introduced to international agendas. At that time, the discussion over every alternative to mass tourism was started, such as defensive tourism, green tourism, nature-oriented tourism, conscious or soft tourism (Boeger, 1991). Since then, much has changed as the popular interpretation of ecotourism today is seen as up-market package tours for rich people to exotic destinations or globetrotting youth with limited financial means. Contact between tourists, locals and environments are considered today in any basic guidelines of tourism and environmental conservation.

A popular interpretation of ecotourism which still survives today belongs to Mieczkowski (1995) who was one of the first theoreticians of the field of study, who made the distinction between conventional mass tourism and alternative tourism by showing that the latter is par excellence "small scale, low-density, dispersed in non-urban areas, and they cater to special interest groups of people with mainly above average education and with relatively high-disposable incomes". Indeed, alternative tourism was seen as being of concern for a highly-educated niche. Today, however, environmental issues are in the attention of wider public concern.

Soon, people referred also to responsible tourism, jungle tourism or sustainable tourism as forms of alternative tourism. All these concepts were mediatised as the perception of tourists started to change with the rising awareness of climate change. More emphasis

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was put on recreational activities that have less negative impact on the environment like hiking, camping, climbing, rafting, bird watching, scientific study, photography, diving, trekking, etc. Seeing ecotourism as an alternative to mass tourism was just one of the many approaches that flourished in the 1990s. Donohoe& Needham (2008) discussed the definitional discourse that emerged around the term and its various interpretations. Some scholars remark that there are vague definitions given and that there is a need for a more coherent perspective.

Environmental concerns within the developed nations has emerged as a major socio-political issue throughout the world during the past decade and the increased number of environment friendly or 'green' products has also been significant. 'Green' products have achieved substantial awareness among consumers and they are no longer regarded as a gimmick or a fad (Juwaheer, 2005). There has been a gradual shift of the interest of the tourism markets from luxuriousness and extravagance towards more responsible forms of tourism over the past few decades. This shift has brought the inevitable evolution in tourism i.e. the concept of Ecotourism. Ecotourism, if applied properly, has the potential to promote environmental consciousness, awareness and environmental education (Naziridis&Telopoulos, 2015). Ecotourism has become a popular word within the tourism & conservation fields. Significant economic and political resources have been committed to ecotourism on the supposition that it accomplishes conservation and development objectives (Lindberg, 1996).

Ecotourism seemingly would not exist, and certainly, would not exist in the shape it is present today, were it not for the dynamic involvement of the academic community. Academics and academia have played an important stewardship role in the conceptualization and operationalization of this activity, more so than any other type of tourism. Ecotourism has evolved and is still evolving through three stages i.e. the ‘New Dawn’ stage, the ‘Crisis of Legitimacy’ stage and the ‘Sustainable Product Niche’ stage. The 'New Dawn' stage is exemplified by idealism, hyperbole and hope. It is followed quickly by a ‘Crisis of Legitimacy,’ where faultfinders illustrate that the ecotourism largely fails to meet its social, financial and environmental standards that has not yet been resolved completely. At last, ecotourism reaches maturity when it achieves the ''Sustainable Product Niche'' stage where a reasonable understanding of what it can and cannot do, emerges (Mckercher, 2010).

In current times ecotourism is turning to be a hype word in the tourism industry. It has gained popularity because of two of its primary prongs i.e. economic incentives and conservation benefits, both to the locals and the destination. Ecotourism greatly relies on the wealth of natural heritage to lure in tourists (Abdullah, Weng&Som, 2011).Ecotourism is being promoted by many conservationists as a strategy to protect natural resources while also meeting human needs. Ecotourism is not only a financial "apparatus" for conservation, but rather additionally the reason for new values and social relations (Stronza, 2007).Ecotourism has developed as one of the quickest growing sectors of the tourism industry, affected primarily by public demand for all the more environmentally responsible tourism. If planned properly, it has been asserted that ecotourism can accommodate conservation of biodiversity with socio-economic development of local communities. For the same reason, numerous government and non-government organizations are anxious to develop ecotourism in protected territories keeping in mind the end goal to augment these advantages. However, ecotourism can have critical negative effects when half-baked and poorly managed including extreme environmental degradation, negative cultural changes and decreased welfare of individuals or communities. Ecotourism ought not to be viewed as a panacea for harmonizing rural development with environmental conservation until its impact on developing nations has been analyzed thoroughly. The local communities adjoining protected regions are mostly not involved in the planning process of tourism development. Ecotourism as a component for accomplishing local conservation and development goals is more fruitful when projects prioritise local involvement and control (Matthews, 2002).

