

Perceived Ecotourism: A Disruptive Practice

*Sanjana Mondal

Abstract:

Ecotourism is an overall tourism practice that leads to sustainability as discussed, described and proven by the literatures on sustainable tourism development. However, the concept is widely misinterpreted and thus embezzled by the tourism service providers and tourists to a large extent. This paper aims to find out the perceived concept of ecotourism and highlight the gap with reference to actual concept. The paper also intends to highlight the disruptive consequences of such interpretation and leading practice. The study is conducted through online mode from tourists and tour operators located in various parts within four regional parts that is eastern, western, northern and southern parts of India.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Perception, misinterpreted, disruption,

Introduction:

Ecotourism is not a tourism type rather it is a form of tourism practice. This tourism practice may redirect towards sustainable tourism development effort. But over and over again ecotourism is misinterpreted as a type of niche tourism. Due to lack of proper knowledge about the concept ecotourism is developed as a tourism offer for those who prefer to visit to virgin natural destinations. To promote ecotourism as a product even some places are artificially being developed creating an effect of natural environment. But this is a disruption towards sustainability. Since tourism industry is extensively dependent on nature and society while contributing towards economy it's sustainability is a mandate and not a choice. Ecotourism is basically a responsible tourism practice that ensures this sustainability. Therefore ecotourism is defined as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and improve the well-being of the local people" by International Ecotourism Society (TIES). Eco-Tourism involves travel to natural destinations, which focuses on building environmental awareness, which must provide direct financial benefits to the host destination and its communities, and look forward towards sustainable use of biodiversity & natural resources that leads to empowerment for local people (Ecotourism and Sustainable Development by Martha Honey)

*Assistant Professor , Calcutta Business School, Kolkata

Any destination to claim or convert as a preferred destination for eco tourists must have the following features.

- It must have a protected landscape that conserves its natural depository.
- The infrastructural development must be in low density and it should have abundant natural areas for the tourists to endure the natural belongings of the destination.
- The place must offer local food, local handicrafts etc. made by local people for the tourist to enjoy the local setting.
- Locally owned lodges, home stay facilities, restaurants and local businesses with evidence of genuine hospitality and friendly local people must be predominant.
- The destination must showcase their cultural heritage through a variety of local events, festivals and demonstrate a sense of pride for local community in front of its tourists.
- The place must be clean with basic public facilities for its tourists like watchtowers, public toilets
- The place must offer trained and friendly local guides to facilitate the experience of its tourists.
- There must be natural meeting places for interaction between the local people and its visitors like benches near the sea beaches etc.

It is, therefore, a market segment for tourism business based on a concept with a certain set of principles. The Components of Ecotourism are as follows:

- It contributes to the conservation of environment and biodiversity.
- It looks forward to the wellbeing of the local community and people.

- It offers a learning experience.
- It involves responsible action and approach from tourists and the tourism industry.
- It encourages the lowest possible consumption of non-renewable energy source.
- It emphasizes local participation.
- It encourages business opportunities and employment generation for local people specifically for rural people.

Objective:

1. This papers aims to find out the perceived concept of ecotourism and highlight the gap with reference to actual concept.
2. It also intends to highlight the disruptive consequences of such interpretation and leading practice.

Methodology:

The data is collected for two months period from June 2018 to August 2018 through online mode. The questionnaires were prepared focusing on two different groups (service taker and service maker). The questions were made with an objective to derive the behavioural and attitudinal variables pertaining to ecotourism. It also involves variables that intendeds to understand the perception of the ecotourism concept among the tourism service providers and tourists. The responses were derived from 240 tourists and 28 tourism service providers. Out of 240 tourists we considered the 224 tourists who strongly prefer Nature tourism or are more interested in visiting to natural places unlike the remaining 16 who were keen towards visiting places with historical importance, pilgrimage or other than nature. The group of service providers consisted of different types like tour operators, travel agents, niche tourism service providers, domestic etc.