Two prevailing perspectives of ecotourism relate to conservation & marketing perspectives. But unfortunately, the marketing perspective through "eco-sell,” often exploits growing consumer interest in "green" products. Ecotourism would benefit from product and performance standards and an ethics-based orientation. If managed properly, conservation and ecotourism can be compatible, complementary, and sustainable (Wight, 1993).

Ecotourism was created as the antidote to mass tourism’s disregard or over exploitation of pristine destinations. But the term ecotourism is easily abused. Marketing, from product development to promotion, creates expectations for both hosts and guests. Procedures and oversight must be set up in a way which guarantees that ecotourism stays consistent with its intended purpose. Around the world, this is still a work in progress (McGahey, 2012).Ecotourism is not nature tourism, farm tourism or adventure tourism, but rather a unique tourism form that that has turned out to be very popular due to the greening of markets, expanding learning of the fragility of the environment, and the acknowledgement that there is a strong & close relationship between ecology and economy. Although many definitions have come up for the concept ‘Ecotourism’, but one of the most central dimensions, co-operation, has not been included. Ecotourism should be sustainable and more importantly four groups of actors i.e. the local people, authorities, tourists and companies involved in tourism have to co-operate (Bjork, 2000). Concepts such as ecotourism and

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sustainability have existed for a few decades as of now. However, the tourism business still feels that these definitions are misty and that they mystify and confuse both consumers and tourism businesses (Tuohino&Hynonen, 2001). Ecotourism is a popular term, but at the same time, the term ecotourism is ambiguous, misunderstood by tourists, tourism hosts and academics. It has been receiving attention since it has turned into the fastest growing sector in the tourism industry. Ecotourism literature that has been published has invested much time attempting to define the term and pinpoint precisely what ecotourism is, theoretically. Numerous definitions have been proposed, however, none have been universally acknowledged or accepted. Much literature likewise exists on ecotourism case studies, yet these remain imperfect since nobody can truly choose what ecotourism is or how it ought to look. There is a large gap between understanding and implementing true ecotourism, as well as understanding and experiencing what one believes to be ecotourism, however, true ecotourism is inevitably an impossible reality to numerous cynics, both tourists and academics (Einarsdóttir, 2010) The centre of ecotourism lies in "ecologically travelling" and "travelling in the ecological environment",however looking at the phenomenon of fake ecotourism products it is seen that the philosophy of ecotourism is not in practice at all (He-you, S. 2008).Ecotourism is broadly perceived as a nature-based anatomy of alternative tourism that includes the virtuous traits that mass tourism allegedly lacks. Henceforth, the idea of mass ecotourism is normally observed as a disagreement in wording or paradoxical expression. However, ecotourism as both a reality and an ideal can logically be conceived as a form of mass tourism, and not it's opposite (Weaver, 2001).

The adeptness of ecotourism to protect both people and places is an unresolved and growing, concern. The commoditisation of host culture and environment is a widely reported social effect of tourism and spawns an array of implications regarding indigenous people's view of their places and themselves. The degree of impact from ecotourism development is related to the degree of market development within the indigenous community and their state of decline regarding natural resource scarcity. Pre-existing power differentials between local people and other groups may be exacerbated by ecotourism development. To protect both people and their places, native people's claim to control ought to be legitimized by governments and conservation agencies, especially indigenous people's role in the technical management of the protected regions. Regional and national government controls are accordant at the birth of ecotourism development, but ultimately should be reduced to one of infrastructure planning and coordination (King & Stewart, 1996).

Ecotourism is frequently positioned as an alternative option to mass tourism, however, the understanding and implementation of the abstraction have been riddled with uncertainty. The ideal balance of conservation & development at the same time is considered paradoxical not only for ecotourism but also for the related concepts like sustainability. Ecotourism has not accomplished the objective of integrating conservation of biodiversity and the socioeconomic development of adjacent communities. One explanation behind the existing implementation problems has been the concept itself and how it has been operationalised. Moreover, ecotourism in the developing nations has been tormented with issues identified with non-realization of promised benefits, none or weak development structures and absence of efficient governance and management. There must be a more noteworthy coordination between the stakeholders involved in ecotourism and of key intrigue, the support and participation of the government and the local community (Magio, Velarde, Santillan& Rios, 2013).

Ecotourism ought to endeavour to accomplish targets which result in "better" ecotourists and a better natural environment. It is perceived that what is viewed as better, or a more attractive type of ecotourism, is exceptionally subjective and perhaps disagreeable. All things considered, the wide assortment of meanings of the term ecotourism suggests that the argument over what ecotourism is, and what it ought to be, continues. An examination and presentation of these various definitions as a continuum permits the development of a contention that ecotourists ought to be encouraged, through the management procedure of the ecotourism operation, to become active contributors to the health and viability of the natural environment. This contention is not a new one, however, the methods by which one can quantify the attractive quality of an ecotourism operation in accomplishing this more alluring state will help with the comparison of one ecotourism operation against another. Also, it can give a premise whereby the accomplishment of another management strategy can be tried (Cosmescu&Cosmescu, 2007).

As the most alluring choice for sustainable development of tourism industry, ecotourism still experiences the absence of an obvious and generally acknowledged definition, posturing many risks and threats in its practices. The objects of ecotourism ought to go past natural, pristine, or even only primitive natural areas to including cultural resources together with their natural context which also deserve preservation. Tourism operators have more influence compared to tourists and thus ought to shoulder more responsibilities for conservation. Ecotourism ought to fill in, as a principle, to guide tourism initiatives towards sustainability, rather than merely a special tour package (Meng, Jun &Zhengzheng, 2009).

The literature on ecotourism is mainly concerned around market segmentation, ecological impacts of wildlife viewing, and community-based ecotourism, yet there has been insignificant regard for areas such as quality control, the industry, external

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environments or institutions even as the components and parameters of ecotourism are being amplified. This unevenness, consolidated with the fragmentation and lack of integration within the literature, suggest that ecotourism, as a field of academic inquiry, is still in a condition of adolescence (Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

III. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTION

One of the popular definitions of ecotourism is given by "The International Ecotourism Society." They have defined ecotourism as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education."

The above definition on ecotourism like many others has got flaws. The term "natural areas" in the definition adds to the confusion among various stakeholders as to what should be considered within the dimension of "natural areas."

I would like to put forward my first point of concern in the shape of an example. There are many gardens in Kashmir that have been built by Mughal kings, so can we consider them within the dimension of natural areas, although they have not naturally existed but are manmade? What about the forts build by various kings in ancient times? Some people would consider the monuments like forts within the dimension of "heritage" and keep the places like gardens within the context of "natural areas." But how can we make such distinction when both gardens and forts in the above example are manmade. So what should come under natural places then? Because when we talk of natural areas in the context of tourism, then we would hardly find a place that is 100% natural. As we would definitely find man made elements in the shape of hutments, hotels, restaurants, etcin almost all touristic places. And if we talk about jungles, forests, etc being 100% natural then does that mean, other places with manmade elements don't qualify to be called as natural place?

My second point is how would places like jungles, forests, etc cater the needs of tourists, if they have to be 100 % natural? Because in order to be considered as a tourist one has to spend 24 hours at a place of his/her visit. Those 24 hours normally comprises of day and night which implies that a tourist would need an accommodation to cater his needs of rest and a restaurant/eatery to fulfil his food needs. And if the places like jungle, forest, etc. are being visited only for few hours then how would a visitor be called as a tourist/ecotourist when he/she has not even qualified the basic criteria of spending 24 hours at the place of visit? That means the person is an excursionist not a tourist/ecotourist if the stay is less than 24 hours.

Thirdly if we assume that the tourists would use tents to cater the needs of accommodation at such natural places like jungles, forests, etc. then again it would mean that a man made element has been added in the shape of tents.

So we need to rework on the definition of ecotourism and should frame it in a way that it would have universal acceptability. I would like to put forward a definition of ecotourism which may help in drafting a strong and universal definition of the concept.

A. Ecotourism may be defined as

"Responsible travel to areas that intends to support environmental conservation with minimum or no negative impact, involves awareness and education of stakeholders and at the same time helps in upliftment of local communities."