Type of tourism service providers	Numbers of respondents	% of respondents
Domestic tour operators	9	32
Purely niche tourism service providers	11	39
Travel agents	8	29
Total	28	100

The nature tourists were categorized on the basis of their degree preference for ecotourism .

Type of nature tourist	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Strong inclination towards ecotourism	31	14
Moderate inclination towards ecotourism	35	15
Average inclination towards ecotourism	116	52
Low or very limited inclination towards ecotourism	42	19
Total number of respondents	224	100

Findings:

To understand the sample adequacy for Factor Analysis KMO and Bartlett's Tests were computed and was found significant.

As mentioned earlier the researcher here intends to identify the perceived concept of ecotourism while highlighting the gap with reference to actual concept. For doing this the variables that reflect ecotourism need and practice are selected both for service taker and service provider and analyzed. For instance we tried to understand the need for the following attributes among the tourists

1. Mixing with local people at the place of travel
2. Attitude towards supporting local conservation efforts at the host destination
3. Exploring local culture of the host destination
4. Gathering knowledge about the destination they prefer to visit before they travel
5. Visiting unusual destinations
6. Exploring the destination as much possible
7. Staying at local homes or homestay facilities and involvement with host community
8. Local guide's involvement in the travel to enhance the experience
9. Buying local handicrafts or handmade unique products from the place of visit
10. Eating local cuisines or local home made food available at the destination i.e preferred by the local people
11. Traveling in local and public transport available at the host destination during the trip

And presence of the following in the tourism service as offered by the service providers

1. Scope of interaction between the tourists and local community
2. Presence of knowledge sharing about the host destination
3. Providing information about the culture of the local community and host destination
4. Providing facility to explore the local community life style
5. Involving local people in the process
6. Delivering the taste of local food and unique local cuisine
7. Educate tourist about environmental conservation
8. Providing facilities to showcase local handicrafts
9. Scope of community development
10. Facilitating local transport ride as a part of unique experience
11. Arrangement for local homestay as a part of unique experience

The methodology applied to derive the result is cluster analysis. By applying hierarchical

clustering technique on the variables the researcher could confirm that the variables are clustered into two parts. We then applied K means clustering to find the clusters type with reference to the attitudinal variables. The result obtained reflects that the tourists need towards the variables pertaining to ecotourism related variables are either weak or strong that also validates the ecotourism spectrum as described by Weaver (2002) where he named it as hard and soft ecotourist. Here we denote the cluster as strong need for ecotourism attributes and weak need for ecotourism attributes.

We then calculated the number of strong need for ecotourism attributes tourist cluster and weak need for ecotourism attribute tourist cluster. We also calculated the number of tour operators who strongly practice ecotourism and those who practice it at very minimal level.

We then investigated the association between the need cluster (1 and 2) and their conception about ecotourism as nature tourist and presented the result below:

Type of nature tourist	Chi-Square value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Significance
Strong need for ecotourism attributes	2.29	.130	Not significant
Weak need ecotourism attributes	3.45	.149	Not Significant
Total number of respondents	6.90	.075	Not significant

The result being insignificant confirms that there is no significant correlation between their inclination for ecotourism and their need for ecotourism attributes. Similarly we further investigated the type of tour operators with the ecotourism practice cluster (strong and weak) and presented the result below. Here we have categorized tourism service providers on the basis of the features of the tourism services they provide and their claim in providing ecotourism service.

Relationship between the type of tour operators and presence of ecotourism attributes in their service.

Type of tour operator	Chi-Square value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Significance
Highly claims in providing ecotourism service	4.39	.000	Not significant
Moderately claims in providing ecotourism	2.29	.130	Not significant
Do not claims in providing ecotourism	29.31	.000	significant

The result derived signifies that their claim of providing ecotourism does not significantly correlate with the presence of ecotourism attributes in the service they provide.

From the above result we may conclude that there is no significant correlation between the actual ecotourism concept and the perceived concept which indicates that it is a disruptive practice.

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