IV. CONCLUSION

Literature review of the topic suggests that the term ecotourism is confusing, misunderstood by tourists, tourism hosts and academics as nobody can truly choose what ecotourism is or how it ought to look. Numerous definitions that have been proposed so fardon't have universal acceptance. There is a large gap between understanding and implementing true ecotourism, as well as understanding and experiencing what one believes to be ecotourism. There is strong need that various eminent authors, academicians, scholars and other stakeholders come together and revisit the concept of ecotourism. Ecotourism looks good on papers but when it comes to its practical acceptability or implementation, and then things start to behave abnormally. There has to be a universal definition forthe concept "Ecotourism" in order to avoid confusion among academicians and other stakeholders. We need to broaden the scope of ecotourism and include within the concept of ecotourism other places such cultural and heritage sites in order to make things simple. And once a universal definition is drafted, it will become easy for various stakeholders to implement the concept without confusion.

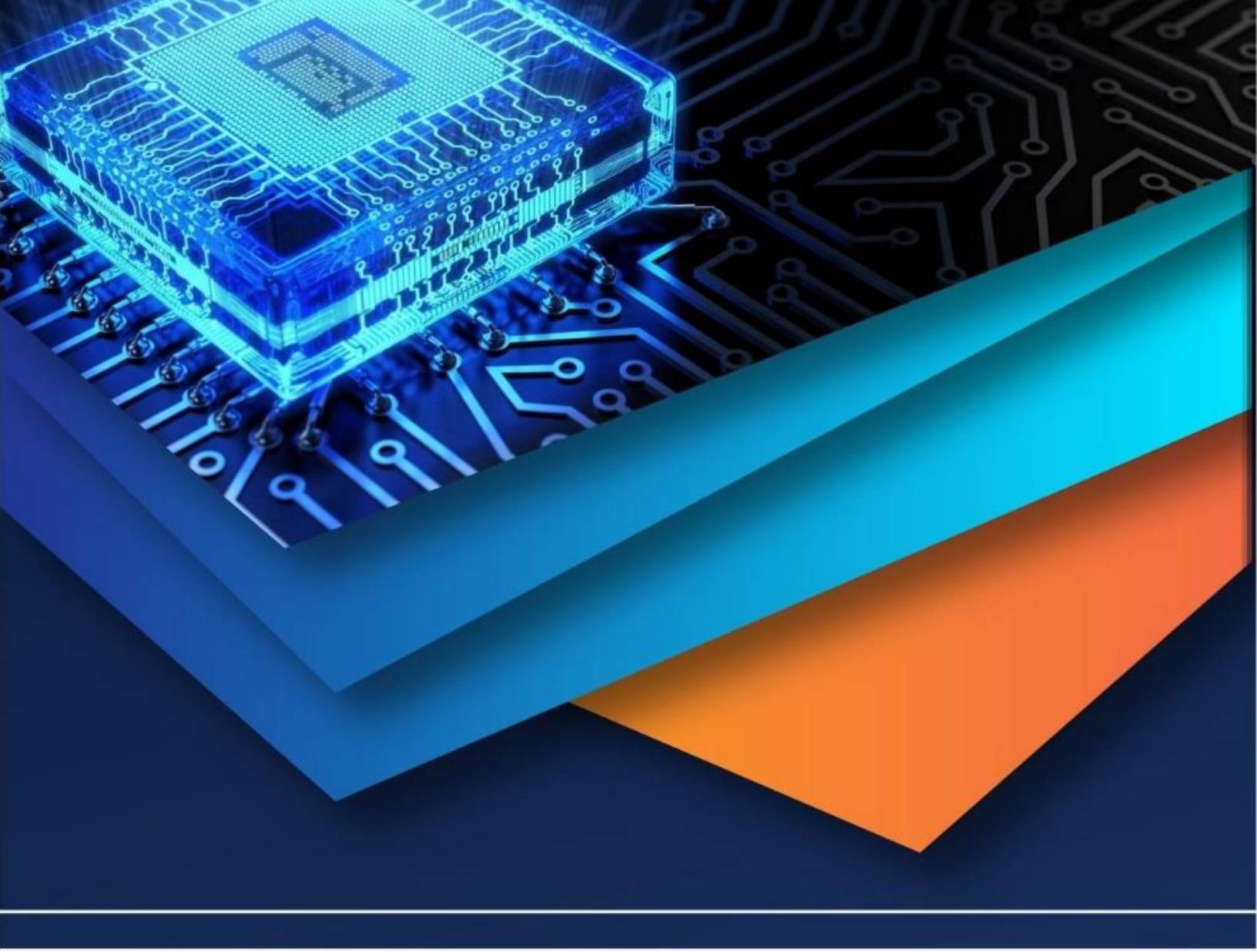
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